

Selling Nonstandard Products

By Don McNamara CMC

Over the years you will be asked by both prospects and customers to have your company create, build or supply a product, service or capability that is not part of your standard line.

When that happens, and it will numerous times over the course of your sales career, it is advisable to think before answering. Thoughts that go through the minds of top sales performers are based on curiosity. Is there real interest or merely curiosity on the part of the buyer? You need to get some answers to determine the significance your prospect places on this opportunity. You need information too.

Questions Are Key

When that happens you should make your response in line with usual qualifying techniques. Here are a few example questions to ask:

- **What do you intend to use this for?** This identifies need and begs for a solution.
- **Who has asked you to look into this?** This identifies the requestor as well as who is the beneficial user.
- **When are you requiring it?** Here a time bounded period is discovered.
- **Where will the evaluation take place?, and order be placed from?** Location, location, location!
- **Why are you looking into this now?** This discovers what sparked the interest and why it is being investigated in the first place. Is there a sense of urgency? Clearly if this is an imminent need you must know this right away for you and your company to react, especially if there are significant sales attached to the request.

After revealing questions such as these get posed and answered, you are now in a position to comment in a declarative fashion - but not before! You can respond affirmatively, not declaring a position just yet. The response used most frequently by top sales professionals goes something along the lines "I am not sure but let me check into it. When do you need a response from me?"

Just such a case happened several years ago when working with one of my sales representatives. At that time our company supported a line of equipment by a major manufacturer. However, our company had not been made public announcement that the manufacturers' top of the line would be supported. Although we surmised the new flagship product would eventually be supported by us, we never actually committed this in front of the prospect. We wanted to be on solid ground before stating its support. We acted positive but non-committal. We responded with 'let us check into it'. This bought us time needed to go back to our internal personnel to check status.

Stating an action you will take demonstrates your commitment to check things out and gives confidence to your prospect that you clearly heard what they said, moreover you are going to do something about it, not merely sweep it under the rug. While you are at it, why not email what your understanding of the request was, include what action you will take and when they can expect your responses. There is nothing like something in writing!

Ask your self why do you want to probe this way?

You want time to analyze the information before responding to both them and calling on your internal resources for their answers. Questions posed to your prospect will surely be asked by your company when you bring this opportunity to them. They will want to know how well qualified the opportunity is and what your instincts tell you about this request. Incidentally, instincts are developed with experience and are your own judgments about the situation.

Should you get positive responses from both the prospect and your company, then your questions can center around who is involved in making the decision and whether or not the product will be evaluated for inclusion into your prospects or customers product line. However, you can refrain from asking those questions until you receive an affirmative response from your own firm.

We Do Not Have All the Answers

Our customers and prospects see us as the front line; they expect us to be sensitive to their needs and requests. Rarely do they actually expect us to have the answers to every question they will ever ask- especially if it is about a product they know we do not presently carry. They know we must check with other resources to ensure whatever gets stated is solid information before migrating it up their own internal decision making chain. For the most part, they are not trying to 'stump the band'; the request usually has a good reason behind it. Our job is to ascertain the validity of the request and present the information into our own company decision chain. Our customers do expect us to follow through and respond in a reasonable period of time. When we fail to respond in kind, we jeopardize the relationship with our prospect, as well as the relationship we have with the account.

Besides, a written follow up to prospects and internal resources reassures everyone we are being thorough and professional and provides the best protection against someone forgetting what was verbally stated.

Think It Through

A non-standard product or service can have an enormous impact on a company. It takes time for a company to evaluate the effect it will have on the entire organization, not just the single opportunity we are presenting. Impact means that when we say yes in Customerland, it is likely our company will include it in the product line as a standard product or capability at some time in the future. It also means that all the appropriate parts of our organization know it will be supplied, which in most cases means a support mechanism put in place, training of personnel and all other issues which affect it being in the product line. When fully supported by all sectors within your company it means you now have another product to sell. This time a standard one.

Regardless of who asks for the product and under what circumstances they ask for it, you will always need to ask questions yourself. The answers should reassure you that the interest is genuine and the need a real one, either now or in the future. You see the answers are in the questions, and top sales people ask lots of relevant ones to discover the buying opportunity.

And it can happen that you are being used to justify a decision that has already been made. Specifically your competition has the inside track on the sale and you are being looked at because the prospects management wants a least one other viable source for comparative purposes. It is always wiser to ask a series of relevant questions before saying either yes or no.

By the way, are you curious about the request for the non-standard product mentioned earlier? In fact, the sales person was awarded the agreement which represented her entire annual quota.

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