

In Sales, Focus On Goals

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High-performing firms exceed their goals because they have a relentless focus on customers. They scope out the big picture, zero in on specifics and hold firm on price. Above all, their salespeople:

■ **Ask the right questions.** Salespeople usually have several objectives during any given client meeting. Listing the goals ahead of time - pegging key questions to each - can help unlock hidden roadblocks and put you ahead of rivals, says leadership trainer Paul Cherry, president and CEO of Performance Based Results and author of *Questions That Sell*. Cherry suggests questions like these:

"What budgetary constraints are you working within?"

"How will funding for this project be determined?"

"Who else is involved in approving the budget, and what hurdles could you encounter?"

"What kind of return on investment are you expecting?"

■ **Nuke complaints.** After a customer states an objective, latch onto a point of agreement and follow up with a clarifying question.

Example: The customer says he likes his vendor.

■ **Your point of agreement:** "Good service is critical."

■ **The response:** "Walk me through your decision-making criteria when choosing a vendor."

The client's reaction could give you opportunities to tout your strengths, Cherry says.

■ **Nail down your rivals.** One of your most powerful questions, says Cherry, is this: "If you could change one

thing about your current vendor, what would it be?" If the client can't think of anything, follow up with: "On a scale of one to 10, how would you rate your current vendor relationship?" Based on the response, ask: "What would have to happen for it to move from a (pick a number) to a 10?"

■ **Stand firm.** Forget cutting your price to make the sale, says Doug Hall, author of *Meaningful Marketing*. "Discounting can backfire," he said. "It signals to customers that the offering (isn't) worth the price. And when customers start to doubt, no amount of discounts can motivate them to purchase."

■ **Zero in.** Relationships with customers hinge on the quality of information you provide, says performance coach Linda Blackman, who wrote *The Sales Coach*. A sure road to trouble is to assume that a customer knows more than he does, she says. The more detailed you are in explaining terms, contracts and other information, the more time and trouble you'll save yourself and the client later.

■ **Check transitions.** Review the pipeline that new customer orders go through. Ensure that it's as seamless as possible, Hall says.

■ **Position well.** Define rivals by positioning your benefits effectively, says marketing strategist Harry Beckwith, author of "Selling the Invisible." The benefits should be unique - or should easily beat your competitors', he says.

■ **Focus on lifetime use.** Have your prospect picture how life will change after he takes ownership, says salesman Jeffrey Gitomer, who wrote *The Little Red Book of Selling*. "If you can concentrate on use and ownership, you can focus on cost and long-term value as opposed" to just the cost, he said. "The key is getting the customer to visualize this" before he asks about price. ■

