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Use the customer's data to prove value up front

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You know your solution will help. Other clients in the same industry rave about it.

Carefully targeting your prospects, you work for weeks to get in front of the decision-maker, and successfully stimulate interest and clarify needs. You carefully construct the proposal or presentation, and deliver it flawlessly.

Everything seems like a perfect fit. Rapport is strong and you're the only vendor in the race.

Shock sets in when you receive the prospect's decision not to buy.

What went wrong? What changed?

Thousands of reasons are possible.

Assuming the prospect was properly qualified, the most likely reason is they don't believe the return on investment is enough to justify moving forward. Even if you know the return is significant, if the buyer doesn't believe, then it doesn't matter.

In the last few years, many buyers experienced downsizing and cost reductions, and regretted buying decisions for which they have little or no evidence of any return on their investment. Many buyers are reluctant to repeat past experiences and refuse to buy on the hope of a good return.

Today's market requires proof of value up front. Proving value early significantly reduces the chances of receiving a "no" decision.

Because of our expertise and experience, we often see needs, savings and gains the buyer doesn't. Because of our insight, it's easy to push benefits too quickly. Selling 101 says benefits are only in the mind of the buyer.

For example, quick delivery isn't a benefit unless the buyer is experiencing problems with slow delivery. A more expensive nonstop flight has little value if time isn't urgent. Connecting benefits directly with a problem or need creates greater value.

The first place to start building value is in the needs analysis interview. Gaining evidence of need and not just accepting an implied need is a good first step.

A good needs analysis includes questions that quantify the costs and impact of the current situation. Getting specific numbers of the cost savings or benefits hoped for is a good steppingstone from which to build a strong return-on-investment analysis.

Buyers have little trust with sellers trying to prove value using their own (seller's) data because buyers believe the data is biased. However, buyers will believe their own data. Finding a way to bring buyers to their own conclusion on cost savings or the gain they hope to achieve is the most effective method and worth repeating.

Buyers will believe their own data and conclusions. Leading buyers through a discovery process using their own information produces credibility, trust and more sales. We all have experienced the telecom industry's approach of asking to see a current telephone bill.

Getting the prospect to do his or her own analysis can seem risky, and the decision-maker may not be willing to do the work. However, not having this proof significantly reduces the chance of making a sale.

One successful approach is to gain permission to work with someone the decision-maker designates, so you can access the information required to do a return-on-investment analysis. Another option is to provide a formula and methodology, and allow them to put in their own data. The downside of this approach is waiting for the prospect to find the time and urgency to do the work.

Consider using documentation (with permission) from existing customers. Keeping the customer's name anonymous encourages reluctant partners to share. Current clients who are hesitant to give out data for indiscriminate use may be willing to be a reference and verbally share evidence with your prospects.

Some software and information technology industries have software packages that allow potential customers to put their own numbers into the model, demonstrating the financial impact either in savings or in growth. Charts and graphs are the best way for potential clients to see a return-on-investment analysis.

Don't forget to allow for examining both hard and soft benefits. For example, cost savings in widgets is easier to quantify than a soft benefit, such as time savings and ease of use. But these soft costs should be broken out and included anyway.

Equally important is the follow-up to make sure the customer is getting the return and benefit they initially visualized when they purchased your solution. This ensures a long-term relationship with repeat business.

Proving value up front takes more than strong presentation skills. Outstanding questioning skills, accurate listening, strong trust and directly addressing concerns are required to quantify costs and potential gains. Though defining a return on investment may seem imprecise, the information will be more credible and acceptable if the prospect is involved in the process.

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