

“CAN WE TALK?”

(Dialogue – The Foundation of the Client Relationship)

I knew I was beating my head up against the wall one day when I was once again cold-calling a prospective client from one of the largest facilities of a key industry sector in my region. I had developed an ongoing relationship with his voice mail, using a less than compelling approach to solicit a return phone call. I then remembered seeing my prospect a couple of years earlier giving a presentation at a conference. I had a genuine interest in the subject matter, as I was working on a subcommittee of a trade association developing policies on a related topic.

So this time when I called him, I simply stated that I was researching the aforementioned topic, remembered his conference presentation, and would like to schedule a lunch meeting to get his perspective on the issue and to pick his brain. For the first time in two years, he returned my call (within five minutes) and recommended a restaurant near the facility where we could meet. If only I'd have known selling could be that simple!

You'll never make any in-roads with a prospective client until you open a dialogue. And if the prospect is currently satisfied with his or her current provider, your chances of opening up a dialogue by finding a topic of mutual interest are far greater than if you simply try to discuss capabilities, services, and needs.

Your prospects know that you are a service provider. So if you develop a basis for an ongoing dialogue, the conversation will migrate in that direction in due time. You accomplish this by soliciting their advice, opinions, perspective, counsel, etc., all in an effort to gain a greater understanding. As you do this, make sure your topic of interest is relevant to your business and that your prospect is in a position to provide useful insights. Without breaching any clients' confidentiality, offer your perspective on the topic based on your experience and that of your peers. The relationship then becomes mutually beneficial.

Let me add one note of caution here. Sincerity is the key. If you're not genuinely interested in the topic of discussion, your client will know.

In the post World War II era, new consumer products exploded into the marketplace. With them came the proliferation of creative methods whereby salespeople manipulated, coerced, and cajoled clients into signing on the dotted line. In today's era, clients are more savvy than they have ever been, and equally as skeptical. The client's "deceitfulness radar," for lack of a better term, is more finely tuned than ever, so your clients will see through any fake attempts you make to start a dialog. In order to adapt, salespeople have been forced to "step up their game," becoming professionals in the truest sense of the word. Today, the salesperson's job is twofold: develop a strong relationship with clients, and then educate clients through sincere dialog, allowing them to make more informed and confident buying decisions.

Whether you are a dedicated salesperson or simply someone who engages the client, remember that you must have a genuine interest in the topic of discussion and a sincere belief that the client will be well served by retaining your services. Otherwise, you might as well move on.

Concentrate on finding common ground, opening a dialogue, and developing rapport and trust with the client. Once you've reached that level, sales is a significantly more simplified endeavor.

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This article is an adapted excerpt from *Selling the Fuzzy Widget: Secrets of Selling Professional Services* by Craig Cortello. Craig is the President and founder of Fuzzy Widget Sales Solutions, a sales consulting and training firm dedicated to serving professional service industries. He is also the National Sales Manager of Trinity Consultants, a nationwide environmental consulting firm, an author, an entrepreneur, a Rotarian, a husband & father, and an accomplished musician.

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