

Don't Solve the Problem...

By David C. Miller FSA, MAAA, MSCC

...too soon. That's the qualifier. As consultants we love to help our prospects solve their problems. In fact we're so passionate about our solution that at the first indication the prospect might need it, we jump out of our skin to reveal it immediately. After all, that's what they want to hear about, right?

Consider the following:

Prospects buy our products or services for two reasons, either:

- To solve a problem, or
- To achieve a desired result.

The most effective way to sell is to first **fully explore what is important for the client to avoid or achieve in the areas where our product or expertise can help them**. This is especially true for consultants and those who sell services. So if our goal is to seek mutual understanding, we must resist the temptation to discuss the solution before we have an in-depth understanding of the prospect's **underlying problems** or their **desired results**.

This isn't easy to do for eager business developers, yet it's vital for realizing successful selling results.

When speaking with prospects, here are **eight reasons to resist focusing on the solution prematurely**:

1. Forgoes the opportunity to help the prospect fully appreciate their need.

As strange as it sounds, the prospect is often not in touch with the full extent of their need for your solution. There is always some level of pain associated with an unmet need. It's human nature to avoid that pain in some way. One of the most common ways is for the prospect to ignore or minimize the problem (i.e., "it's not really that bad").

The prospect won't see the need for your "medicine" until they are aware of their "serious illness." In other words, **an undisturbed prospect will not buy**. Successful business developers help their prospects get in touch with the consequences of doing nothing before they present their solutions.

2. Reduces the probability of providing the best solution.

How can you solve the problem before you thoroughly understand what it is? It's easy to jump to conclusions and **assume** we understand what the client wants and then "make" our solution fit. Usually the prospect will tell you the solution they want rather than the problem or result. It's like a patient telling the doctor, "I need chemotherapy." Would a qualified doctor respond by saying, "Great - I specialize in chemo. How's next Tuesday?" Certainly not. But that's what many business developers do. As soon as the prospect says they want a service that the business developer provides, the business developer thinks, "Great! Time for the close."

You can imagine the problems that can result from this approach: clients spending a lot of money on solutions that don't deliver the desired results. That's bad for business!

Just like a doctor, **you want to explore the prospect's "symptoms" before you present the solution.** This way you can be sure you will deliver the best solution – one that the client will be happy with.

3. Takes away rationale for meeting with other decision-makers.

In the complex sale, your initial meeting may not be with the ultimate decision maker. Many organizations utilize a team approach when buying services. If you present the solution out of the box at the first meeting, you may forfeit the opportunity to meet with the other decision-makers. As a result, you may be left to depend on someone else presenting your solution to the rest of the team. It's a sure bet they won't do as good a job as you. In addition, you won't have the opportunity to explore the needs and motivations of these other decision-makers. It's much better to lay the groundwork to be able to speak with **all** the decision-makers on the team.

4. Minimizes the amount of exposure to the prospect.

Especially with complex / high-ticket sales, mutually exploring problems and results will take more than one meeting. In contrast, presenting your solution in a "dog and pony" format can be done in one meeting with little reason for further discussions. This provides very limited exposure to the prospect.

Instead **demonstrate how you solve problems by the way you sell** (i.e., "mutual exploration"). In this process you are helping the prospect understand their situation, developing rapport and fostering a relationship over several meetings.

5. Makes it difficult to understand the prospect's true intentions.

Mutual exploration gives you the time and opportunity to assess the prospect's true intentions. Are they really interested in your services? Or is this discussion a "price check", "fishing expedition" or free feasibility study? By presenting your solution prematurely, you'll never really know what the prospect's motives are and it may end up costing you plenty in terms of time and resources spent futilely trying to get their business.

6. Gives enormous advantage to a competitor that may already have a relationship with the prospect.

Have you ever had the prospect love your idea and then take it to their favorite consultant to implement it? Presenting the solution prematurely makes you extremely vulnerable to this. In these types of sales, relationship wins. Before presenting the solution, you must understand the prospect's needs, their decision-making process and what competition, if any, exists.

7. Forces you to resort only to claims of experience and expertise to differentiate yourself.

While touting your experience and expertise is a valid way to set yourself apart, it's often not enough. Let's face it - pretty much everybody makes those same claims. Presenting solutions prematurely doesn't give you time to develop a relationship with the prospect and demonstrate how you solve problems.

8. Weakens your ability to prove value for the cost or fees.

Your price or fees will only eliminate you from the process if you haven't first provided a context for them. If I asked you to give me \$25,000 for what's in this brown paper bag I'm holding, you would say, "No way!". That's what it's like for the prospect if you present your solution before they understand what the solution will do for them. Services are intangible and can seem mysterious and thus expensive. The prospect needs a context to measure the value they'll receive for your fees. For example, if you can show the prospect how paying \$25,000 for your services will save them \$1,000,000 in the next twelve months, you'll get much fewer price objections.

Remember to resist the temptation to reveal your solution prematurely for better sales success and more satisfied clients.

David C. Miller FSA, MAAA is a Professional Business Coach who works with consultants and sales professionals who are struggling to attract enough clients. He conducts seminars and one-on-one coaching in business development, influence, leadership and career enhancement. He can be reached at dave@translifecoach.com or 215-968-2483 or via his website www.BusinessGrowthNow.com.