

## **Dealing With Your Customer's Time Constraints**

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"My customers don't have as much time to spend with me as they used to."

That's a comment I'm hearing more frequently in my sales seminars. It's a growing phenomena. Your customers used to be able to spend more time with you. But lately, it seems like they are on tighter schedules and are harder to see. You just can't spend as much time with them as you'd like, because they're pressuring you to move on.

This is a real information-age issue. You know how confused and pressured you feel these days. Your customers feel the same way. As pressures brought on by rapid change, growing competition and the need for every organization to become more streamlined and efficient have hit your customers, many of them have reacted by trying to make everyone more productive. As a result, your customers have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it, just like you. Some of your customers are walking around with day-planners under their arms today, when, just a couple of years ago, they didn't know what one was. Time, more than money, is the precious commodity of the Information Age.

It's not that your customers don't like you, (although they may not) nor that they are not interested in your products and services. It's just that they have too much to do, and simply don't have as much time to spend with you as you'd like.

### **Implications...**

This development is truly ominous because the implications strike to the heart of your ability to perform for your company. Let's think for a minute about the value you bring your company. Why do they employ you? What do they really need you and other salespeople to do? If you were to boil it down to its most fundamental level, you'd probably say that your company needs you to create relationships and spend face-to-face time with your customers.

Here's another way of looking at it. Suppose you were to make a list of all the things you do in the course of a week. Then look at the list, and ask yourself this question, "How many of those things can be done better or cheaper by someone else within my company?" If you answer honestly, most items on the list can probably be handled more effectively or efficiently by someone else.

But, the one thing that you do that no one else can do as effectively as you is interact with your customers. It's the face-to-face, person-to-person interaction with your customer that is the heart of your job, the core of the value you bring your company.

That's what makes this challenge ominous. If you can't spend quality time in front of the customer, your days as a successful salesperson are numbered.

### **Here's how to attack this challenge...**

First, remember to respect your customers' time constraints. If you try to overstay your welcome, you'll only succeed in making him/her more irritated with you. Do unto him as you would have him do unto you, if you were in his place. Protect the relationship.

Then, focus on making the time that you do have with him more productive for both of you. Think of the issue being quality time, not quantity time. Here are three strategies that will work for you.

#### *1. Focus on the quality of the time you have with your customer.*

If you're not going to have as much time in front of the customer as you'd like, then you must concentrate on making the time that you do have as valuable and productive as possible. That requires you to spend more time planning and preparing for each sales call.

Gone are the days when you could just "stop in." Rather, make sure that you have at least three things prepared for every sales call:

- a specific objective -- what do you want to accomplish in this call?
- an outline of how you're going to accomplish that objective, and
- all the necessary tools you'll need to do it.

That way, the actual time that you spend with your customers will be more productive. Your customer will appreciate your organization and your respect of his time, too.

#### *2. Set an agenda -- talk in terms of your customer's needs.*

Begin every sales call with an agenda. Tell your customer what you want to cover and how you're going to proceed. Mention the needs and objectives in which he is interested, and explain how you're going to address them. This will relieve him of the worry that you're going to appropriate his time unnecessarily, and will allow him to focus on you.

For example, at the beginning of your sales call, you could say something like this:

*"John I know you're interested in the cost payback of a possible investment in a new telephone system. I'd like to share with you some of the numbers that others have used to investigate this kind of purchase. After we go through these, I'll address any other questions you may have, and then we'll talk about the next step in this process. Does that sound reasonable?"*

#### *3. Always have something of value to discuss.*

This a longer-range strategy. As you consistently hold to this principle, over time you'll build up a certain expectation in the customer's mind. Don't expect an immediate payback from this strategy, but, none the less, stick to it for the long hall.

Think of the time that your customer does spend with you as an investment by the customer. Put yourself in his shoes, and see the situation from his perspective. Is he gaining something of value from you in exchange for his investment of time? You want the answer to that question to be "Yes."

In order to generate that perception in your customer's mind, make sure that every time you see him, you have something of value to share or to discuss with him. That means something that the customer is interested in. If you have nothing that the customer will think is of value, don't take his time. Wait until you do have something to see him.

After a few such calls, your customer will come to respect you and look forward to your calls, knowing that you're not there just to work some agenda of yours, but rather he'll come to expect to gain something from your sales calls.

You'll find it easier to make appointments and get time with your customers when you've built in them the expectation that the time spent with you will be well worth the cost of it.

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