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THE role of the sales professional has changed. Those who haven't figured this out by now will probably become part of the 20 to 25 per cent of sales staff predicted to lose their jobs in the next five years.

The sales industry has changed because the way people buy has changed.

This is due to the Internet. The result is that some traditional sales functions have become secondary or unnecessary altogether while other skills and techniques are required to get the sale.

For example, sales staff are no longer the primary information source for the customer.

As a sales professional, you need to be aware that a customer can have far more information about your product than you have.

They can access not just the manufacturer's or distributor's website, but also the reviews, forums and/or blogs where everyone, from industry experts to users of the products, have their say.

More informed is not better informed

The role for today's sales professional is not to be an information source, but an information sorter.

Customers have access to so much information — of varying quality — that they become overwhelmed by it.

In trying to "do the right thing" by themselves and thoroughly research their potential purchase, they actually diminish their decision-making confidence.

In short, they know they want one, but can't decide which one, so they postpone the purchase.

The sales staff's task is to restore this decision-making confidence by helping them sort through the conflicting information and facilitating their buying decision.

It's all in the questions

The basis of all sales success in the current era is the ability to ask quality questions at the right time.

This is a long way from the old "selling is

The way to close a sale

Successful sales professionals ask customers four important questions



Your customers would probably have researched your product before meeting you, so you should ask them for their opinion before offering yours. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

telling" model. The questions are used to understand what is required for a customer to move confidently towards a "yes".

Here are four questions you should consider adding to your sales repertoire:

1 Based on your research, what's your opinion of what's available?

Traditional sales models have you approaching customers with the assumption that they know nothing about your product.

Now (particularly if you sell products of a high-dollar value), you can assume that they have spent quite some time researching your product before deciding to see you.

■ "Based on your research..."

This acknowledges that they will have already done research and gathered information...probably quite a lot of it.

■ "...what's your opinion...?"

Asking someone their opinion is irresistible to most people, so it is more likely that you will get an answer that gives you some insight into their thinking.

2 Just so I don't waste your time, is there anything else I need to understand?

One of the most important things a customer must understand before he is likely to give you a complete and honest answer to your question is, what is in it for him to answer your question completely and honestly.

By the way, the fact that he is less than complete and honest with his answers is not a criticism of him.

It is natural self-protective behaviour for people to withhold information until the required level of trust has been established.

The first part of this question answers this requirement: You are saving their time.

The second part of the question is deliberately open because the obstacle to the eventual sale will probably have nothing to do with the product, you or your offer.

It will have something to do with the customer's "system".

People exist in very complex systems with many stakeholders, influencers and complicating factors.

Some of these you could never imagine, so unless you ask, you will not find out about the impending divorce/interstate transfer/overseas job offer/court case until it is too late.

3 What would have to happen for you to feel confident enough to make a decision on this?

It is proven that beyond a certain point, more

information actually diminishes a person's decision-making confidence.

Most decision-makers enter into a conversation with a sales professional, confident in their ability to make a decision.

They then are overwhelmed with more information from the sales professional — trying to establish his authority.

Ironically, the effect of this is that the customer withdraws to do more research to try to assimilate the new information.

This question acknowledges that the customer needs help in building his decision-making confidence.

You do this by helping him to sort and prioritise the information to identify the best choice for him.

4 What do you think will be the biggest installation/implementation hurdles?

While people may see themselves as poor decision-makers, most believe they are good problem-solvers.

By directing their attention beyond the sale to the implementation, you are:

■ Showing that you are not just interested in the sale, but in the product's successful use as well; and

■ Focusing their attention on solving the implementation problems.

This uses the principle of the "assumed close". Once the problems have been solved, making the purchase seems logical.

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