

# Sales Lessons from Dancing with the Stars

I admit it! I'm hopelessly addicted to this fluffy, feel-good show where famous men & women dare to learn something new with millions of people watching their every move.

Tonight I'll be watching the finals, cheering my favorites on one last time. Tomorrow I'll be despondent that it's over.

But before the results are announced, I'd like to weigh in on what you as a seller can learn from "Dancing With the Stars."

## **1. Practicing before prime time is essential.**

Each week the stars not only learned a new dance, but also struggled to perfect it before they stepped on the stage. They practiced hours each day, tripping over their own two feet and worrying endlessly about mastering the intricacies of each dance.

Sellers need to take this lesson to heart. You can't "wing it" in sales today. Savvy sellers run through their presentations multiple times before standing in front of the committee. They listen to their own voicemail messages before calling real clients. In short, they stumble over their own words in private before they "perform" in front of prospective customers.

To increase your sales success, practice more.

## **2. You can't skip any steps.**

Every dance has certain requirements that the judges expect to see. When the couples don't have enough turns or taps or whatever, they're docked points – which could ultimately lead to their eviction the following week.

Sellers who skip steps of the sales process in their attempts to get the business quickly, create obstacles that can delay or even derail their own sales efforts. Customers have their own buying process to go through. They won't be rushed. The more sellers "push" towards closure, the more likely they'll blow it.

To win more sales, don't skip any steps.

## **3. The best option doesn't always win.**

At the beginning of this season, actress Sabrina Bryan (Cheetah Girls) was clearly a formidable competitor. She danced beautifully and powerfully. Everyone was convinced she would be in the finals. But halfway through the competition, she was booted off the show because the viewers hadn't voted for her.

Sellers need to constantly be aware of anything that could negatively impact their sales efforts. If the right people in the company aren't advocating for your product or service, your ability to win the sale is at risk.

To stay in the game, make sure people are cheering for you.

## **4. Lack of confidence doesn't sell.**

Jennie Garth, actress of Beverly Hills: 90210 fame, came out week-after-week and did a yeoman's job. But she didn't believe she was a dancer and it showed. At times, it felt like she was counting steps or moving tentatively, afraid to really get into the role the dance needed from her. Instead, her niceness showed through – and it cost her.

Making a decision to change from the status quo is risky. Customers worry about what might go wrong or if they'll achieve the desired results. Sellers who are confident in their firm's capabilities often can provide the impetus to move ahead.

To initiate change, know the difference you can make.

## **5. All things being equal, relationships count.**

Going into tonight's finals, three contestants remain: Spice Girl Mel B, Indy 500 champion Helio and performer Marie Osmond. All have demonstrated "enough" dancing skills to be a contender for the coveted trophy. Now it all boils down to relationships.

Will the Spice Girl's fans cast their ballots en masse? Will Helio's & Julianne's chemistry pull in the votes? Or, will Marie's long-time fans carry her into the winner's circle?

When just three competitors remain in a sales situation, typically customers perceive any of them to be capable of doing the job. Then, the real question becomes, "Who do we want to work with?" Hopefully it will be you.

To win the trophy, strengthen relationships.

Jill Konrath, author of *Selling to Big Companies*, helps sellers crack into corporate accounts, shorten sales cycles and win big contracts. She's a frequent speaker at annual sales meetings and association events. To get more articles like this AND a free Sales Call Planning Guide (\$19.95 value), sign up for Jill's e-newsletter. Visit [www.SellingtoBigCompanies.com](http://www.SellingtoBigCompanies.com) or send an email with a "sign me up" subject line to [jill@sellingtobigcompanies.com](mailto:jill@sellingtobigcompanies.com)

## **Slow Down to Speed Up Your Sales**

After months of trying, you land an appointment with a major account who uses your competitor's products. Like many reps, you probably feel an overpowering urge to cram as much as possible into this one meeting. You need to tell them about your company's new directions, latest technologies, state-of-the-art products, competitive advantages, top notch service, and more - so much to cover and so little time.

### **The Speed Backlash**

Whoa! Slow down. Prospects who receive massive information dumps unconsciously erect barriers to slow or even derail your sales efforts. How? They tell you everything is fine, even if they're dissatisfied with their current vendor. They rule out doing business with you if your product lacks a minor capability. Your pricing is never good enough. Or they simply thank you for the update and promise to contact you when the need arises.

Sound familiar? It's the result of trying to convert long-standing vendor relationships in one sales call. Prospects distrust motives when they perceive a lack of concern for their needs. And that's exactly what happens when you spend most of your time doing all the talking.

### **Slower Strategies for Faster Results**

Top sellers realize that replacing an incumbent is a slow, deliberate process. They understand it takes time to demonstrate value and develop strong relationships. Knowing this, they put together a one-step-at-a-time account entry strategy that actually advances the sales process much faster than if they tried to do everything in a single call. The steps:

#### *Do your homework*

Learn as much as you can before your meeting. Review your prospect's annual report and website. Look for gaps between where he is and where he wants to be. Identify his primary initiatives. Figure out how your product helps him achieve his objectives or ties in with his critical business drivers. For example, if "Earning Customer Loyalty" is mentioned repeatedly, determine how you can contribute.

#### *Think and talk results*

Your product is a tool - nothing more. People buy it because of what it does for them; make sure you know what that is. Talk about the business results customers achieve when using your product. Explain how he can reduce time to market, increase operational efficiency or improve sales.

#### *Establish a logical next step*

Before your meeting, determine how you want it to end. A successful advance might be an information-gathering meeting, an analysis of current work flow or a presentation. Most sales to large accounts require multiple calls, so build this into your planning right from the beginning.

