Lessons in global sales: Strict use of time, advance agendas are vital

The most important differences between local and global selling are time and distance.

When I started my first company in central New Jersey years ago, most of my clients were local. They were the purchasing officers of major foreign companies, especially mining companies, situated in neighboring Manhattan. It was easy for me to follow up on a sales call or to drop by again the week after the call with a price quote.

In global sales, though, a salesperson does not have that luxury. He or she has to make the best use of time because the Continued, Page 22
It’s vital to set an agenda before travelling to meet with client

Continued from Page 1

distance is so great.

I remember an early trip to Bolivia. I called my clients and a host of prospects to advise them of my impending visit and to set up appointments. They were all very positive and, except for a firm appointment with one client, asked me to call as soon as I arrived.

I arrived in La Paz on a Sunday and began calling everyone on Monday. They were all busy but “would return my call.” I visited my one client and waited for the return calls.

I also waited all day Tuesday, reading a great James Mitchner novel to pass the time.

On Wednesday, I began to panic and to call the prospects again. Again, they said they would return my calls. And they did. On Thursday!

And they all wanted to meet on Friday. That was impossible, although I tried my best.

That experience taught me lesson No. 1 in international sales - namely, that time is at a premium. Now I force the issue as far as I can and set up visits before I leave home.

Another imperative to insuring a good outcome in global selling is what I call that the “advance agreement.” It tends to separate the great global salespeople from the rest of them.

Most good salespeople try to set an agenda with the client or prospect before or while scheduling the visit. Great global salespeople, however, also try to set the outcome of the meeting in advance of the visit. In essence, this means closing the sale before the meeting takes place.

A good advance agreement has several key elements. The amount of detail required for each element depends on the nature of the product or service being sold and the level of trust the salesperson has built with the client.

The first step in securing an advance agreement is to establish the topics to be discussed during the meeting. You may do it verbally or in writing, but with e-mail being so pervasive, writing is the better medium.

After setting up the topics, you should describe your role in the meeting. This step can be as simple as stating that you will have questions to ask about problems, budget and the decision process.

It also can be a more complicated formula. Perhaps you will have to have meetings scheduled with managers and users, with financial people or with others. You will have to ask all of them a set of pertinent questions.

Once you have established your role, you have to identify the role and expectations you have of the client. Certainly you have to give permission for the client to ask any pertinent questions, but the client’s role might go beyond that.

It might be that the client has to bring something to the meeting - drawings, statistics or other data. He or she may have to set up internal meetings or arrange for a company plane to take you to a work site. Whatever role the client has to play, spell it out as well.

The hardest element of all is the final agreement.

“If we agree during the meeting that the service my company offers is the right service for you, and if the price is amenable to both of us, then you will place the order so we can begin production.

Of course, if you determine that this is not the right service at the right price, then you will advise me of that and we will end our dialogue and wait until the next time you may need our services.”

If you have handled the advance agreement well, then you have, in essence, closed the sale, with the parameters set for a “yes” or a “no” before you even have the meeting. Any agreement is, by definition, a two-way street.

If all the elements are agreed to verbally, then confirm them in writing. If you send it in written form, then be sure secure a response. An agreement has to involve both parties.

Take these steps before your next sales trip. Set up your meeting in advance. Establish an agenda. Spell out the roles that you and your client will play, and pre-ordain the outcome of the meeting.

You will save time and travel by reducing the selling cycle. The result: lower costs and the ability to close more business. You will move from good to great. Your company will love you, and you may even put more money in your pocket.

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