

Client-Centered Selling: Your Process – or Theirs?

By Linda Stimac, Author, RxSales: An Expert Performance System

When the president of a broker dealer speaks, financial advisors listen. As always, George Connolly exuded presence when he strode crisply down the aisle and ignored the podium, preferring instead to stand just inches in front of the first row of participants. You could feel the energy, pride, and promise he has for these financial professionals and the important work that they do with their clients.

I sat in the back row watching George, remembering the days, five years before, when he was a financial advisor like many in this group who, despite their success, wanted to improve their skills in order to achieve new levels of performance and personal satisfaction. In those days, George was an estate planning specialist and investment advisor with Merrill Lynch – and a highly successful one, mind you. But he knew that he, like everyone, had skill gaps which, if identified and corrected, would take him to new heights.

So, five years later, George knew his sales force very well because he had walked many miles in their shoes. In five short years, he had parlayed his business savvy, classical training as an attorney, experience as an actuary, and natural ability as a futurist into a full-fledged leadership position.

On this morning, George was introducing a segment that an RxSales consultant would lead on the Client-Centered System, the center piece of the RxSales Expert Performance System. He told the group of nearly sixty top producers at the “Circle of Excellence” meeting about his roommate from university days, when George was studying law and his friend was preparing for a career as a neurosurgeon.

“My roommate learned a fifty-six step surgical process for removing a brain tumor,” he explained. “What do you think would have happened if he could not remember the exact sequence, or worse, if he decided one day that he would just wing it? If, for whatever reason, he performed step thirty when it should have been step sixteen, the patient would die on the table.”

As you can tell, he is a big believer in the adage, Order Is Critical. George helped his group of financial advisors understand that there is no glory in “winging it,” a practice to which many sales professionals confess when asked to identify the steps in their sales process. But George went on to differentiate between a company’s internal, operational process that puts a product or service into the hands of the consumer and a different sales process: a client’s emotional buying process.

Like the operational sales process, this emotional buying process has well defined order. Potential clients move through a predictable sequence, seven steps in a psychological, decision-making process. If sales professionals understand the steps in their client’s emotional decision-making process, then they will do a better job of aligning their operational process to match it. The sales professional’s process becomes client-centered because it mirrors the experience that the client prefers in reaching a buying decision.

Five years earlier, George opened his mind to this approach. He studied the client’s decision making process with a vengeance, like it was new math or some breakthrough in medical science. He believed in it. In the learning process, George discovered that his trusty old sales process had some trouble spots:

- He was presenting too early, to anyone who nodded, looked interested or “fogged the mirror,” sales-speak for “was alive and blinked.” As a result, too many potential clients

- thanked him kindly, took his information, and did business with someone else. George disliked being an unpaid consultant, and he vowed not to let it happen in the future.
- His process lacked a critical step that would parallel the potential client's wish to understand, just before the presentation, how the decision making process will work. When George became adept at discussing it, he was able to get potential clients to agree to make a decision (Yes or No) when they understood his solution. This happened before he presented his solution. After his presentation, people were ready to say Yes or No. They made a decision. George and his assistant were able to clear out two drawers in his file cabinet of "follow ups" and never have another one.

In the RxSales system, we diagnose sales professionals using a learner's assessment called The CheckUp for Sales Professionals™. In it, we examine sales professionals for trouble spots in their sales process ... thirteen potential gaps or sequence problems that prevent them from tracking in sequence with their clients' decision making process. However, before sales professionals are enlightened about the client-centered sales process, they work on the skill gaps, weak framework (attitudes) and non-supportive beliefs (myths) that will prevent them from executing the client-centered selling system.

After the workshop, George and I sat down to reminisce about his days in the learning program that I coached at Merrill Lynch. I asked him what part of his learning helped him the most.

"I learned that I was an unpaid consultant – one who gives away knowledge and solutions. This was the real driving thing for me. I looked at my selling style in light of this revelation. It was true. I was so desirous of adding value to the prospective client that I had lost sight of the fact that my duty was to frame questions that would help the client and me figure out if we were going to work together. I needed to "Get a Yes, Get a No, Move On."

"Learning this one thing transformed my career. My production tripled and, accordingly, my income tripled. My opportunities improved. I was suddenly exposed to bigger clients and bigger opportunities because I was better. I could concentrate time on a fewer number of things with more upside. And finally, I was doing all of that in fewer hours. To triple your income in a year and do that by working fewer hours is a heavenly experience!"

And what did that client-centered sales process do for him now? A thoughtful pause, and then:

"I think the price of admission in business is the ability to frame questions that lead to getting a decision, whether it is a yes or a no. In any profession, it is an essential part of selling yourself – whether you are in a corporate or a sales role. Even though my formal assignment today is company executive, that same skill set allowed me to build a satisfying career. What I do today is not considered sales, but every single day I am selling."

To learn more about RxSales: An Expert Performance System™, visit the Guest section at www.rxsales.com or contact Charles Loew at Charles.Loew@masetllc.com