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IN PRACTICE August 2008

The Art of People-Whispering

By Laura A. Davis

I don't know about you, but I sometimes long for the relative simplicity of the 1970s and 1980s. As a consumer, life seemed more straightforward. I had a checking account, a money market account, and a few stocks. As a recent college graduate, I worked for Chase Manhattan Bank's installment loan department. Personal computers were introduced during my second year as an employee. The world was going paperless! It was to be a revolution.

It turns out the real revolution is option overload. Looking back to the 70s and 80s again, a typical middle class American had a checking and savings account, life insurance, and maybe some stocks, bonds, and land. Today, one can own stocks, bonds, 401(k)s, inherited IRAs, deferred and defined benefits programs, charitable trusts, dozens of other trusts, annuities (variable and otherwise), nonqualified deferred compensation, thousands of mutual funds, and more. An executive at a major financial services company confessed to me recently that he cannot stay current on trusts, his area of expertise. If he can't do it, how can the rest of us understand trusts and our several thousand other options?

The truth is we can't fully understand all of our choices, and we'll drive ourselves crazy if we try. This carries over to the training and development field, as well, particularly when we are trying to sell services or training ideas.

Our customers, knowing they cannot understand all of their options, must choose the most trustworthy and seemingly competent person, or choose no one at all. Even in an age of email, websites, blogging, and social networking, many choices are based on personal recommendations. In short, today's buyers cannot choose among all of the products and services they need nor can they research all of the firms that offer them. What they can do is choose among people.

I recently won a solid training and coaching contract after my client said to me, "You seem like a good and honest person who knows what she is talking about. And you come highly recommended. That's good enough for me."

Connecting through people-whispering

Have you ever noticed that the more we like a person, the more capable that person seems? Let's face it—your product or service had better be good and you had better create value. But that's not enough anymore. People do business with people they know, like, and trust. And we know, like, and trust people who connect with us. Connecting is defined as simultaneously being your unique self and crossing into another person's world. Once someone feels heard and understood, they will feel comfortable partnering with you for mutual benefit.

I like to call this subtle skill the art of people-whispering, and it has four straightforward steps:

- Know your own unique gifts and talents and the ways in which you perceive the world. What strengths and potential blind spots do you bring to the table in the sales relationship? Know thyself first.
- Be able to read the other person from a loving, serving intent. Identify their strengths and preferred ways of communication to effectively connect with them at each stage of the sales process.
- Communicate with your prospective or established customer in his language to cross the bridge into their world.
- Partner with your customer going forward because trust and rapport are facilitated by people-whispering.

Gaining trust and credibility

So what are some simple ways to establish trust and credibility to ensure you are the person your prospect chooses? Delivering a high-quality product or service is a baseline expectation, but assuming you're competing against others who can also deliver, you need to set yourself apart from the pack.

First, know what you're talking about. Be competent and deliver on your promises. Stay as current as you can. Like the financial services executive, you likely can't know everything about your field, but you can still know a lot. Better yet, you can be an exquisite translator.

You can listen intently to what your customers really need, regardless of whether you're dealing with internal or external clients. Once you listen for what's really being said and what's important to that buyer, you can state that back to them in language they understand so they know they've been heard. It's then relatively easy to tailor a solution to meet their needs.

Just remember: Even in our fast-paced, Internet-savvy world of overwhelming options and choices, selling is still about serving our customers, forging relationships, and building trust.



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