

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Build Your Business Using Consultative Selling

Trying to add value for your customers in this competitive market? Consultative selling can be a useful tool for providing that value and retaining your clients or customers.

Traditional sales methods focus on making the sale – period. Consultative selling, on the other hand, is the process of building a strong relationship with your customers, so that you're seen as a true asset and trusted advisor to their company.

When relationships are created, your company becomes more valuable to your customers, your sales are likely to increase and your customers are more likely to remain loyal.

Successful consultative selling requires a different approach than traditional sales processes. These four steps should be followed:

- **Probe, ask questions and listen.** In traditional selling, salespeople do most of the talking. This approach won't work with consultative selling. You need to probe by asking open-ended questions so you can learn about the customers' business and better understand their specific needs. Then, listen. If you're so anxious to make a sale that you fail to really hear what customers are saying, you may either sell them something unsuitable that will later cause dissatisfaction or lose the sale entirely.
- **Focus on the customer.** With traditional sales methods, the driving question is, "How do I close the sale?" With consultative selling, ask yourself, "How can I help this person obtain what they need?" With consultative selling, it's imperative to put the customers' needs first and determine how you can best help them. This may even mean walking away from a potential sale if you realize your product or service is not a good match for your customer. But by taking this approach, your customer or prospect will respect your honesty, which will benefit your business in the long run.
- **Work to improve the partnership.** At the highest level of consultative selling, your customers see you as a valuable partner in their own businesses. They look to you as someone they can turn to for advice, who is truly interested in their success and who is willing to help them – even when it doesn't involve making a sale. This type of relationship involves staying connected. Call occasionally just to ask how things are going without trying to make a sale. Find ways to help solve problems. Develop a list of trusted companies you can refer your customers to when you can't meet their needs.
- **Involve your entire company.** All of your employees should understand your consultative selling approach, so that it becomes ingrained in your company's culture. Strive to form a strong team environment within your company so that team solutions can be sought when needs arise. If one salesperson begins working with a customer, but it becomes evident that another is better suited to maintain the relationship, then the customer should be reassigned.

Salespeople who come from traditional sales environments might not understand the concepts involved in consultative selling and might be leery of trying something new for fear of losing commission income. Therefore, it's important that your salesforce understands how they will benefit in the long run from using a consultative selling approach.

Consultative selling isn't merely a sales method. It's more a philosophy of service to your customers. It takes time and involves occasionally walking away from a sale in order to serve the customer's best interest.

However, the result can be loyal, satisfied customers, who return again and again and are happy to refer more business to you.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: margaret@mksh.com.

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