

Success Thoughts: Send Me A Proposal

by Jeffrey Mayer

Shirley, a consulting client, was all excited. Earlier in the day she had been talking with Tom who works for Acme Manufacturing in the IT department.

She was telling me of the 'wonderful' phone conversation she had had with Tom about her company's new software products. At the conclusion he told her, "That sounds very interesting. Send me a proposal."

Shirley hung up the phone, called corporate to get more information, and then spent the next 45 minutes putting a detailed presentation together. She put it into an envelope and mailed it to Tom that afternoon. She was feeling so wonderful that she didn't feel like making any more calls. So she did miscellaneous paperwork and other 'stuff' for the balance of the day.

When we spoke the following morning, Shirley began the conversation by telling me all about the wonderful opportunity she had found with Tom. After listening to her for a few minutes, I asked a few questions:

"How did you get to Tom in the first place?"

"I had been referred to Bill in the marketing department. When I spoke with Bill he told me that any software purchases must first go through the IT department. He gave me Tom's name and phone number and I called him."

"How much time did you spend on the phone with Bill?" I asked.

"About three to five minutes."

"And when you spoke with Tom, how long did that conversation last?"

"Maybe ten minutes," Shirley answered.

"Tom asked me lots of questions about my software. What it did, how it worked. He wanted lots of technical information about how it would perform with his computer system and over his network."

"Then he said that my software sounded very interesting to him and asked me to put the proposal together."

"Why does ACME need your software? What problems do they have that it will solve?"

A long pause followed. Finally, Shirley said, “I wasn’t able to find out much about their situation because Tom was asking me a lot of technical questions.”

“Okay. What do you know about Tom?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s start with some of the basics. What his position/title? Where does he fit in the organization? How do they make their purchasing decisions?”

There was dead silence on the phone.

“I don’t know,” Shirley said in a barely audible whisper.

“Now that you’ve sent Tom this proposal, what happens next?”

“Well, . . .” Shirley stammered, “I guess I’ll call him up in a week or two to see if he’s received my material.”

“Did you schedule an appointment with him to discuss this before you got off the phone?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Wasting Her Time

As our conversation continued, Shirley began to realize that she didn’t have a prospect at all. Tom—in his friendly and very polite way—probably asks everybody to send him information. It’s his way of blowing them off.

He couldn’t care less how much time Shirley has invested—WASTED—in creating a proposal and then following up. It’s not his problem. Her material will end up in the “I’ll read this later pile.” If it’s not immediately thrown away.

She’ll diligently follow up and 30, 60 or 90 days later be told, “We’re not really interested.” Talk about wasted time, effort, energy and money.

Qualify Your Prospect

Before you send out a proposal you need to qualify your prospect. You should know the answers to these six questions:

- * What is the customer’s problem?
- * What is the financial impact of the problem?
- * Is the person you’re speaking to responsible for this problem?

- * Is this a problem the customer wants to solve?
- * Does this person have the authority to make a decision?
- * What is their process for making buying decisions?

The best way to get some—and maybe all—of these answers is over the telephone. Ask great questions and you'll be able to quickly separate buyers from tire kickers.

Ask for Commitments

Most importantly, ask for commitments every step of the way.

When you're asked to create a proposal, don't just mail, fax or e-mail it out. Schedule a meeting—or phone call—to discuss it further. If your prospect won't schedule a meeting he's sending a signal that he isn't 'really' interested.

Shirley learned that she should always ask for a commitment to move the sales process forward at the conclusion of each phone conversation or meeting.

She's no longer getting the runaround. She's spending more time with qualified and interested buyers and closing more sales.

Reprinted with permission from "Jeffrey Mayer's SucceedingInBusiness.com Newsletter" (Copyright, 2003, Jeffrey J. Mayer, SucceedingInBusiness.com).