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Should Clients Trust Your Sales Pitch?

By Charles H. Green

Consultants often destroy client trust in the sales process—and rarely recover. That's a shame because those consultants are squandering their greatest opportunity for creating client trust.

Sell the right way, and you start with trust. Sell the wrong way, and you may get the deal anyway because so few of your competitors do it any better. But you'll start work in a low trust environment that will be difficult to overcome.

The reason consultants miss this opportunity to build trust with their clients is simple: most consultants feel conflicted about selling. We not only look down on salespeople, but feel vaguely guilty when we have to sell. We don't even call it "sales." The preferred euphemism is "business development," passively voiced, as if to distance ourselves from "developing business."

The truth is that clients want to trust us—to believe that we care about them and their interests. They want to believe we are trustworthy.

Unfortunately, the usual consulting sales practices give us away. Too often, we succeed in proving that we really are not trustworthy, but guilty of putting our own interests ahead of the client's; that our primary objective is to close the sale—that we don't care about them as much as we care about ourselves. The way we sell destroys the trust that the client wishes to place in us.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way.

Four Beliefs that Kill Trust

1. The objective of selling is to get revenue, right?

No—not if you want to be trusted. The objective of Trust-based Selling® is to help the client make the best decision for the client. If you pursue that objective, clients will see that your goal is to help them—not just to get their money. Then they trust you. And then they buy from you—overwhelmingly.

2. The goal of the sales process is to close deals—isn't it?

Not if you seek to build trust. The focus of Trust-based Selling isn't the transaction, but the relationship. Relationships yield transactions; but focus on transactions alone is a zero-sum approach: there are winners and losers, negotiated pain and gain.

Most consultants use transactional sales models, which emphasize the sales closing process. That is not a way to build trust. In relationship-focused selling, there is true upside potential for both the client and the consultant.

3. Clients buy rationally based on expertise, credentials, qualifications, track record, and reputation—after all, they say so!

They may say so, but it's only true if they can't trust the seller, and they usually can't. Clients prefer to buy what they have to buy anyway from experts they trust. A trusted seller trumps all others.

4. Clients want to hear about your depth of experience in resolving their issues.

Clients are people just like us, and everyone's favorite subject is themselves. Clients want to hear your take on their problems, in their company. Don't talk about your expertise—demonstrate it by applying it real-time to the client.

What is Trust-based Selling?

The principles of Trust-based Selling are rooted in the knowledge that if we consistently behave with the best interests of the client and the relationship, we will get more than our share of sales because we are fulfilling the highest desire of a client—to find an expert who can be trusted.

Selling based on trust cuts our ongoing cost of sales by increasing client retention and decreases the average sales costs, since generating repeat business is far cheaper than finding new work with new clients. We also improve our sales rates because clients overwhelmingly prefer to buy from those they trust.

There are four principles of Trust-based Selling:

- Client focus for the sake of the client, not the seller
- A medium-to-long-term perspective
- An ingrained habit of collaboration
- Willingness to be absolutely transparent.

The acid test of trust in selling is this: Would you recommend your competitor to an important client—if that would be better for the client? If you are not willing to do that, then by definition you always put your best interests ahead of the client's. And why should they then trust you?

Key Practices of Trust-based Selling

Client focus, collaboration, and transparency are essential to building a trusting relationship. Here are seven practices to help build client trust.

- Write your proposals *with* the client.
- Practice listening as paying attention. Don't think about what you're going to say next while the client is talking, and don't focus on behavioral techniques like mirroring or paraphrasing. Just pay attention.
- Be willing to think out loud.
- Focus as much on the limits as on the breadth of your knowledge. If you don't know, say so.
- Practice "selling by doing, not selling by telling." Demonstrate your value-adding capabilities on the client's real-life situation, in real-time, rather than by describing others' situations.
- Embrace third party consultants and purchasing agents as the new clients, rather than trying to fight them or go around them; help them like you would any client.
- Recommend other solutions for the client to explore during the sales process, don't just pitch yourself.

The idea that developing trust with a client takes a long time is a myth. People form judgments very quickly about whom they trust. The opportunity to influence that initial impression is long gone by the time the sales process is over.

Trusted relationships with clients lead to reduced transaction costs, faster client decisions, and less total time to generate the sale—for buyer and seller alike. Trusted consultants can increase creativity, collaboration, decision quality, and other revenue-enhancing features.

Trust-based relationships are a far surer path to profitability for a consulting firm than the best competitive strategy or the lowest cost.

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Charles H. Green is the founder and President of Trusted Advisor Associates, the author of *Trust-based Selling*, and coauthor of *The Trusted Advisor*, with David Maister and Robert Galford. Green, a speaker and seminar-leader for major consulting organizations, spent nineteen years in consulting with the MAC Group and Gemini Consulting.