

Building Relationships

By Don McNamara CMC

Don't you get a little weary listening to all the experts trumpeting, then droning on-and-on that 'it's all about relationships'. It troubles me since no one has taken time to analyze what it takes in developing quality long term relationships. It's important because all of us count on our referral network in one way or another as a lead source. And as we know, getting a referral is the surest way to a new customer.

Ask yourself, has anyone bothered helping you understand what it takes to build and maintain a quality relationship?

Consider building quality relationships as a PROCESS. Yes, think of it as a step-by-step sequence that takes time and patience with a long term goal in mind because we never know where the next referral will come from. If you think you can do it in one or two 'touches' you are totally delusional! It takes continuous positive experiences over time.

1st Stage - Acquaintance

When we meet someone for the first time we want to be friendly, cordial and above all genuine. Nobody likes a phony. People today have a natural resistance to accepting anyone into their 'circle of friends' as Robert De Nero said in the movie Meet the Fokkers. A little kindness and spirit of friendliness never hurt any budding acquaintance. Certainly asking non-threatening questions is a great way to break the ice and serves as a starting point. Taking a real and sincere interest in the acquaintance's answers shows you are listening, paying attention to what they are saying and forms a position from which any subsequent dialogues, 'touches' and contacts can be initiated. And it helps if you remember some defining comment the acquaintance made to you which demonstrates you found something significant and impressive about them in the initial conversation.

2nd Stage – Connection

There is somewhat of a quantum leap from acquaintance to connection. It requires us to be easy to communicate with and understand. At this Stage something almost surreal happens when a bond and a commonality gets identified between both parties. This could be something as simple as growing up in the same city, having a common friend or having worked in the same company in the past. At this Stage both parties realize they are no longer total strangers to each other, rather they have one or many things in common.

Step 3 – Mutuality of Purpose

Do we have a common goal in mind, namely do we share the values providing quality service and being recognized as a reputable salesperson. Is there a 'meeting of the minds' as it were in how we conduct ourselves and our business affairs – specifically with honesty and integrity. Do we have the same objectives, such as resolving an issue or eliminating a problem. Is there a way either we or they can help another customer or friend. In my experience acquaintances and connections do not advance to this stage because they have not let each other know how they can help each other. In sales we call this relationship focused purposefulness.

Be mindful I'm not talking about winning a popularity contest. It was Abe Lincoln who said, "You can't please all the people all the time." However one thing you can do which influences potential relationships and referrals is to be a pleasant, polite and professional individual.

4th Stage – Relationship

What determines if our acquaintances, connections and mutually purposeful contacts will ever mature to a relationship is based on trust. However, much more significantly, we will advance to this stage when we have demonstrated long standing competence and achieved a level of respect that only gets established when we act and perform in a consistent manner. Consistency is the touchstone leading people to feel comfortable around us, and one of the ways they feel at ease is knowing we will be the same as last time – friendly, respectful and trustworthy. Could you count on them if a situation or opportunity arose requiring their experience, background or assistance. Those wise in the relationship building process know that a little trial or test in one area is at least an indicator of what that person would be like in a more complex situation. Frankly, if we live up to our word and conclusively show we know what we're talking about and what we are doing, we have reached that Stage called relationship.

5th Stage - Maintenance

Let's not take our relationships for granted nor ever forget we are only as good as our last sale. A relationship can be compromised when we muff an opportunity that has been referred to us. And when it does the prior relationship may be in serious jeopardy. If we do a less than a quality job that word gets back to our referral source, then they may begin to doubt our competency and possibly no longer have a positive impression of us. They may eventually disregard us and a viable supplier of goods and services down stream.

Conclusion

After more than thirty years of building relationships I have come to the conclusion that the PROCESS is incredibly similar to what excellent sales people do. And just in case you think you are not in sales, be mindful of what Robert Louis Stevenson once noted, "Everyone makes a living by selling something."

It is fascinating to me that Americans are an impatient lot. The Point? I believe it is virtually impossible to jump from Stage 1 – Acquaintance to Stage 5 – Maintenance in a single contact event. It takes time and patience to build a relationship. It can't be done in one 'touch'. While it may take many interactions, nonetheless it can be accomplished in fewer 'touches' when the first three Stages occur in a short time span.

Now you know why I call it "building a relationship". It's like building a house; you can't put the roof on until the concrete pad is down and the walls are up. It requires us to be trustworthy, honest, credible and competent. And don't fool yourself, the test of these goes through a gestation and maturation cycle during each of the Stages.

So if you are intent on building quality relationships, and in sales it is vital we do, then appreciate where you are in the Stages mentioned above with everyone with whom you are attempting to cultivate a relationship. Trying to move the PROCESS too quickly will probably cause indigestion from too much too fast. Give it time and let the Stages play out; in so doing both parties will have a much clearer sense of each other and how each can become a trusted referral source to the other. Above all abiding by the above PROCESS will assist in getting us to our goal of quality long term relationships.

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