

ELIMINATING THE OBSTACLES TO CLOSING SALES, By Conrad Elnes

PREFACE

“In order to differentiate ourselves from the competition, we sell a turn-key package that represents a complete solution for our customers.”

Doug Turner, Anderson Industrial Engines

“We are promoting a couple of new services that are unique in our industry. They give us a substantial competitive advantage to help avoid or minimize price issues.”

Ray Bruegman, Miller Electric

These are two of the answers given to me in response to the question I have been posing to business owners and corporate executives for nearly a month:

“What is your company doing to combat longer sales cycles, plugged up pipelines and heavy pressure to discount prices?”

Since these three obstacles are the most important impediments to reaching their 2009 sales and revenue goals, I found that businesses are working intensely to develop solutions and get themselves back on track before year’s end.

“When the economy is in recession, companies make changes within their internal staff. We endeavor to develop allies at all levels in a client company, particularly senior management, and work to enhance our relationships with them between engagements. Doing so helps reduce the stalls and longer sales cycles caused by staff changes that often fall disproportionately on junior staff.”

David Cook, Milliman

When I began the project of surveying executives to discover how companies are dealing with the three biggest obstacles to making their 2009 numbers, I attempted to follow Stephen Covey’s advice: “Begin with the end in mind.” My end point was to be five creative solutions that readers could adapt or implement. However, because of the interest in this subject and people’s willingness to share, I have identified 14 solutions to date and still counting. My “end in mind” has evaporated, and I will continue seeking and sharing with you every valid solution that is made available to me.

- I welcome your solution idea, and I’ll credit you if I can use it in this series of articles. Summarize it in a brief paragraph, and e-mail it to celnes@salesinstitute.com. Be sure to include your contact information.

Part 1: CREATING ALLIES (ADVOCATES) TO MAKE THE SALE

“What are you doing to combat longer sales cycles, plugged up pipelines and heavy pressure to discount prices?” One of the most thoughtful answers is, *“We work to create advocates who help us make the sale.”* Let’s take an in-depth look at what creating advocates entails in order to help your sales team maximize the benefits of doing so.

Complex sales of high-value products or services are almost never closed by a salesperson who persuades the decision maker to cut a check or provide a purchase order on the spot. Such sales require a well-orchestrated campaign to discern the process a prospect will follow in making the purchase, to identify the “players” involved and to convert as many players as possible into allies.

Those involved in making the decision choose to become your ally (as opposed to your competitor’s ally) for a combination of two reasons:

1. They like you personally.
2. They feel that your solution best meets the needs of their business unit.

Once they have chosen you, they may coach you in one of three ways. Early on, they may limit coaching to providing requested information. At this level, your relationship is based mostly on business issues. As the relationship deepens, your discussions turn to more personal and risky topics. Their coaching expands to guiding you successfully through their purchasing process.

As the relationship peaks and your solution is perceived as the best under consideration, your ally may become your vocal advocate, to the point of laying his/her career on the line. One of my manager allies told his CEO, “You are certifiably insane if you don’t provide this training for our salespeople.” His endorsement shortened the sales cycle and their check cleared the bank within two weeks.

Finally, it is wise to remember that allies coach you by *“telling you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”* even when they know it may hurt your feelings. For example, if they develop an objection to your product/service, they reveal it rather than use the old “think it over” stall to avoid addressing it. Revealed objections can often be resolved and the sale closed.

“Creating Allies Is Job #1.” By doing so, your salespeople increase the probability of creating an ally who helps get the order, shorten the sales cycle and prevent a stalled sale.

A business handshake, when conducted flawlessly by the salesperson, is the beginning of an ally relationship. If the handshake is marred by one of the 15 common flaws, the prospect may never allow the relationship to flourish. Unfortunately, up to 40 percent of salespeople have a flawed handshake. For an e-copy of my article, [“Are Defective Handshakes Killing Your Sales?”](#) [click here](#). You will learn how to detect flaws and how to correct them.

