

The Art of the Sale

In today's economy, bright ideas are what it takes to land a sale. So we went to the source--to salespeople at super-successful companies--to provide you with surefire tips for selling.

Customers aren't buying. Sales cycles are longer and more complex. Welcome to the world of sales in 2003. For you and your sales team, selling isn't as easy--or as fun--as it was just three years ago. In fact, for many salespeople, selling has become an exercise in pain tolerance.

"The demands on salespeople today are greater than ever before," says Joe Galvin, vice president and research director of CRM strategies for Gartner Inc. "The bar has risen. It's not just a more competitive environment, it's an environment that requires greater skill."

When you wake up at 3 a.m., anxious about a morning sales call that will make or break you for the quarter, you might wonder how the great salespeople not only make but also consistently exceed their numbers. Well, we sought out top salespeople navigating the trenches at well-known companies to find out how they sell. What goes through their minds as they make a sale? What's their process? How do they land customers? Whether you're selling wholesale, retail, B2B or technology, you'll see the sales process through their eyes--and get their top tips for generating more sales.

Selling Retail

It's a tough market out there, but not for Kathy Williams, a top salesperson in Charlotte, North Carolina, for women's clothing store Chico's, which has about 400 stores nationwide. "On a good day, I might make three big sales," says Williams, 47. This may mean an \$1,100 sale, a \$900 sale and a \$600 sale all in one morning. "A lot of customers look at me and say 'I just came in for a belt, and I'm leaving with a bag full,'" she says. Here are her tips for bagging the sale:

1. Beat a cold greeting. Many retail salespeople struggle with the "I'm just browsing" rebuff. Williams asks "Have you shopped with us before?" as an opportunity to reveal her knowledge of Chico's product line. Williams wants to know why a shopper came into the store. "If a customer says 'I'm just looking,' well, what is she looking *for*?" Williams says. "You're just trying to trigger what's of interest to her."

2. Think for the customer. Once Williams triggers an interest, she starts a dressing room and selects an outfit based on that one item. Chico's doesn't put mirrors in its dressing rooms, which puts Williams front and center with the customer. "I don't consider myself a salesclerk. I'm a wardrobe consultant," she says. "I take the thinking out of it for them." Williams takes notes on each customer after a sale, then follows up with a call or a handwritten note.

3. Attack the sack. Williams sees opportunity in returns, a philosophy she calls "attacking the sack." She finds out what didn't work for the customer and finds a solution, which could be another color, another size or another look. "Nine times out of 10, if they bought once, they'll buy again," she says. "A lot of times, they end up buying more merchandise. They may return \$300 [worth] and buy \$500."

Selling B2B

Michael Minelli is a New York City-based media and entertainment business manager for SAS Institute Inc., the world's largest privately held software company with sales of \$1.8 billion in 2002. In his five years at SAS, Minelli has consistently surpassed his quotas, averaging \$2.5 million in annual sales and winning clients like Sony and Time Inc.

1. Remember, it's about someone else's job. In B2B, a bad multimillion-dollar decision can be a career killer for the ambitious manager who's making the purchase, and this fear colors the buying process. "One of the key challenges is the implication to someone's career. They're so emotionally attached [to the purchase], it's a hard sell," Minelli says. "If you can't show how you'll increase revenue and decrease operating costs, you're out of the game. You have to pull [buyers] into the process so they can articulate how this will add value."

2. Focus on first quarter. "With B2B, you're asking the customer at every step for a 'go' or 'no-go' decision, and sales cycles are much longer--months on end," Minelli says. "First and second quarter are the magic months. You have to make it happen then if you're going to close lengthy sales cycles within a fiscal year."

3. Don't sell a need; sell a vision. Minelli asks a lot of questions: How does this potential customer generate revenue? What is important to them, and where does our solution fit? "Customers don't care if you make your quota," he says. "They're concerned about their side of the

equation. You have to find compelling reasons why this is good for their company."

Chuck Bond, 47, is founder of COKeM International Ltd., a 3-year-old Plymouth, Minnesota, wholesaler of software, video games and accessories. COKeM's sales reached \$130 million in 2002, and its client base includes Best Buy, Costco, Disney, Electronic Arts and Microsoft. "Right now, there's a shrinkage of shelf space," says Bond, who's still very active in sales. "You have to fight for your own shelf space or try to create new shelf space."

