

“THE FUZZY WIDGET”

(The Nature of Selling Professional Services)

Anyone who has taken an economics course probably remembers the generic term for a manufactured product: the widget. But not every company sells something tangible. Attorneys, accountants, and consultants don't sell something that has higher RPMs or tensile strength. What they offer isn't more absorbent, doesn't have better cleansing ingredients, isn't fortified with vitamins and minerals, doesn't have higher resolution or more pixels, and won't leave you feeling fresh all day. Because their product is a service, they are selling a “fuzzy widget,” so to speak. And how do you sell something that doesn't appeal to the physical senses?

After three long years selling heavy equipment to industrial facilities across the eastern two-thirds of the United States, I decided to make the transition to professional service sales, selling environmental engineering and consulting services to industrial accounts. I quickly learned that many of the techniques I employed in selling equipment came off as too “salesy” or unprofessional with my new client base, which consisted mostly of white collar engineers, scientists, and business professionals. My new sales environment required a softer sell, and even using the term “salesperson” was enough to repel some potential clients.

So I began studying the sales field. I read books, listened to tapes, and attended seminars. Not all the concepts applied to my selling situation, so I began to “pick and choose” those concepts that seemed useful and discarded those that were simply not appropriate in the sale of professional services.

For example, “closing” techniques that might help when selling copiers, electronics, or automobiles seemed like gimmicks in my line of work. When selling professional services, once you've positioned yourself such that the client considers you a partner in his or her business enterprise and your services irreplaceable, you have no reason to do a traditional “close,” because you've already eliminated the competition. The close is simply the natural byproduct of the client interaction.

Truth be told, however, the sales profession, regardless of the service or product you're selling, is quickly becoming a consultative one. The boom in technology has allowed the rapid dissemination of

information and buying options. Sales professionals who can't differentiate by offering service in some form or another, appealing to the human element of the buying decision, are doomed to failure. In the past, a company that developed a product with a new or unique feature could lead the competition for decades. Today, technology guarantees that by the time the product gets to market, a half dozen competitors are near completion on a similar product, or are even ready to roll out a superior offering. At that point, service is the only differentiator a salesperson can rely on.

If providing professional services is your forte, you're in for an interesting ride. Opinions differ as to how to most effectively sell professional services and which techniques are most effective. As such, you'll probably end up using a number of different tactics in order to optimize your time.

I can almost hear you now: *"But I'm not a salesperson. I'm a service provider."* Realize that the "seller-doer" concept is prevalent in most professional service firms, where the consultant or service provider must also wear the sales hat in the absence of a dedicated sales or business development representative. In this environment, you are essentially responsible for building a practice of your own within the larger structure of the firm. Other firms or companies employ dedicated sales staff to support the project staff or to get the sales cycle closer to the close, thus allowing those whose billable activities drive revenue for the firm to use their time involved in sales in a more strategic manner.

In professional services, people—namely you and your staff—are the product. And if you're selling services, you'll likely be coordinating your staff's efforts through a complex selling process. You'll be responsible for hustling up new business prospects, bringing them to the table, knowing which members of your organization are compatible with their needs and personalities, realizing when to present those individuals and what types of presentations to compile, maintaining an aggressive sales posture without coming on too strong, allocating your sales and marketing dollars and efforts, and knowing when to get out of the way and let others in your organization take over. It's a fine balancing act that would make Barnum & Bailey proud. When done properly, you'll be positioning yourself and your firm to become the marketplace leader.

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.

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