Part TWO: CREATING A JOINT ACTION PLAN

Sales aren't closing. Proposals or quotes fall into "Black Holes." Buyers postpone decisions, and then don't return your phone calls. Potential orders seem to evaporate. It appears you've fallen off the radar screens of some buyers. A potentially great month goes into the tank and frustration mounts! Fortunately, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Read on to learn how you can eliminate many disappointments and bask more often in the glow of success.

The best available data indicates that price discounting, longer sales cycles and business stalled in plugged sales pipelines are frequent obstacles that prevent companies from achieving their 2009 revenue goals. **A JOINT ACTION PLAN** offers you an effective solution.

Many lost sales are due to the *loss of control* suffered when you and your buyers are not playing by the same rules. If their "Buying Plan" differs from your "Selling Plan," their plan will predominate yours. The "game" of sales, like other games, must be played according to a set of mutually agreed-upon rules.

Near the conclusion of your first sales interview, you can exert gentle, but firm, control when you outline the selling plan (rules) you and your firm propose to follow and gain the buyer's agreement to adopt a similar buying plan. When your selling plan is obviously of mutual advantage, buyers seldom resist, and if they suggest reasonable modifications, you would be wise to adopt them. From then on, everyone plays by the same rules known as a **JOINT ACTION PLAN**.

Always gain agreement to follow the **PLAN** before proceeding. When buyers resist adopting it, it's likely they are not really qualified prospects, or they may be "using" you for some other purpose.

Your strategy for making important *sales* should include three specific goals: to control the process; to shorten the time line; and to increase the likelihood of a successful close with only a minimal number of objections. Experience indicates that a **JOINT PLAN** helps achieve those goals when it is agreed that you will be allowed to interview the Decision Maker (especially in smaller to medium size companies, where they are often more accessible), and the prospect commits to a specific purchase date and budget.

A **JOINT ACTION PLAN** will help eliminate many of the causes of objections, delays and lost sales. To receive an e-copy of a sample **[JOINT ACTION PLAN, click here.](#)**

Part THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF CALL OBJECTIVES

"Who wants to waste time planning Call Objectives when I need to get out and make some sales. Winging it works for me." WRONG!

Although it is seldom recognized as such, failure to plan and achieve the right Call Objectives is an important cause of lost or postponed sales. A Sales Board survey of 300,000 sales people showed 99% of them set the wrong sales call objectives. Use the following ideas to stimulate discussions and action. Before long, you will see sales improve.

Failure To Plan Effective Call Objectives

Four of the most common complaints buyers hold against even experienced salespeople are:

- "They come in only to schmooze and waste my time."
- "They never reveal a plan to help us become more successful."
- "They come in to pitch the same product info I can get off their web site."
- "They rarely take time to ask a few questions to see if or what I really need."

Planning Effective Call Objectives

To avoid having buyers think about you in these ways, consider how the following ideas can help you be more welcome in the offices of your prospects and customers.

- It's wise to forego calling on a prospect or customer until you have a clear plan to add real value for them. Specialized knowledge, new applications, new products, or consulting services are examples of what can add value. Ask yourself: "In what ways can I add value?"
- The most effective Call Objectives move a sale forward in measurable ways and should be compared against reality immediately after the call. Ask yourself: "What could have gone better? "Am I now closer to closing the sale?"
- Plan the commitments you want the prospect to make as a result of your sales call, e.g. buy your product, introduce you to a key decision maker or schedule a demo. Ask yourself: "What commitments are reasonable to request?" How will they move the sale forward.?"
- During pre-call planning, play the interview in your mind. Note factors such as how you will establish rapport, plan your probing strategy, anticipate your need for visual aids, rehearse your close and review your plans to deal with stalls and objections. Ask yourself: "What else should I plan for?"

Also, consider this: While you plan Call Objectives for sales appointments, it's virtually certain that prospects have one or more Call Objectives as the reason they agreed to schedule an appointment with you. It's likely they are **vulnerable**; they are **unhappy in some ways with**

their current situation or supplier. It is essential that you plan to learn and discuss their concerns early on, otherwise they may use your seeming lack of interest as justification to employ tactics that prevent you from achieving your Call Objectives.

