

SELLING BETTER STUFF

Are the guys who close those six-figure deals natural-born salesmen? Is the customer who buys the big system a "lay-down" that anyone could have closed? Or do the best-of-the-best in custom and retail sales have a secret weapon? Well, they do. And here it is. All you have to do is practice.

By Eric Bodley

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It's no secret that the face of consumer electronics retailing is changing. From large mass-merchants to e-commerce, specialty retailing seems to be caught in a pinch. Many independent specialists are doing a larger percentage of their business in custom installation. Many are exploring new product categories such as lighting control, structured wiring, and telephone systems. Even with all these changes, one constant remains: The challenge to sell better, higher performance, more expensive products. This is still a difficult task for most organizations. The price oriented nature of commodity products such as DVD players, televisions, and camcorders has many consumers pre-disposed to thinking that paying more isn't necessary. Contrast this to the automobile industry, where the sales of luxury automobiles are still going strong. Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, Acura, Jaguar, amongst others, are posting record sales. Our industry offers many of the same quality contrasts: from the entry level A/V receiver to high-quality, high-performance multi-channel separates and from 45 in. rear projection TV's to two-piece HD capable projection TV & screens. It is a challenge for many retailers to get any movement in these upscale products, yet custom installers seem to do it with ease. They sell the better stuff. What's their secret?

Selling Better Stuff is Advanced Selling

Moving a customer from good, to better, to best is not a basic selling skill. In fact it is by chance or luck that it will occur unless the sales associate has the product knowledge necessary to show the benefits and advantages better products have and has already developed a consistently repeatable process with which to operate with every customer. Every sales training course will undoubtedly contain the four following steps: Greet, Qualify, Present, and Close. There may be different names for these steps, but by far the most important step is the Qualify step in the sale. Also known as asking, discovering, probing, etc. this complex process is where the sales associate earns the right to show a product or system to the client. Unless a repeatable agenda is used, most sales associates jumble the qualification and presentation portions of the sale into one step. They ramble through a series of questions that do not follow a logical pattern to the client. For example, questions asked of a customer wanting to buy a home theater system might touch on the room, what they currently own, another question about the room, one about who else in the home will use it, then more questions about the room, etc. The questions jump around, many times based on the customer's responses or return questions. The customer loses patience and wants to move on to see or hear something. I use a system I call **The Map**. The map is a set of directions that lets you get from point A to point B without getting lost. The goal is to become so familiar with the route that

you aren't thinking about the drive, you're hearing the actual responses from the client and dynamically using the information. You can't really listen to the client's responses if you're too busy trying think of what to ask next. I learned a pattern a long time ago called the Four W's. It involves asking your qualifying questions in logical groups from general to specific:

What - What are you looking for?

This is where you identify the exact product or products the customer is looking for. Don't just stop at "Big Screen TV", identify the size, a 32 inch TV is big to some, where 10 foot is big to others.

Where - Where will it go?

For televisions and loudspeakers this is the room they will be using it in. For all other products it is the products they own or system they will incorporate it into. Learn as much as you can about what they already own.

What - What would you like it to do?

Do not ask what most sales associates ask: "What features are you looking for?" Instead ask, "Are you familiar with the features available in televisions today?" Try to discuss benefits of the features, not the features themselves. (See "Demonstration or Presentation: What's the difference." Later in this article.)

Who - Who else will be using it?

There are two reasons for this question. (1) To find out what features will be important to others using the system, and (2) To find out if there is anyone else involved in the buying decision.

It really doesn't matter if you arrange the four W's in a different order: *What, Who, Where, What, What, What, Where, Who*, or *What, Who, What, Where*, all are OK, as long as you do it the same way every time. You'll be amazed how much longer a client will allow you qualify them when they see a pattern to your questions.

Why Customers Buy Better Stuff

Building a nice store and putting up expensive products is not a sure formula for success. In order to sell better stuff one must first look at what motivates the customer to spend more, and get better stuff. Typically, there are four motivators a customer might have to buy better stuff:

1. They want the prestige or status that owning better stuff gives.
2. They can truly see and/or hear the difference and won't settle for lesser performance.
3. They bought the inexpensive stuff previously, and they were dissatisfied with the quality and/or performance of the lower priced, lower performance product.
4. They aren't independently wealthy, and can't afford to buy the best of everything, but can afford to buy the best of certain selected products. They indulge themselves with an important luxury.

What is most interesting about a customer's motivation is that it is typically one of the above, and you can't... and shouldn't try... changing it. Your job is to identify the correct motivation, and sell to that motivation. On the retail floor, many sales associates sell only to the first two items: prestige and performance, whereas my observations and experience show that the latter two items: dissatisfaction and indulgence are much more power motivations to buy.

Probing for Problems and Dissatisfactions: SPIN® the Sale

At this year's PARA conference, guest speaker Neil Rackham intrigued us with his insights into retailing. He has written two terrific books I highly recommend: *SPIN Selling* and *The SPIN Selling Handbook*. The process of S.P.I.N. centers around four steps: **Situation**, **Problem**, **Implication**, **Need-Payoff**

In the book, the studies and examples center around large account selling of office machines, but the concept is very adaptable to high-performance consumer electronics products. The steps are a process of first learning about the customers current **Situation**; probing to find a **Problem**, difficulty, or dissatisfaction with their current or past situation; discussing the **Implication** of the problem; and introducing a **Need-Payoff** during the product presentation.