#### *Plan your questions*

Questions are key to your success. They demonstrate interest and concern. Prospects feel you are more knowledgeable when you ask good questions. Questions provide valuable insights into customer needs and the decision-making process. They are the basis for developing a strong relationship. Plan at least ten questions ahead of time.

The sales process can't be short-circuited. If you go too fast, problems are guaranteed to arise. Your opportunity will evaporate into thin air.

## **The Big Meeting**

At last it's time for the big meeting. Get down to business fairly quickly, minimizing chit chat. Start by stating your purpose. It's enough to simply say, "I'm here today to understand your organization better and see where we can improve your business results." Next share a short story about how your company helped another client and the specific results they attained. Talk results, not products!

Explain your process in working with accounts. Tell your prospect it's essential to fully understand his objectives, needs, issues, and challenges in order to determine the value you can provide.

Transition to questions and spend the bulk of your time investigating. Ask about the current situation: "Tell me about your workflow." Find out about any problems, challenges, or difficulties he has. Explore his answers by asking about the ramifications of these problems and the value of eliminating them.

Even though he asks, don't be tempted to talk about products. If you get caught in this trap, your chances of sales success decrease significantly. Graciously explain that product discussion is premature until you understand their needs better and get back to asking questions. Before you leave, share a few key benefits and suggest the logical next step.

This is what the top sellers do. They don't rush the sale and, as a result, they get the order. And quicker. Follow their example and you'll soon be enjoying the same success.

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## Are You Asking Provocative Questions?

The other night on TV, I saw an ESPN special on the Football Hall of Fame. Just before the final commercial break, the announcer said something like, "When we get back, you'll have a chance to learn what we asked these Hall-of-Famers."

Then they showed clip after clip of the most famous football players ever, all shaking their heads saying things like, "Wow, that's a tough one" and "I don't have a clue." Of course, I stayed glued to the television to find out the question that elicited these incredulous responses. When the show returned, the announcer posed the question:

"If you were the captain of a Hall of Fame football team, who would you pick to be on your team first?"

What a great question! Every single person had to really think before they answered it. Did they want an offensive or a defensive player? Someone they'd played with or against? Perhaps even a player from an entirely different era? What qualities would they want in that first pick?

Great questions are like that. They're provocative, forcing you to look beyond the obvious, to analyze, assess and make decisions.

In selling, your ability to ask great questions is highly correlated with sales success. Great questions demonstrate your expertise and enhance your credibility. And, the best questions you can ask are highly provocative – ones your prospects can't possibly answer without seriously considering their business situation.

So how do you come up with provocative questions? First of all, it's virtually impossible to come up with them when you're in the midst of a sales call. Too many other things are going on.

Provocative questions require pre-planning and a significant investment of your time before you meet with prospective customers. To develop them, you need an in-depth understanding of your own offering from a customer's perspective.

Here's what you need to consider before you develop your questions.

1. Determine how your prospective customers are meeting their needs if they don't use your product/service. Identify the 3 to 4 most likely scenarios you encounter. These scenarios may include competitive offerings, your older systems, or even doing nothing.
2. Define the primary problems, difficulties and concerns prospects likely experience in each of these scenarios. State these in your prospect's words.
3. Clarify the business implications of these problems. How do they impact productivity, time-to-market, legal issues, profitability, costs, operational efficiency, decision-making and more?
4. Determine the value a customer gets if they replace their current methods, systems or processes with your offering.

Having a cursory understanding of your offering isn't enough. You need to 'know' it at a much deeper level – and truly understand it from your customer's perspective. It's only when you've conducted this exercise that you can begin to develop provocative questions.

You see, most customers are living with a less-than-perfect system. They know it has its drawbacks but they've learned how to work around things and get by. Besides, they're much too

busy to analyze every aggravation or potential problem.

Most customers have *no idea* about the total cost of continuing to do things the 'same old way.' When you ask questions about the business implications or the value of change, they're provocative! They get your prospect thinking about why change is necessary - and why it's needed now.

And better yet, these provocative questions create a reason to do business with you today not in the distant future. Plus, they demonstrate your knowledge and expertise – making you an invaluable resource to your customer.

To ask provocative questions, it also helps to frame them with your knowledge of your customer's business, industry, or market trends.

For example, I work with many companies on new product launches, specifically in the hand-off of the new product from Marketing to Sales. My prospects have frequently had less-than-stellar results on previous product/service introductions.

I frame my questions with statements such as:

"In a recent study on new product launches, 75% of executives felt a poor value proposition and launch process were major factors in their lack of success."

"Based on my work with other technology companies on new product launches, the biggest thing that gets in the way of their success is how much they love their new technology."

Then I ask questions such as:

- Are you comfortable that your value proposition is strong enough to deliver the projected sales revenue?
- What gaps or problems do you see in your launch process?
- What is the impact on your company if your new product/service isn't successful in the projected timeframes?
- If the product takes an extra 3-6 months to ramp-up sales, how does this impact time-to-profitability? Competitive inroads?
- What benefit would it be to your company if your salespeople didn't have to create their own proposals and presentations?

Provocative questions are related to the problems you can solve and their resulting business ramifications. They're focused on critical issues facing your customer and framed with your own personal knowledge and expertise. They always get your customer thinking and they move the sale forward.

So, let me ask you a question:

*Why is it that most sellers say they know it's important to ask questions on sales calls, but few take the time to plan really great, provocative ones?*

Investing time developing provocative questions will have an immediate impact on your sales results. Are you willing to do what it takes to excel?

P.S. In case you're interested – Johnny Unitas was selected most often as the number one pick by the Hall-of-Famers.

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