Action Plan

What can you do to instill a habit of planning Call Objectives in your mind? Managers might consider talking about them during future meetings or drop an e-mail reminder. Prep for making joint calls, by discussing them. Anytime a sales person asks for help with an account, agree on the call objectives. This extra bit of coaching will aid greatly in developing the team toward peak performance.

Part FOUR: QUALIFYING THE BUYER

As a sales trainer, I am inclined to suspect that every salesperson, in every company needs sales training. Your sales people may have similar feelings regarding the products they sell. Stalls, a frequently mentioned obstacle to closed sales, develop when sales people fail to distinguish between a *suspect* and a qualified *prospect* and try to close suspects. Unless salespeople follow a rigorous *qualification* process, their desire to quickly close some sales may cause them to shortcut or eliminate a thorough qualification. The frequent result is another stalled sale plugging their pipeline.

Since only qualified prospects are likely to buy rather than stall, let's examine five items of information that must be obtained prior to presenting a solution.

1. **NEEDS/WANTS:** What does a suspect need, and is that what he/she wants? Needs and wants are not necessarily the same. Buyers rarely allow themselves to be “closed” until they sincerely *want* your solution.
2. **AUTHORITY:** What levels of buying *authority* and *influence* does each individual involved in the decision possess, and how does he/she apply them. In high-value, complex sales – those with the longest sales cycles – it is essential to make allies of those with the highest levels of authority and power to help push your sales forward to a faster and successful conclusion.
3. **TIMING:** What timing factors can influence the outcome of your sale? Here are a few factors that must be considered:
 - Is there a deadline for making a purchase, and how close is it?
 - How much time will the purchase save the buyer?
 - When will the buyer hear presentations from your competitors? Who are they?
Do you want to present prior to or after them?

4. BUDGET: What effect will budget have on their decision to proceed or hold back? How close is the beginning of a new fiscal new year, and will more money be available then? What are they currently paying your competitor for a similar product? Is their current budget adequate and expandable if the benefits justify the change? If the purchase involves a first-time purchase, how would the suspect characterize the budget? What ROI will be required to justify the purchase?
5. DEAL KILLERS: Is there any reason why the suspect would resist buying from you or your company in particular. (Such reasons can be “deal killers.”)

If a *suspect* successfully passes all five of your tests, they become *qualified prospects* and worthy of your best presentation.

To aid in qualification, also ask for details concerning the *process* they intend to follow in deciding whether or not to make a purchase. Finally, ask what the three most important factors they will consider in selecting a supplier.

Granted, the qualification process just described takes thought, time and patience. However, the time wasted in trying to sell non-qualified suspects - and the discouragement felt from failures - make prospect qualification a very rewarding use of time. Fewer lost or stalled sales and shorter sales cycles will be your assured rewards.

Part FIVE: GAINING ATTUNEMENT WITH THE BUYER

My observations of sales people, especially those who are highly experienced, indicates that they sincerely desire to be helpful to buyers. Since they have solved nearly every buyer problem many times over, they are often tempted to propose a solution very early in the sales process. Let's see how doing so may cause stalls and price objections.

In the following example, a buyer discloses this troubling issue early on: ***“We feel that our bottle filler is too slow to meet the increased demand we are experiencing.”*** Behind that disclosure lurk several additional, as yet undisclosed buyer expectations:

- “We need 20 percent greater throughput.”
- “We must reduce overtime expense by 15%.”
- “Our inability to ship product on time has caused the loss of 6 major accounts.”
- “New equipment must be priced within our budget of \$100,000 and give us at least a three-year payback.”
- “Its factory warranty must cover all parts and labor for two years.”

In the rush to offer an exciting and helpful solution to the slow bottle filler, the salesperson may bypass the unspoken expectations in favor of describing the speed capability of his/her

company's new model. In addition, he/she may "sell" its Teflon coated bearings, its stainless steel filling spouts and its free factory installation - stellar features all! But for this buyer?

As you compare the buyer's group of expectations with the salesperson's set of presentation features, the lack of *attunement* between the two becomes obvious. When two musical instruments are in tune, they sound as one and when a buyer and seller are in attunement, each owns the same body of knowledge as the other.

