

Salespeople, Stop Worrying About Being Liked

 hbr.org/2019/03/salespeople-stop-worrying-about-being-liked

March 22, 2019

Paul Linse/Getty Images

Summary.

The myth that likability is a crucial sales trait remains alive and well. One analysis of 450,000 salespeople found that among elite salespeople — those with the best records — 89% said they do not need to be liked. But among the weakest, 86% said they do need to be liked. And the weaker their sales records, the more likely people were to believe that their ability to make friends is their greatest asset. Customers care far more about the value of what they're buying than they do about the person selling it to them. For salespeople to deepen their expertise they need to really understand the problem they are solving for a client and the process that sale will follow.

The myth that likability is a crucial sales trait remains alive and well. As I travel across the country and around the world training teams and executives, I run into this myth constantly. People ask things like, “But if I do that, won't the customer dislike me?”

Being likable is not a necessity to succeed in sales. And those who focus on it as a priority are destined to fail.

One analysis of 450,000 salespeople found that among elite salespeople — those with the best records — 89% said they do not need to be liked. But among the weakest, 86% indicated they do need to be liked. And the weaker their sales records, the more likely people were to believe that their ability to make friends is their greatest asset.

It's a natural human inclination to want to be liked. Learning to let it go can seem like a monumental challenge. But customers care far more about the value of what they're buying than they do about the person selling it to them. The key, I teach sales teams, is: “Be an expert, not a friend.”

Here are three crucial steps to demonstrating your expertise.

Dig for root causes. To make a sale, you need to determine the problem you can help a prospect solve. Salespeople who focus on being liked often fail to figure out the real source of a client's problems. That's because prospects often haven't figured out the causes themselves.

When prospects say what they believe is causing their problems, successful salespeople push back. A study found that sales professionals who are assertive and willing to present controversial views outperform “relationship builders” by a huge margin. “Challengers” were

40% of top performers in sales, while relationship builders accounted for only 7%.

In my book *Gap Selling*, I tell the story of an asset management company that was 29% below its sales goal. They assumed the problem was simply their sales strategy. The other consultants they interviewed just responded with ways to improve the strategy.

But I asked about things they hadn't mentioned, such as their organizational structure, coaching process, and hiring decisions. I explained some potential problems I had identified in these arenas. I got the job. The man who hired me said I had effectively "smacked him over the head," and that he realized it was time for a "new framework from which we could operate."

Don't stop at the first "yes." Sometimes, you get a terrific response from a prospect. They've bought into your offer and want to make it happen. It's tempting to think that you've achieved all the expertise you'll need. But your credibility as an expert can be overturned on a dime.

I learned this the hard way. A top official at a change management company was excited about my offer. She brought in a peer, whom she thought would agree. Instead, this peer had a different set of problems, which I wasn't prepared to address. I had made the crucial mistake of assuming her problems were the same. That sale fell through.

To avoid this pitfall, always be engaged in learning more and more about the functional area you're selling to within a business, whether it's sales, marketing, HR, or IT. Talk with people knowledgeable about the field, in order to discover the broadest set of potential problems that specific group is dealing with.

Learn the process, not just the problem. To close a deal, you also need to become an expert on the process it takes to make a sale go through.

Early in my career, I created an online platform for ski resorts to help them advertise and book sessions with instructors. Heads of resorts were enthusiastic. But I wasn't ready for the intense pushback from their IT departments, which were concerned about how to make the platform work with their unique systems. So quickly, I began suggesting that we bring IT into the discussions early on.

There was another big problem, however. Even after IT approved, we needed HR to sign off. They were concerned that they'd have to pay instructors for the time spent setting up their profiles on the platform, potentially even violating labor laws for hours worked. I wasn't prepared with a response. That business failed.

Now, I recommend that even as you're working to get a "yes" from someone, you plan for the next "yes" you'll need as well. Learn the chain and anticipate it. While this can involve many steps for B2B (business-to-business) selling, it also applies to B2C (business-to-consumer)

sales anytime more than one person is involved in the decision.

In all these cases, the clients told me they liked me. That had no effect on whether they hired me. It was simply a matter of whether my expertise won them over. That's why, in the end, salespeople should refocus their energy. Give up the need for personal approval. Instead, commit to knowing your clients' problems better than they do.

Of course, none of this means that being liked is a bad thing. Sure, with all things being equal, buyers might opt to work with someone they like personally. But in sales, "all things" are virtually never equal. Your quick wit, warm demeanor, and offer of tickets to a ballgame might be nice extras. But every time you try to schmooze about life instead of drilling down on the sale, you take focus off of your expertise. You just might find yourself going to that game with some prospects who like you — but buy from your competitor.