Getting customers to focus on something they don't like about a product they already own, or a situation they're in is a powerful way to get them to buy something better. The problems and dissatisfactions create pain. The use of the SPIN process allows the sales associate to *skillfully build the pain*, so the client is anxious for a solution to take the pain away. I know it sounds negative, and it can be if you don't practice, but it is highly effective in selling more stuff, and better stuff to your clients. Let's take a couple of simple examples:

You want to sell a DVD player:

Situation: Customer likes to watch movies. Owns them and rents them.

Problem: "So you currently have to rewind the movies in your VCR, don't you?"

Implication: "Don't you get tired of waiting, and waiting to watch a movie?"

Need-Payoff: "So how would a DVD changer that allows direct access to any movie or part of a movie benefit you?"

You want to selling a lighting control system:

Situation: Customer has many rooms and lights throughout the home.

Problem: "So if you leave your home you have to walk from room to room and turn off all the lights, don't you?"

Implication: "How long does it take to do that? And if you don't, how much more is your electric bill?"

Need-Payoff: How would locating keypads or switches in your home that would allow you to turn on and off certain lights or all the lights in your home benefit you?

The reason this is so effective is that the decision to buy in many big ticket sales usually occurs when the sales associate isn't around. It occurs after the client has left and is discussing it with their spouse, a friend, or is just in quiet contemplation. Magnifying the problem through implication is a very, very powerful thing.

Self-Indulgence: The Narrow-and-Deep of Luxury Goods Sales

Many upper-middle class consumers have come to the conclusion that they will never be independently wealthy. It is a very rare client indeed, that will give a sales associate *carte blanche* for their home theater or whole-house electronics purchase. There is usually a limit or budget for any purchase. However, many upscale clients will spend more than a proportional amount on something that they really want. A sales rep in discussing this concept with the staff at my installation company, Home Entertainment Design, agreed that buying an expensive car like a Mercedes or Lexus made no sense to him. However, there were a few things that he would indulge in. For example, he likes to smoke cigars, and since he did it in moderation, he chooses to buy very expensive cigars. Not the \$3 to \$5 ones, but \$10, \$15, or even \$30 ones. Why? "Because I'm worth it", he replies. "Besides, what else in life can you enjoy the very best there is for only \$25 to \$30?" He also likes to fish. And he owns the finest, most expensive fishing gear you can buy. The best spinning reels, the best rods, the best tackle. Does he catch more fish? I dunno. But he feels great about fishing, and I'm sure he looks great too!

Identifying the self-indulgent luxury buyer isn't as difficult as you might think. The key to it lies in showing the best you can offer whenever you show any product to a customer.

Demonstration or Presentation: What's the difference?

When asked this question, most retail sales associates will respond, "A demonstration is when you play the product and a presentation is when you show the features of a product." However, they should draw a greater distinction between the two.

The Demonstration

In the course of qualifying a customer with What-Where-What-Who, during the second What (What would you like it to do?), you may find that the customer is not familiar with the features and benefits available on the product or products you sell. It is at this time many sales associates will take to client to a product and blur the qualification and the presentation into one step. Because the product is such a powerful distraction, and because they are forced to pick one product to "show & tell", many times the sales associate jumps to a pre-conceived conclusion as to the product the client might buy, before they have thoroughly qualified the client.

The solution is to take the client to the very Best you have to offer. By showing *The Best*, you accomplish several things: (1) *The Best* typically will have every benefit and feature available in the product(s) you want to sell. You will not have to take the customer to another product just to show a single feature. This will help maintain control in the sale. (2) In many cases your client may have never experienced *The Best*. How can they ever aspire or desire to own *The Best* if they've never experienced it? (3) Most clients will buy in the middle to upper-middle of the price range for a particular product category. Since *The Best* usually costs the most, you stretch the middle up.

When you take the client to *The Best*, you need to explain why you've chosen it to demonstrate the benefits and features available on the product(s) they're interested in, especially if it has a high price tag on it. For instance, if you were showing *The Best* Home Theater you have to offer, preface your discussion by saying, "So we can better determine the performance level that's best for you, I'd like to show you the standard we measure all Home Theaters up to." If the customer is taken aback by the price, simply comment, "This may not be the right one for you, but experiencing *The Best* will allow us to find out how close to this level of performance you want to get."

The Presentation

After you have determined the client's needs and decided on a product selection, it's Showtime! This is when your personality and showmanship should shine. It goes without saying that the system should be clean and at peak performance.

Follow these simple guidelines as a basis for a presentation that sells:

1. Choose your demo material carefully, and play music and movies that you have determined that the custom likes and approves of. Ask them during qualification.
2. Create a Word Picture carefully describing what the client will see and/or hear during the presentation. Don't get too wordy or ask them to listen or look for more than three things.
3. Play the demo. Keep it short, (three minutes or less). Stop the demo and confirm that they heard and saw what you pointed out prior to the demo.

Remember, the Presentation is where you show the client products you've earned the right to show them based on their answers to your questions during qualifying. If asked, "Why did you pick this one.", your response without hesitation should always begin with, "Because *you said...*" The *You Said's* always relate back to what you gleaned in your qualifying. Showing or discussing items not discussed then will not have the power and may confuse or detach the customer from your choice.

There isn't a magic potion or formula for selling better stuff. It takes hard work and a lot of practice. The most important step is to develop a consistently repeatable pattern and process for your sales presentations. Try applying some of the suggestions mentioned here, and you'll well on your way to Selling Better Stuff, and having clients that are thrilled!

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