1. Have a buyer's mind-set. A retail buyer's biggest fear is using limited funds to buy something that does not sell. Bond visits a few store locations before a sales call to see where a retailer puts its money. He also visits its nearest competitors and pulls on this knowledge during his pitch. "Larger retailers aren't going to tell you what they're looking for," Bond says. "You have to tell them 'Here's what you're looking for.'"

2. Customize. Retailers are competitive, and they don't want the same thing as the next retailer. Bond customizes programs as well as product displays for each of his customers. "You have to bring them a margin opportunity or a theme sales opportunity," Bond says.

3. Give them R-E-S-P-E-C-T. A lot of buyers don't want samples and long-winded pitches. Bond's meetings can consist of two minutes in a lobby, and he cuts his sales call short and reschedules when he feels the buyer is too distracted to listen. "Respect their time. Don't have your own agenda," he says. "I've seen too many salespeople fail by only thinking about their own agenda."

Selling Solutions

Garrett Boone, 59, is co-founder of The Container Store, a Dallas-based retailer of shelving and organizational supplies. Store sales are increasing 25 percent per year; sales in 2002 were \$296 million, and \$335 million is projected for 2003. Boone and co-founder Kip Tindell, 50, remain active in employee training and sales.

1. Don't compete, collaborate. The Container Store's salespeople don't work on commission, so salespeople from different departments will work together to meet the needs of one shopper. Salespeople are empowered to problem-solve. "It's a team approach that amazes customers," Boone says.

2. Engage the customer. The Container Store's salespeople are trained to notice the types of products customers are looking at, or already have in their shopping carts. For example, if a customer is looking at wrapping paper, ask if they are getting ready for a birthday or a wedding. It's a conversation-starter that focuses squarely on the customer and lets the salesperson offer a solution. "We're trying to engage them in a way that says, I can see you need help, and I'm not going to ask a dumb question like 'Do you need help?'"

3. Remember the man in the desert. The Container Store's employees are versed in a philosophy called "the man in the desert": A man crawls through the desert gasping for water and finds a retailer who gives him a drink. Then the man crawls away and finds The Container Store, where he gets water, food and help in finding his family. Translation: Always offer customers a comprehensive solution. If a customer is looking at wrapping paper, she'll probably need a box, a bow, some tissue paper and a greeting card to go with it. Says Boone, "If you sell right, then selling and service are the same thing."

For three years, Alan Mayer, 29, was a top phone-based sales representative for Dell in Austin, Texas, working largely with entrepreneurs from small and midsize businesses making technology purchases from \$50,000 to \$3 million. He was voted sales representative of the year in his segment for two years in a row and was recently promoted to field account executive. With technology, "everyone's looking for value," Mayer says. "People have a better understanding of technology than they did five years ago."

1. Distinguish purchase price vs. total cost of ownership.

Today's technology customers look at the total cost of ownership, from initial price and support to downtime and depreciation. "With technology, there are multiple factors to price outside of dollars spent on day one," Mayer says. "The price is just one element of the sale."

2. Stay flexible and knowledgeable. No two technology sales are the same. Mayer stays flexible, responds to questions quickly and keeps up-to-date on products. "Companies still need technology. Selling is no harder than it ever was," he says.

3. Understand value from the customer's perspective. "If a customer needs a product and they're just deciding who to purchase it from, it's different from a customer who doesn't know they need to purchase something at all," Mayer says. He gets an idea of each customer's time frame and goals, and whether they're working within

a budget, so he can propose products and a financing plan. "Realize that value is perceived," he says. "You won't know what the hot button is until you engage the customer. Meet customer needs where they want to be met."

Selling a Service

Nick Elmore, 41, is a senior account executive for FedEx in Oklahoma City. Over a 90-square-mile territory, he serves more than 500 small-business customers and constantly makes cold calls. Last year, Elmore received FedEx's highest award, the Five Star Award, and was also account executive of the year for FedEx's Southwest region, which includes 65 account executives throughout New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

1. Don't talk, listen. Elmore spends more time listening than talking. "So many salespeople want to talk about what they have to offer. But you have to know the customer's processes," he says. "[Listening] is so basic, it's overlooked. But it's the first step to respect."

