

## **“I DON’T KNOW”**

(You don’t have to know everything to engage customers)

Many books on selling talk up the importance of knowledge—that of your company and its services and of your client’s business. There’s a flipside to that principle that’s also true: You shouldn’t let lack of knowledge stop you from getting out and engaging clients.

Most technical salespeople and service providers prefer to know as much as possible about a topic before engaging clients. They tend to sell by demonstrating their knowledge in their area of expertise to the client. This approach can be a double-edged sword, however.

For one, you’ll be reluctant to probe for information regarding the full line of services your firm has to offer, as you’re not likely to be as qualified as every one of your company’s employees in all of those service areas. Often salespeople shy away from certain topics out of fear that they would be unable to field a client’s questions regarding those topics. Realize though that there’s no shame in simply saying that you will have one of your associates who is well versed in that area follow up with them.

Furthermore, wanting to employ a knowledge-based sales approach can be a subtle form of procrastination. While you’re conducting further research on a topic, your competitor is having a business lunch with the prospect you’re chasing.

Also, relying heavily on knowledge can set the wrong tone for the selling process. Here’s what I mean: If you start by assuming that your level of knowledge is the critical aspect of the sales call, then you’re focusing on the wrong side of the table—you’re focusing on yourself and not on the client. As a result, you’re more likely to want to demonstrate how much you know, monopolizing the conversation instead of demonstrating a healthy curiosity regarding how the client is dealing with the issues in which you are so well versed.

Even client knowledge has its potential pitfalls. For one, you may make certain assumptions based on readily available company data that give you a false representation of the selling situation. The reality

of your customer's department or office may be drastically different than that of the company as a whole.

For example, perhaps the company is very profitable, but your prospect has overrun her department's budget and is looking to trim costs. Conduct research on your prospect in advance, but don't let that be a substitute for a productive and inquisitive discussion when you're with the client.

Don't get me wrong, I don't want to trivialize the importance of doing your homework. A continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge is absolutely essential in almost any profession, and failure to take such an approach virtually ensures extinction in professional services.

A proper analogy might be safety precautions. By all means, in any endeavor that can be dangerous, from driving a car, riding a bike, or simply crossing the street, take all necessary precautions. But if you wait until you have a 0.00% chance of an accident, you'll never get out of bed in the morning, much less leave your house.

The prospect knows that even the qualified professional has limitations. Therefore, it's reasonable to say, "I don't know, but I'll get back to you." Your prospects expect you to facilitate the buying process by helping them understand the relevant factors to be considered, then to coordinate the people and information within your firm to help address the issues, if it turns out that your firm has the appropriate capabilities.

Realize that you will always have limitations in terms of your knowledge base; however, knowledge limitations are acceptable and need not impede your ability to sell.

So buckle up (research the prospect), look both ways (know your firm's capabilities), and get on the road and drive (get out and see the clients).

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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.

Craig is a proud resident and native of the New Orleans metropolitan area, and a Hurricane Katrina survivor!

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