



June 12, 2009

Reaching Consensus: Boosting Sales

by Michael Rosenthal

As a training specialist that supports our company's sales function, I see the effect of the economic downturn. While prospective customers express interest in our products, they seem unwilling to buy. This, combined with ongoing departmental layoffs, has taken its toll on morale among the sales team. I want to help, but don't know where to start.

Selling in a down economy can be very challenging and, therefore, discouraging. At the same time, when things aren't running smoothly, it can be a great wake up call for identifying better practices and building on one's skill set.

Now more than ever, a salesperson's role is less about providing product information and more about creating value for the customer. In fact, customers' chief complaint about salespeople is that they spend too much time and energy describing their product – research shows today's customer would rather consult the Internet for product information. Thus, to be successful, salespeople have to be creative problem solvers, since it is advice and expertise that wins business nowadays, instead of just the product or service the salesperson represents.

That said, you might start by shifting the team's mindset from "live brochure" to trouble-shooter. In a stronger economy they might have been resistant to this shift because their product and services were selling despite their lack of skill and, as such, your company was reluctant to let them go. In today's uncertain business environment, however, they might be more open to your advice.

Once you have their attention, some skills that you might want to work on are negotiation/influence, communication, and conflict resolution.

To get customers to move from "expressing interest" to "buying," your team has to uncover the (undisclosed) real and perceived barriers, navigate those hurdles, and persuade them to buy. This starts with forging a relationship characterized by trust and open communication. It continues with creativity and flexibility. And it ends with a signed contract. If your current negotiation/influence curriculum doesn't teach these skills, then it's probably a good time to update your syllabus or consider a new training vendor.

Those skills might not be enough. There will be instances in which your team has to decline a customer request or deliver bad news. Done improperly, this could result in the loss of (potential) business. For your team to be most effective, you might consider a course or two on having challenging conversations. Not only would this type of course help win business, but it also will protect the customer relationships that already are in place. Honing their "active-listening" skills would also be valuable.

Finally, conflict resolution skills will help your team resolve any problems that might arise during the sales process – both with the customer and internal to your organization – and keep things on track.

Needless to say, all three of these complementary skills will be equally useful for internal matters. Sometimes a salesperson's biggest challenge is the negotiation they must have with another department within their own organization – the salesperson is more than willing to tailor a product or go the extra mile to close a sale, but they may encounter naysayers from other functional areas that stand in their way. These skills can help your team navigate the labyrinth of business relationships.

By empowering your colleagues with a skill set that matches today's economy, they should feel more optimistic about their future with a higher level of engagement. As the team begins to see "prospects" turning into "customers," and as the company starts to see revenues increase, the downsizing trend will probably end, which should provide some added security and energy to the department.

At the very least, you will have given them the tools needed to discuss and influence the situation in a constructive way.

Michael Rosenthal is the CEO of Consensus. Consensus (www.consensusgroup.com) is a negotiation and conflict resolution firm that offers consulting, training and development, and international peace building services to private and public sector clients throughout the world. If you have questions that you would like answered, please contact Consensus at (212) 391-8100 or inquiry@consensusgroup.com