

In sales, it's getting customers to decide

By BOB CHUVALA

A salesman's gift of gab is overrated as a tool for closing a sale, according to David Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting in Ridgefield. "Nobody makes a decision based on what you're saying," Fields said. "People make decisions based on what they're experiencing; they act on emotion and then use logic to justify their decision."

The job of salespeople is not to babble at prospects, but to give them the best opportunity to create an experience that leads to the emotion that drives the action, he said. "A salesman can talk to you until the cows come home about the reasons you should back up your data on an external hard drive, but when do most people buy an external hard drive? After they've had a crash. What they've had is an experience."

That hard-drive salesman should create an experience by developing a harmless software simulation that shows all the files that will no longer be available after a crash. Then all he has to do is ask questions. "How long will it take to restore those files? How important are they? How much money have you just lost?"

A salesman, he said, "has to get the customer to the place where he decides for himself" to buy the product or service.

Five experiences

Fields said he has identified five different types of experiences from his two decades in corporate marketing, sales and market research, and has put his findings into a white paper available on his Web site (www.ascendantconsulting.com). They are:

1. "The absolute best is the in-use experience, commonly called sampling," he said. "It's been around for ages and the folks who have really mastered it are software companies. They let you use their product for 30 days and then take it away if you don't buy it."
2. The second type is the "proxy experience," he said. "You can't have the actual product, like a custom-tailored suit, but the salesman can put on a suit and give you a swath of fabric."

3. The "virtual experience is when you have a tangible product but it's not practical to put it in front of a buyer, like a cruise. The travel agent isn't going to spray salt water in the customer's face," but has to create a virtual experience "based on the idea that there's no psychological difference between a well-imagined thought and a sensory experience," he said. "The best example is TV advertising, which creates a visualization that's meant to evoke certain emotions to get you into an experience and create an action."

4. Selling a concept "becomes a little tougher," Fields said, but the easiest way to sell it is to do a test, "which is the conceptual equivalent of a sample." Running a product test with a few customers or in a few stores is easy, inexpensive and productive. "The ability to use this technique depends on the expected cost of failure," he said.

5. The final experience is the "projected experience," selling a concept or condition where it's not possible or practical to run a test. "Trying to convince a retailer to move your product from the bottom to the middle shelf to increase sales requires a change in condition and process, so you need a clearly articulated, fully developed story" -- similar to a television advertorial for gym equipment. "You have to take time to create the story, a projected experience," he said.

Knowledge is free

Fields said he is offering the white paper free on his Web site "because knowledge is free and people who think they can implement these ideas on their own were never going to hire me in the first place. The company that realizes it takes some level of expertise to get the full benefit of these concepts will hire me, so I've lost nothing by giving away the knowledge. My value is knowing how to apply the knowledge so my client makes money."