

Professional Service Providers

Set the Ground Rules

By Don McNamara CMC

Have you ever had it happen that you received a request for quotation or proposal that you knew you could easily fulfill with your product or service but sensed the same request was out to a number of other competitors.

Did you wonder what to do about the request or even if you should answer it?

Try Criteria Selling

Ideally, you are the salesperson who helped the prospect create the specifications in the first place. By that I mean you were first in the account long before the request was ever created. That meant you had sufficient time to develop a complete sales campaign with the strategy and tactics required in order to build rapport with all the decision recommenders, influencers and makers. That also means you were able to set the buying criteria, namely the ground rules. Regardless of whether the timeframe to accomplish all your activities was short or long, the sales opportunity was as simple as a one call close or as complicated as a multilevel sale, the point remains the same. The sales person who sets the specifications and buying criteria sets the ground rules for the sale.

Simply stated, you either set the ground rules and the prospect agrees to them, which means they agree to yours, or you will lose. Here's why. The competition knows that if the prospect agrees to their ground rules they will win. Makes sense doesn't it. You see you cannot expect to win playing a game in which the competition has set the ground rules, in this case the specifications. They know how to win with their ground rules; you don't know how to win with theirs. You only know how to win with yours.

Instead you will be trying to push the ball up the hill, rather than letting it roll down. In the scenario where you do not set the buying criteria, you will undoubtedly endure frustration and an enormous amount of your most valuable asset, namely your time, being wasted on a sales opportunity that you have a slim chance of winning.

Similarly your competition would find the situation equally frustrating and time wasteful if you had set the buying criteria and specifications. Just like you, they can't win responding to your ground rules because you have set the buying criteria. They would lose just as easily if the tables were turned on them.

So what do you do if the specifications were yours? Really it's all a matter of a great strategy.

Strategize the Opportunity

If the specifications call for a product or service that you can easily fulfill, respond to the request letter for letter. This is the response that meets the request.

If however, your products or services exceed those requested, submit another response that exceeds requested specifications.

Furthermore, should you have the ability to far exceed the request, create a third response. This is the one that totally surpasses requirements.

At this stage you might be asking yourself why go to this length when you have set the ground rules. The reason is simple. You can never assume you have no competition. That is the most fatal flaw in all of selling. If anything, you must recognize there is competition for everything, including your account. Otherwise, you become complacent and believe you are the only game in town, which of course is utter folly.

Naturally with each separate response you identify the features, advantages and benefits of the respective submissions. You ensure they are clearly spelled out so that the prospect can identify exactly what cost would be paid for each submission. Your job, which should never be ignored or abdicated to someone else, is to ensure the value of each proposition is clearly stated and understood by your prospect. It is silly to assume the buyer can make the distinctions by themselves. Your role as the salesperson is to assist the buyer understand what each level of investment buys and what the value to them becomes. That takes a salesperson that understands their products, prices, practices, processes, policies, procedures and programs very well. The salesperson must articulate this effectively through meaningful communication.

And of course, it is always best to present these responses in person. The reason is simple. If you have spent the time and energy to set the ground rules, part of a winning strategy is to present your proposals in person. At a very minimum, this gives you another opportunity to be face to face with your prospect. And B2B selling is all about face time with your prospect.

Reverse the Play

Now let's reverse this scenario. Suppose you are not the supplier who set the specifications. In this case you must contact the requestor and speak to the person or committee that created the specifications. To simply respond without talking to the specification writers is no better than shooting in the dark. You will be spending your valuable time responding not knowing if you can change the ground rules.

Once you speak with the specification creators, ensure you understand what the real needs, wants and desires are before you decide whether or not to submit a proposal. You see, if you can't change the ground rules, that is make the buying criteria yours, you will be submitting information that has no relevance to the prospects requirements. Furthermore, why submit a proposal that is blind to the real reasons the prospect will make a buying decision at all.

So let's say you have made the contact with the specifications creators and are comfortable that you can meet and exceed the stated requirements. Now is the time to do the same thing as the competitor, only this time you get the prospect buy-in that the criteria should be modified to include the capabilities of your products or services. In other words, you just changed the ground rules. Go ahead and submit your three responses. And as mentioned earlier, ensure you gain a meeting with the prospect to review each option and what the value is enjoyed with each choice of option. Now you have a reasonable chance of winning the business.

In conclusion, it has always fascinated and mystified me why salespeople submit blind responses to requests for quotation or proposal without ever speaking to the requestor. It amounts to using a quote as a substitute for selling time. Remember a responsibility of B2B salespeople is to be savvy about their prospects and to expend energy in face-to-face meetings in which they set the ground rules of the sale. Whether you are the vendor helping set the specifications or the one receiving a request without prior knowledge of the account situation, the point is the same. Either set the ground rules of the sale or get them changed to yours. Otherwise you are playing in a game where the vendor who sets the ground rules has homefield advantage.

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