2. Develop trust. Elmore finds signing a client can take anywhere from a few days to six months. Along the way, he asks the customer very targeted questions: What is the competition doing that you want done better? What would you use our service for? His goal is to build trust. "I imagine I'm an employee of [my potential client], except FedEx pays my salary," Elmore says.

3. Make a difference. Elmore wants to find a cost-effective answer for each customer. "Right now, people want solutions," he says. "Once you show them how to grow their businesses, you have an open door."

Now go forth and sell!

Good As Gold

Knowledge

"Ensure that your product knowledge doesn't overwhelm the prospect but is applied toward solving the problems the prospect is faced with. If a man is drowning, you wouldn't discuss the relative benefits of your rope."

-Michael Anderson, salesperson for CaseStack Inc., a logistics solutions outsourcing company in Los Angeles

Enthusiasm

"If you want somebody to bleed, you've got to hemorrhage. Translation: A salesperson must give it all to make a client take notice."

-Cody Lee, director of sales, Ironclad Performance Wear in Los Angeles

Process

"Seek movement on every call you make. You'll save time and increase your sales by pursuing prospects who will commit to moving forward and weeding out those prospects that will not get off the fence."

-Robert Monroe, sales, CaseStack Inc., Los Angeles

Integrity

"Clients are looking for four things: strong ethics, responsiveness, problem-solving and enthusiasm. Add a strong product or service behind you, and you create a formula for success."

-Scott Fuqua, senior VP in sales for Midwest Diagnostic Management LLC, a radiological and diagnostic referral-management company in Mokena, Illinois

Persistence

"Always go into a sale with a positive attitude, and be confident you can earn their business. The minute you doubt whether or not you can [sell] the person, you will lose the sale."

-Kaine Smith, owner and partner of Advance Med LLC, a medical staffing firm in Austin, Texas

Relationships

"Focus on developing a win-win relationship for both the company and the customer. The sales orders will follow."

-Larry Panattoni, sales, Servatron Inc., a Spokane, Washington, company providing manufacturing services to the electronics industry

Fun

"Customers are real people, and real people love to have fun. Run with this theory each and every day, and you are destined for success."

-Jason Murphy, owner and partner of Falcon Solutions, an electronics-components supplier in Roswell, Georgia

Have You Got It?

No matter what they're selling, top salespeople share common traits. Want to see how you and your sales team stack up? Great salespeople . . .

- 1. Are entrepreneurial.** They see themselves running their own business within a business. "They're highly motivated, focused and organized," says Joe Galvin, vice president and research director of CRM strategies for research firm Gartner Inc.
- 2. Have developed a process.** "They've figured out a process that has been successful for them to maintain their success," Galvin says. "Then they execute against it."
- 3. Think about clients, not quotas.** "The best salespeople focus on the customer," says Skip Miller, founder and president of M3 Learning Corp., a sales management firm in Los Gatos, California. "It's always about the customer."
- 4. Sell solutions.** Great salespeople see themselves selling more than just widgets; they sell solutions. They tailor their sales pitches to offer a clear solution that solves the customer's problem.
- 5. Get customers thinking.** Great salespeople can make customers see value early on so they're selling themselves on the solution. They're able to find "the catalyst for the customer to move forward," says Sam Reese, CEO and president of sales development company Miller Heiman, with headquarters in Reno, Nevada. Stellar salespeople can also find this catalyst early in the sales process. "Closing a sale starts really early in the process."
- 6. Aren't afraid to get creative.** "You have to be creative. It's almost like putting on a show for customers," says Michael Minelli, New York City-based media and entertainment business manager for SAS Institute Inc., the world's largest privately held software company. "You're talking with them, finding out what their vision is, then demonstrating [value] back to them."
- 7. Are on the move.** The great salespeople "are still going out and seeing customers and prospects," Reese says. "They're crafting clear, valid business reasons to meet."
- 8. Know when to move on.** Great salespeople don't waste time on dead ends. They're experts at targeting their resources.
- 9. Stay current.** They keep up with products, clients, trends and what the competition is doing.
- 10. Love what they do.** Top-grade salespeople are passionate about their work. If selling isn't fun anymore, incorporating tips one through nine might help you and your sales reps get your mojo back.