

The Best Presentation: Canned or Planned?

by Hal Slater

Scripts

I am amazed that I still encounter direct salespeople who are required to memorize and present a pre-written script to their customers. Although there are exceptions to every rule, I cannot imagine a circumstance where a product with a high enough ticket to warrant a direct sales call would not create a level of concern in the customer beyond what a script could cover.

I am reminded of a company that, over thirty years ago, attempted to recruit me to sell an elaborate baby buggy. They required a salesperson to learn the script and demonstration with promises of great success. My wife and I found the presentation to be a real turnoff and an obvious set up to cover an overpriced, over-designed item. The author of the script allowed no room for buyer input and attempted to overwhelm the prospect with benefits we didn't understand, much less need.

If you are asking for enough money that you can afford to send a salesperson, then the buyer will probably have enough concern about the purchase that the salesperson must uncover and address his needs directly. This is why a canned presentation or script won't work. Not to mention the fact that delivering a canned presentation from memory is a difficult task.

I have been a member of a Toastmasters club for nearly sixteen years and I have admired the gargantuan, but misdirected, efforts of new members who come prepared to deliver a memorized script. As often as they succeed, however, they lose their train of thought and must deal with devastatingly long pauses when that happens. Sometimes, they become so dejected that they are unable to continue their public speaking development. A memorized, nonresponsive monologue is no way to talk to one person, much less an entire audience.

Instead of memorizing a script, your salespeople must learn to understand: 1) what your buyers want, 2) how to uncover their motivations and justifications and 3) how to appeal to their emotions and stimulate action. This requires as much, or more, preparation but the payoff is worth it. Once trained in this approach, it is easier to add new products and upsell existing ones. Besides being more effective, this style of selling is also less stressful on the salespeople, resulting in a better working atmosphere and less employee turnover.

'Pitchbooks'

I heartily agree with the use of a PRESENTATION MANUAL or other visual aids to assist a salesperson in making a sale. Terminology is important because it affects our inner beliefs, so they should never be called 'pitchbooks' because we should never be 'pitching'. We are professionals selling a highly desirable product or service and we don't pitch our story. We offer our value to someone who has a need for it.

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That said, it is true that... Pictures are worth a thousand words. Not only are they a better way to explain concepts; when placed in a strategic sequence, they can tell a story as effectively as words. They can also be used as prompts to make it easier to remember the important points to address in the sales presentation.

It has been my experience that, except in special circumstances, laptop computers are not ready for use as a presentation tool. Their main problem is that they distract the salesperson from the client and, although seemingly minor, even small distractions break the rhythm of the presentation. While the salesperson is looking for or loading a file, the prospects' attention drifts and the information stream is not properly organized in their mind. The exceptions are when there is a reliable, professional, credible, interactive element and design to the computer presentation. The computer must really be a necessary part of the process or it will seem like mere showmanship and become even more distracting.

Three-ring binders with an easel back, high quality page protectors, a desktop computer with a color inkjet printer and a digital camera are all that are really needed to present any story in a compelling and professional fashion. With little or no graphic arts training, anyone can assemble, reassemble and refine their message into one that produces consistently impressive results.

'Pack' and 'Drop'

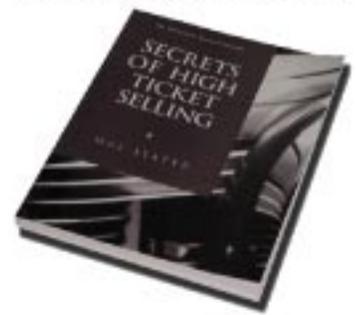
We all need a reason to buy... TODAY. Whether we are buying or selling, we need a reason that will stimulate action. When we are buying, we like the reasons to be our own, but when we are selling, we like to be able to control the timing, so we must provide the reason. Your buyers feel the same way and that's what makes it so challenging. The question is not whether to use a closing incentive, the question is how to offer one without losing your credibility. When you offer a reason to buy today, why won't your reason be valid tomorrow?

Many salespeople try to offer a discount for buying today but few buyers believe that the discount would not be available tomorrow, or any other day for that matter. They have been conditioned by advertising offers and other amateurish salespeople to believe that these 'special' offers aren't very 'special' at all. They are usually right. If they are right, your salesperson becomes a liar in the prospect's eyes and that seriously diminishes the chances of a sale, now or later.

The best reasons to buy today are the buyers' reasons and it is the mission of the astute sales professional to uncover and target those motives. If you know that there is no compelling reason to act today, it is the job of management to provide one. If the salesperson must 'pack' the price for a subsequent 'drop' this is where credibility will be lost. If the buyers don't believe in the first price, they won't believe in the second price, either. Since the salesperson made up the first price, he or she will not be as credible representing it. The alternative is to hire only salespeople who can lie with impunity and I believe that you can imagine the problems that policy would bring.

If we want honest, credible and effective salespeople, we have to provide them with a reason they can give their customers to buy today, and it should be an honest reason. Added value premiums typically work better than cash discounts but it is the reason it is being offered that is most important. If the buyer is sold on the value of the product or service, and can afford it, and has a credible reason why it would be advantageous to act now, you have the elements

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of a sale. In lieu of any elaborate fabrication, you could tell the truth; marketing, including follow up, costs money. Ask them, "We know we are going to spend the money. Which would you prefer, that we spend the money to give you bonus gift X, or that we spend the money to pay George, our telemarketer, to stay in touch with you until you have made up your mind?"

I will admit, that's not the strongest incentive to act that I have had to work with, but it is universally true that follow up costs money and you can deliver your product at a lower cost if your buyers are closed on the first call. By sharing that savings with only those who act today, and this is the hard part, you can improve your salespeople's performance and make your buyers feel like they received special treatment. The difficulty will come when somebody wants to get yesterday's special today. If you give in, you undermine the credibility of the offer in the minds of the salespeople, if you do not, you are forced to turn away business that you may need, at any price. I recommend that you stick to your guns but it is a decision that you must make for yourself. Welcome to the real world of sales.

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Selling Power Magazine (Video Review)

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**K. Wittmayer, Sales Manager
Cash Lewis Company, San Diego**