The lack of attunement illustrated in the example will almost certainly cause several buyer questions that raise objections - price objections are frequent. In addition, the sale may be stalled as the buyer contacts other suppliers in hopes one of them may more satisfactorily meet his/her expectations.

By controlling the urge to be helpful until attunement is reached on each of the buyer's expectations, a sales person is more likely to present a solution that fits "like a hand in a glove." Buyers respond by eagerly "wanting" the solution; they advocate for an expedited purchase. The shorter sales cycle and less focus on price discounting eliminate two of the impediments to meeting the sales person's revenue goals.

Part SIX: ATTUNING YOUR PRESENTATION TO THE BUYER

Sales people who improve their solution Presentations by eliminating some common flaws will experience fewer stalled and lost sales and fewer price objections. The following are examples of flaws that are easily corrected:

- Proposals that are faxed or e-mailed rather than delivered and sold.
- Generic power point expositions.
- Information dumps.
- Tedious use of facts and figures.
- Proposals that don't dramatize benefits to show attunement with a buyer's expressed needs and wants.

The following suggested improvements will shorten and sharpen sales Presentations.

1. Assume the buyer and seller are in attunement concerning each of the buyer's expectations. Presentation attunement is reached most readily when a solution feature and benefit are *dramatized* in a way that allows the buyer to envision one of his/her expectations being met or surpassed. Dramatization is enhanced by demonstrations that include visual and touching elements. As the Presentation concludes, a prospect's desire to buy should be at its peak. "*I want this solution*" should be his/her predominating thought.

2. Since your product may appear to be similar to others under consideration, identify and “sell” two or more unique services your company provides with the purchase of its products.
3. As the desire to conclude a purchase peaks, a prospect may give the sales person buying signals (signs). Statements such as: “This is exactly what I’ve been looking for.” indicates no further Presentation may be required to close the sale. Questions can also be strong buying signals. For example: “If I give you a P. O. today, can you install the bottle filler before the end of the month?” That and similar questions demand that the sales person close.
4. Finally, buyers realize that changing suppliers can cause a number of hassles for many people in his/her organization. The fear of unfavorable consequences is a frequent cause of stalls. The Huthwaite study that led to publication of the book *Spin Selling* showed that nearly two-thirds of “price” objections disguised a fear of the consequences of making a change. To beat the fear of change, nothing may be as potent as first reaching attunement concerning a buyer’s situation (needs and expectations) and then attuning a proposed solution until a buyer eagerly wants it, regardless of consequences.

When buyers and sellers reach attunement and remain so throughout the sale, sales people experience fewer stalls, shorter sales cycles and fewer price objections.

Part SEVEN: PREVENTING STALLS FROM SIDELINING SALES

Stalls are most often caused by one of a number of largely preventable factors such as these: hidden objections, fear of consequences, lack of buying authority, lack of desire for your proposed solution, the need to hear your competitors’ proposals before deciding, previous complaints against your products that were never resolved and staff changes within the prospect’s organization.

You can help prevent many stalls at closing by qualifying prospects *thoroughly* prior to your presentation. In addition, creating allies throughout the sales process helps prevent stalls. As the sale progresses, a real ally coaches you by “telling you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” even if they fear it may hurt your feelings. Therefore, resistance at closing can often be avoided.

If your closing attempt is answered with a stall such as, “*I like your solution, but I want to think about it,*” or if the stall is expressed like this, “Your product looks good, but I want to talk to my V. P. before I decide,” you can be certain that the buyer has stopped coaching you.

Your immediate task is to restore the ally relationship and seek coaching to learn “the truth . . .,” thus allowing you to resolve the issue. This is a very delicate time in the sale; but when you deal with a stall in a buyer-friendly way, a sale often results. I have developed three examples of approaches and dialogues that are highly effective, but too detailed to be included in this paper. If stalled sales are a concern for you, I will be happy to e-mail a complimentary copy of my suggested [**solutions for stalls. Just click here**](#) and provide your complete contact information to expedite your copy.