

Confirming the Sale

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For the professional salesperson, the confirmation is just the beginning of a mutual commitment to an ongoing business relationship. The emphasis is not solely on the confirmation of the sale but on the entire sales process. Professional salespeople, who sincerely match customer needs with your product or service, can be much more relaxed once you reach the commitment stage. If you've been conscientious all along the way in working with your prospect, the two of you will naturally progress into the commitment phase.

Selling is like a marriage. Both parties must make a commitment to each other. When the client says "I do" during the confirming phase of the sales process, she is making a commitment to implement your solution to her problem. When you say "I do" to your client during the assuring phase of the sales process, you are committing to see the solution through its successful implementation -- regardless of what it takes. When you and your client make a mutual commitment, you are vowing to have open regular communication with each other and to deal with problems in a friendly professional manner before they become too big to resolve.

In collaborative selling, the separation between "selling" and "closing" is barely perceptible. If the sales process has been done well up to this point, the client has clearly specified his needs and problems and knows how your product or service will specifically solve them. You have had an adequate chance to use verbal and non-verbal feedback to see how the client perceives your product as THE solution to his goals. In fact, before you enter the commitment phase of the sales process, you and your client should have mutually agreed on acceptable solutions to his problems. Therefore, the commitment is not an "if" but a "when!" Closing techniques are unnecessary, in the sense of radical, complicated, or tricky techniques.

Therein lie the differences between confirming and closing. It is a qualitative distinction that embodies both attitude and behavior. In the confirming phase, you must be tuned into your prospect and her reactions. She will determine what you do and when, by her level of receptivity. If she is ready to commit to a purchase early in the presentation, then you need not finish your presentation. If you do, you run the risk of overselling or boring her. On the other hand, a prospect may want all the information you have before agreeing to anything. Any attempt to gain a confirmation too soon would be pressuring her.

SEEKING CONFIRMATION

When should you try to confirm the sale? There are not cut and dried answers to this. The best approach is to watch your client's interest level and buying signals. If, during the presentation, your client is acting and speaking in ways that indicate she's ready to place an order, you should stop the presentation and do just that - confirm the sale. You would tie up everything that had been said with a benefit summary and then take the order. A benefit summary is simply reviewing all the features and their associated benefits that the client favorably responded to during the presentation.

When you are at the end of the presentation process, you and your client are ready to proceed to the key phase of the confirmation process -- the commitment question. To do this, ask the client an open question with direction, such as "Where do we go from here?" "When do we proceed?," "How would you like to proceed?," or "What's our next step?" This question is an open straightforward request, lacking the pushy, tricky, and manipulative characteristics of other closing techniques. Since your client has participated fully in the entire sales process and has had a major hand in collaborating on the solution, you will generally be answered with a time, date, or other relevant reference. If there is something of concern, your client will generally by this time feel comfortable and trusting enough to speak out. You are, after all, problem solvers working together.

BUYING SIGNALS

All of this points out the importance of being aware of verbal and nonverbal buying signals that your

prospect may project. During a presentation, can't you sense whether the prospect is with you or not? Of course! This is because you consciously or unconsciously read your prospect's buying signals. Like traffic lights, these buying signals can be red (negative), yellow (neutral) or green (positive). By the end of the presentation you'll have a good feel for the overall "color" projected by the prospect and this generally dictates the type of commitment question you would choose.

When the buying signals are definitely red, you simply ask an open question with direction. When you've been getting yellow -- or "on-the-fence"-- signals, simply do a benefit summary and then ask an open question with direction. In some cases -- especially with data-oriented prospects -- you might want to substitute the "Ben Franklin Balance Sheet" for the benefit summary when you've been getting yellow signals. This simply consists of two columns of positive versus negative features and benefits of your product or service.

The only time you can deviate from the open question with direction commitment is when the client has been sending definite green buying signals. In these cases, the client is basically saying to you -- either verbally or non-verbally -- "I'm sold!" When someone says, "I'm sold" what do you do? Do you ask, "Do you want to buy?" Of course not! You work out the implementation details such as -- How many do you want? When do you want delivery? How are you going to pay for it? etc. These questions take the form of assumptive questions or alternative choice questions. It's all right to use these more traditional commitment questions only when you get green buying signals from your client. It is not all right to use it in all cases, especially when you get red signals.

QUESTIONS

The questions the prospect asks will tell you a great deal about his thoughts. Some typical questions that are buying signals include the following:

1. "Could I try this out one more time?"

2. "What sort of credit terms do you offer?"
3. "How soon can you deliver?"
4. "How can I even think of buying with interest rates so high?"

Questions, which are concerned with terms, delivery, quantity, benefits and service, usually indicate a positive buying attitude. Questions that ask about product features, ease of use, maintenance are more neutral. Questions, which are negative, are usually pretty obvious. "This computer was rated tenth by Consumer Reports, wasn't it?"

STATEMENTS

A prospect may comment about a product or service indicating various buying signals. You may hear statements like:

1. "That's very interesting."
2. "We could probably afford that."
3. "This is much too expensive."
4. "It's not exactly what I need."
5. "That's better than I expected."

BODY LANGUAGE

We give away our thoughts through our posture, facial expressions, and hand and arm movements. If you watch your prospects carefully you will see many correlations between their body language and their intentions. Keep these clues in mind:

1. If the client is sitting, open arms indicate receptiveness; tightly crossed arms indicate defensiveness.
2. Leaning forward and listening carefully show interest.
3. Supporting her head with one hand and gazing off into space means you have lost your prospect.

4. Increased tense postures are not a positive indicator. People tend to relax when they've made a decision to buy.
5. Happy, animated facial expressions show you that the prospect is relating well to you and your product.

Having a working relationship, you'll want to do more than monitor your prospect's buying signals; you'll want to know why. This is especially true if the indicators are negative. Because you have established trust, you can feel comfortable in asking your client why she feels the way she does. If you see that her questions or body language indicate disinterest, you should say something like, "I get the impression that I have lost you. Is there something I can do to get back on track?" Or, you can say, "I hear you saying YES, but I get the impression something else is on your mind. Would you mind sharing it with me?"

You can think of your relationship as both of you walking side by side down the same path. If your prospect starts to lag behind, you turn to find out why. If she speeds up, you do the same.

The commitment phase of selling is both a beginning and an end: the beginning of a possible long-term relationship and the end of a single sale with a new customer. Now your work focuses on maintaining that customer and keeping her satisfied. Best of all, the commitment process can be a win-win situation without ever sharpening your teeth before going for the client's jugular. If you think of your clients as lasting relationships that need to be cultivated, the jugular attack will be replaced by a clear conscience for you and a sigh of relief from your client.