

Customer Comeback

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So you think you know what your customers are really thinking? Anna Britnor Guest asks IT managers to spill the beans on the salespeople who make them smile - and seethe!

Have you heard the one about the IT Director who only saw new salespeople at 4pm on a Friday - just to see how serious they were?

It wasn't a game but it was a test - and many failed.

So, what do IT Managers really think of salespeople? Stuart Jenkins, IT Manager at a large manufacturer sums it up. 'Over the years I've found that selling and buying are all about relationships. The first meeting has nothing to do with product - it's about how we react with each other. If the interpersonal stuff doesn't work we simply won't buy from them'.

'Fundamentally, the relationship is a friendship but solely within a business environment. Some salespeople try to make it social but this doesn't work for me at all. I don't see it as a social thing'.

Richard Johnston, Desktop Services Manager of a County Council is clear about what he looks for. 'I need someone prepared to build a relationship over time, without expecting a quick sale. They need to already know the types of issues councils are facing and to understand our specific needs and constraints. It's very frustrating if they have no concept of how local government works'. Stuart agrees 'The seller has to understand what's driving me and my business - it has to be totally relevant and timing is more crucial than ever!'

Alan Hill, Stuart's Network Manager, describes the relationship-building process. 'The salesperson seems genuine, you undertake a project, it's successful and so it builds - it's all about repeat business. When I talk to a salesperson I know and trust, I am interested in what they say. They build that trust by listening and understanding where we are - and by not being pushy'.

Being arrogant, pushy and aggressive are all cited as major barriers to establishing a successful working relationship but there are other stumbling blocks.

Alan reveals 'One of the most annoying things is when a salesperson pretends to be technical and then can't answer a 'tricky' question. If they can I'll be impressed but if not I'll lose respect. Stuart recalls 'We met a salesman from a company we hadn't dealt with before. The chemistry worked well but when Alan asked some fairly innocuous technical questions it became evident that he didn't know anything about his products. I don't mind meeting a 'brochure-presenter' but please set my expectations! If you pretend to know all about it and you don't - well, that's the end of it!'

Richard Johnston presents another frustration. 'Just because I'm a manager doesn't mean I don't understand the technology. New sales contacts sometimes assume this and explain things in very basic terms. Unfortunately for them I automatically switch off!'

Overselling of the technology is another common obstacle. 'If a salesperson oversells the capability of a product it will sour things for the future' says Richard 'It's much better to tell me that it will only do 75% of what we want - we may still be happy enough to go ahead'.

'I need suppliers to whom I can say what I feel', adds Stuart, 'If I say 'this product could be great but it's missing a widget' don't take offence. Go away, look at it and respond based on your knowledge of my issues'



Many customer-supplier relationships survive thus far, only to fall on stony ground when it comes to support.

Stuart explains 'I don't want suppliers who make excuses. If something goes wrong I want it fixed first - then we can talk about it. The suppliers who cause us most headaches are typically those whose products are 'intangible' like software development. No matter how well we think we have pinned down the spec we still end up thumping the table because we feel they are wriggling out of something we expect'.

Rod Coate, IT Supervisor at a trade association agrees. 'Buying software development can be like ordering a car with sunroof and being told you might not get the sunroof. Eventually you do get a sunroof but at the expense of the windscreen so you have to pay extra for a periscope to see where you're going!'

So, the relationship is everything. Jas Patel of a large insurer sums it up. 'If you are offered the best bargain in the world but don't like the salesperson you'll never buy it'.

The salesperson's view

"As a software vendor we can have a huge impact on a customer's business and the interface with the client is the account manager's responsibility. It's always hard when there's a problem but there are no excuses for not picking up the phone. Honesty, credibility and integrity are key. 'Working with my sales coach I have found that the more I listen, the more I understand my customer's business and can communicate effectively'".

Courtney Green, MD of NETconnection Systems, datacomms and Internet security specialists, adds "Honesty is important but so too is getting the job done. When someone buys from a new supplier they are putting their own credibility on the line. They need to know that we are there for the long-term and won't let them down. I think we 'go the extra mile' with all our clients to achieve this".

So, how can you avoid the traps?

Don't

- Pretend to be more technical than you are
- Be arrogant and assume you can solve all their problems
- Expect to be the only supplier your customer deals with
- Be aggressive, pushy or expect immediate results
- Oversell

Do

- Listen
- Know your customer's specific business pressures
- Work to their timescales
- Take ownership of problems - and the priorities for resolving
- Be open, honest and trustworthy