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Do We All Really Need to be 'Sales People'?

by Wayne Bidelman



Have we not all heard throughout our careers that “we are all sales people” or “everyone in our organization is in sales”? Does it nauseate you sometimes, because ‘sales’ to you is not only uncomfortable but also has a connotation of aggressiveness and being gabby? I would submit that we do not all have to be sales people per se, but we cannot avoid having to sell.

Before deciding that you already know where this is going and/or you feel that you are a sufficient sales person, please hear me out. Indeed, my trite conclusion is that we all have to sell at times in our careers – whether it is to sell our self (job interview), sell an idea (to gain exposure and/or leadership position), or to sell a product or service (or our organization or our own business). And here is my last clichéd statement – the simple solution to effective selling is preparation – and preparation that anyone can do!

Stay with me ... since here’s the deal. If you think you are great at sales, I would submit that you are probably not as good as you CAN be. Because you have confidence in your gift for gab and your ability to describe or respond to anything, you probably seldom feel the need to prepare.

And if you are the stereotypical actuary and tend to be more analytic and process oriented, you actually have a greater ability to be GREAT at selling! Here’s why ... First of all, how to sell effectively CAN be learned by anyone. As actuaries, we have had to learn our whole careers, not only to pass the basic exams but on an ongoing basis if we are to retain our actuarial capabilities and credentials. An actuary also tends to be a person who can embrace preparation as a means to feel comfortable doing something that might not be natural – and once prepared, gains the confidence to move ahead.

My story? I fit this stereotype. However, now part of my coaching of independent business owners involves the proper marketing and sales techniques. Because I am experienced and trained to be able to help anyone regardless of the type of business they are in, I focus on the basics – the things we all think we know – or do know – but seldom put to work for ourselves. Let me use a personal example just to make my point.

I used to hate to network and I dreaded walking into the reception/cocktail hours at SOA and industry meetings. How did I get over this? I prepared, believe it or not.



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



I spent the time just ONCE to write down a list of questions (which eventually became a mental list) that would be useful in a conversation with anyone – rapport-building questions, questions about their business roles, etc. Even if you are talking to someone you know, there is a series of questions you can think of in advance to initiate and keep the conversation going. It is easy! And the simplest thing of all is, if you are talking to someone for the first time, you need to make your discussion all about them. People love to talk about themselves. They will love you – before they even know anything about you. Isn't that the initial objective? And the final key: prepare in advance in writing how you describe yourself and your business – see below.

I'll bet you have heard of a Unique Value Proposition, or Unique Sales Proposition. OK, I am starting to sound cliché again, but this is key to highly effective sales efforts. The simple message is: prepare in advance the best possible way to describe/define yourself, business, product or service (as the case may be), making sure to focus on how you or your product/service is different from other comparable people or things that will come to mind and what you can say to compel the

people who could be interested in what you have to sell to want to hear more. This is one of the most powerful sales techniques, and it costs nothing to implement – other than your time!

This article would become way too long if I were to go through the multitude of techniques to come up with the best possible Unique Sales Proposition (USP). I have a list of very specific questions I ask clients to elicit creative content for their USP (which I would be happy to share, if you want to contact me). However, do NOT worry about perfection with this, nor delay pulling your thoughts together. A well-thought-out something is better than nothing – believe me! Here are some of the key things to remember in your final Statement:

1. Do NOT just describe who you are or what your proposal or product/service is. In the end, no one really cares...
2. They only want to know what you or it does for them, so DO state what those things are!
3. Include how you are different from anyone or anything competing with you.
4. Pay attention to BOTH the rational and the emotional side of things (i.e. don't just describe features and benefits, describe how you or it will make them feel and gratify them, etc.).
5. Provide a guarantee with your proposal. (This is powerful, but a whole separate topic. I guarantee that you can come up with a guarantee within your USP – which by definition is a technique that gets rid of that last major concern of the prospect before they make a decision about you and/or your proposal.)

Short of getting assistance in pulling this together, merely start writing down sound bites (as many as you can think of – and be creative) covering each of the major areas above. Divide those sound bites into two or more “themes”. For example, the themes

for a description of you might include: experience, knowledge, business philosophy. For a product or service: value, buying experience, reliability. For a business proposition: strategy, financial viability, value to organization.

Once these themes are created, divide up all of your sound bites under the appropriate theme. This gives you the basis for putting together a good USP description – and can be tailored to any type of situation (30-second ‘elevator speech’, interview, article, formal presentation, advertisement, etc.). You could pick and choose your best advance thoughts from this document depending on who the audience will be and the amount of time or space you have for your presented USP. The point is that this USP is something that you (and any people who work for or with you that also help you ‘sell’) work into EVERY conversation with people you want to ‘sell’, as well as people who know people to whom you want to ‘sell’ – and is consistently heard by everyone, be it through a networking discussion, an article, a speech, an advertisement, description on your website, etc.

A couple of key supporting sales tactics include testimonials (which you can write yourself – ask me how) and scripting. The thought of ‘scripting’ typically creates a big “ugh” from everyone, but it is the key to effective and consistent selling. Your script (or outline of what you are prepared to say) not only includes your USP but also includes anticipating and writing down the best responses to every possible question and challenge you could get on your proposal/description.

How powerful would you be at selling yourself, your proposal, or your product or service if you craft in advance the best possible way to describe it (USP) AND have already come up with the best possible responses to every possible question or challenge you will get? This process takes some work, but can easily be dynamic and improved over time. Some of us actuaries are cautious about trying anything because we are not sure it will be perfect; again, this is nothing more than collecting your best thoughts in advance to put yourself, your proposal, your product/service in the most positive light. You can do it! ●

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