

# Making Sure You Get The Sale



**John Graham**

Selling in a broad swath of industries is arguably more difficult today than at any time in the last half century. No matter what the optimists may say, competition for customers is horrendous. Ask any salesperson. As one said recently, “I have never seen anything like it.”

Along with everyone else, those in sales constantly look for signs of hope from the latest economic reports, whether it’s relevant or not. Like everyone else, salespeo-

ple are faced with doing their job whatever the economic conditions.

Hoping for a better tomorrow is the right attitude, but it takes more than that to make sales. For that task, here are five concepts worth considering:

**1. Challenge sales strategies.** There’s hardly a week that goes by when someone isn’t tantalizing salespeople with what they call “the ultimate sales solution,” whether it’s how to get in the door, get endless referrals, making powerful presentations, closing the sale with one meeting, or connecting with endless prospects. On and on it goes.

Now, here’s the point: Salespeople are easy targets. Like beagles, they’re always sniffing around for a new approach. They’ll try just about anything that offers hope for making selling easier.

What they don’t do often enough is ask the one important question when they encounter the latest and greatest sales strategy or technique: “Does this really make sense? Or do I just want to believe that it will help me make more sales?”

For example, every salesperson knows that if the customer or prospect calls them, they have a far greater chance of making the sale than if they make the contact. Yet, how much time do we spend chasing prospects rather than investing time in activities that result in getting more prospects and customers to contact us?

Challenging every sales strategy is time well spent.

**2. Never start out by talking about the company, yourself or your solution.** Whether it’s a sales presentation or a first meeting, never make the fatal mistake of starting out by talking about your company.

A marketing executive was invited to meet with key people of an insurance organization. The first words from the president were these: “It’s your meeting, tell us what we should do.” Fortunately, he avoided the trap. No one today will listen to a talking head and then sign the order.

It may be helpful to think of sales meetings as seminar-type events, with the objective of getting the key players involved. You want to know what they’re thinking, what they want to accomplish, the problems they’re encountering, their opportunities and the hurdles they must get over.

As you respond and help clarify their thinking, they can determine if you’re on target, responsive to their situation and whether or not you are collegial in the way you work with customers.

Ironically, when a sales meeting is the *customer’s* meeting, it becomes yours as well.

**3. Keep your priorities straight.** Today’s customers can detect, instantly most of the time, if a salesperson’s *only* goal is to do whatever it takes to make the sale. It sticks out like a sore thumb and it’s equally unpleasant. Perhaps more so than in the past. Salespeople may not wear their emotions on their sleeves, but their “intent” is more than evident

Every salesperson has the same objective. They want to get the business, the commission and to keep their job. Some want to qualify for an incentive trip. And there are those who are out to prove they’ve got what it takes.

Unfortunately, all that often gets in the way and scuttles the chances of closing the sale. This happens when a salesperson attempts to figure out what the prospect will buy and settles for that instead of what the customer actually needs. A quick sale is better than no sale at all. Get in and get out—at least with something. If that’s the idea—it’s dead wrong. The customer figures it out soon enough and never wants to see that salesperson

again.

It takes time to gather information and prepare a proposal with thoughtful options. It takes time to discuss them with the customer and to listen to what they say. It takes time to show how one or two of the options may best align with the customer’s objectives.

That’s keeping your priorities straight. That’s also what it takes to earn a customer’s trust—and business.

**4. Be the producer as well as the presenter.** After making a presentation, a salesperson will often say to an associate, “How did I do?” And the person replies, “Terrific. Just great.” That’s the wrong person to ask. It’s the “audience” that counts.

Too many sales presentations fail because the focus is on the presenter instead of the participants. What do they look for in a presentation? What do they like and dislike in other salespeople? While it’s your presentation, they’re still the decision makers.

No one listens to a “talking head.” Studies show that attention spans are very short. Listeners become bored. The first time you see a Blackberry appear, you’re through. It a signal that all is not going well.

Since the objective of a presentation is to move people to action—to approve your proposal—your “production” will be much more compelling if the participants are involved. Here are three ways to achieve this goal:

· *Use carefully crafted stories.* Experience may not be the only teacher, but it’s certainly the best one if it involves stories that touch the emotions. Doug Nielsen, an insurance salesperson at Archibald Insurance Center in Rexburg, ID, is often asked why he’s so passionate about workplace safety. He replies, “Years ago, I was a foreman for a big printing company. One day, a new pressman’s arm was severed in a press accident. I was to blame because I hadn’t trained him properly.” Doug never has trouble getting business owners, managers and workers to listen to what he has to say. He speaks with personal authority.

· *Forget about paper presentations.* You might as well give everyone the sports section of the newspaper or a movie to watch. Keep them focused on you by saving the paper until the end.

· *Change the way you use PowerPoint.* Follow Steve Jobs’ lead and have a few slides with a word or two accompanied with great graphics and a few video clips that illustrate your message.

The success or failure of a sales presentation is never out of your hands. You’re the producer, so it’s your show. No matter the conditions or circumstances, you must come through.

**5. The action step.** You want feedback from the participants. In other words, you want them to tell you what they would otherwise tell each other after you’re gone. To do this, here are questions you can ask: Does this solution meet your expectations? What are its strengths? How can it be improved? What did you like or dislike? What wasn’t clear? What did you like best?

Not only do you want to have the last word, but you also want to gather feedback so you are prepared to revise your proposal, if necessary. Without it, your proposal is in danger.

A feedback discussion also sends a powerful message to the participants. It says that you’re open, you really want to know what they’re thinking and you want your proposal to be right for them.

Remember, your competition in a sales meeting isn’t just other presenters. It’s what the people listening to you have on their minds. One may be thinking about a customer crisis, while others are preoccupied with an argument with a spouse, a job-related problem, a financial concern or a sick kid. You’re competing with all this! *You don’t have anyone’s undivided attention.* It’s your job to make a successful sales presentation in spite of it all.



John R. Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. He writes for a variety of business publications and speaks on business, marketing and sales issues. Contact: 40 Oval Road, Quincy, MA 02170; 617-328-0069; jgraham@grahamcomm.com. Blog: [grahamcomm.com/wordpress](http://grahamcomm.com/wordpress). Website: [grahamcomm.com](http://grahamcomm.com)