

## Running a Reverse

### *What to do if you're not the first salesperson through the door*

Suppose that a potential client calls you asking for information or requesting that you respond to an RFP. It could be that they are just starting on their purchasing journey (which is a good thing for you). Or perhaps they've already dealt with one or more of your competitors, already have a solution—and preferred vendor—in mind, and contacting you is a pro forma step that shows they sought out competitive bids.

You have to be careful in situations like these because research has shown that decision makers tend to latch onto the first solution that is presented to them. The rest of their purchasing process is a way to help them justify that they've already made a good choice, not a true investigation of alternatives.

What can you do?

#### **1. Always ask what they've done already**

You don't know how far they've gotten in their buying process, so you *always* need to ask something like, "What steps have you taken in regards to making this decision?"

Ask them to tell you about the issues that caused them to start to looking the buying decision in the first place. Probe into the criteria they have already established: "What does the solution look like? What factors are most important?"

#### **2. Look and listen for signs that a decision has been made**

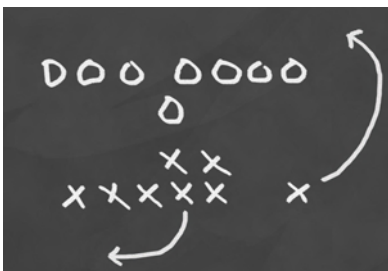
We salespeople are, by and large, very optimistic people. When a customer calls us, it's natural to be excited about the opportunity, but

What steps has a customer taken *before* they called you? Knowing the answer is key to developing the right competitive strategy.

we need to manage that optimism or we can be blind to important signals.

A customer who is truly interested in what your company has to offer will be open to working with you. A customer whose company has secretly made a decision and is just looking for some competitive bids will likely do one or more of the following:

- Be unwilling or reluctant to schedule a meeting.
- Be reluctant to share inside information.
- Use a competitor's terminology or language.
- Push to get you to submit a proposal very quickly so they can meet self-imposed and arbitrarily short deadline, one not driven by any impending business event.
- Not read information you send.
- Show signs of impatience if you call to get more background information.
- Be slow to respond to a request for information, or say they aren't providing extra information to any vendors.



### 3. Run a reverse play

If you see any of the signs of trouble, recognize that your odds of winning aren't that good. It's likely they've been dealing with one or more of your competitors (even if they won't say so), and perhaps have already chosen a preferred vendor.

You could, of course, give up and move on to other opportunities. Or you can take the plunge and try to **run a reverse play**. Football enthusiasts will know that a reverse play is when you get the opposition to think you're going off in one direction, only to switch direction abruptly.

In sales, running a reverse play means getting the customer to believe that you're following along with their idea of a solution (likely shaped by a competitor), but then skillfully getting *them* to suddenly change direction—to **change their vision of the solution**.

For example, that you're selling corporate jets. You work for Brand A, which has a higher price than Brands B or C. If a customer perceives the options as equal except for your higher price (because they don't value your other strengths), you need to develop a new scenario. Perhaps you have an alternative to offer customers: the potential to purchase a *share*

in multiple jets from your company, and then pay a monthly fee and hourly operation costs. On as little as four hours notice, your company can send out whichever size jet your customer needs that is most conveniently located. Need a twelve-seat jet next week in Paris? No problem. Need three jets the week after that in Rio? No problem.

Now the competitive situation is completely reversed. Why should the customer spend \$10+ million on any *one* jet from Brand B or C, plus costs for insurance, fuel, pilots, and catering, when they could have access to a fleet of jets for a fraction of the up-front costs?

**Adding new criteria or shifting the importance of existing criteria can get you into the race.**

What a reverse play does is getting the customers to **add new criteria** and/or **shift the importance** of existing criteria for the solution. The jet Brand A seller's strategy, for example, gets customer to think shifting "jet ownership" lower in importance in exchange for some new criteria: flexibility in the size and location of the jets they have access to.

There are two ways to change customer criteria when you're coming into their buying process late.

- 1) **Get them to envision even greater results than they are currently envisioning with your competitor's solution.** To come up with ideas you could use here,
  - Consider existing customers who have implemented your solution in new and different ways, the customers who gained much greater value from your product or service than others. What are these "uber-customers" doing differently from other customers? If the answer to that question is a different concept than what the prospect is currently considering, it's your professional responsibility to introduce the game-changing concept to them.
  - Make a list of the most unique solutions you've delivered for customers. What specific differences does your company have, or could you have, and how can you make these differences important to your buyer?
  
- 2) **Get them to think about additional needs.** As suggested above, you want to have customers talk about how they are currently defining their needs. As part of a reverse play, you want to plant some seeds for additional needs—needs related to problems that you can solve! For example, say, "Other customers have mentioned having an issue with \_\_\_\_\_. Is that something that's important for your company?"

## Add the Reverse to Your Playbook

A colleague recently asked me how often I used the reverse play. My gut instinct was to say “rarely,” but when I thought more about it, I realized that I use a Reverse strategy almost every time *I’m not the first in the door*. By coming into the process late, I have to assume that my competitors have set the requirements for the customer’s solution. The only way I can win is to open the door just a crack so the customer begins to entertain the possibility of alternatives.

Be forewarned, though. Reverse plays can be risky. If done wrong, the customer will think that you’re *ignoring* their needs rather than trying to redefine them! And if you’re going to call a reverse, do so quickly—as soon as you sense that the customer’s mental picture of a solution was painted by competitor. Don’t put it off, because the longer you wait the lower your chances of success.



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