

Selling technique

Persuading customers to part with their money may not be easy. But the actual process is a straightforward one.

There are separate protections for business customers and consumers who purchase services or goods from you. This briefing outlines the rules you must follow when selling to these different groups of customer. It also explains how to:

- Identify and approach targets.
- Understand customer needs, then sell the benefits of your product.
- Handle objections and close the sale.

1 Planning your approach

As part of your marketing strategy, you have to decide who your target customers are, and how you will approach them.

1.1 Find out as much as you can about your **target customers**.

- Find out what they do. What products do they need and why? What key benefits are they looking for?
- Find out when customers prefer to buy, so you can contact them at the right time.
- Be clear what each potential customer is worth to you. This determines the amount of time and effort you put into selling to each one.

1.2 If you are selling to other businesses, identify **decision-makers** and other individuals who influence purchasing decisions.

- A brief conversation with a receptionist can

reveal information about the customer's company structure and details of who you need to speak to.

- Your aim is to talk with the person who has both the budget authority and the need to buy your product. This is not necessarily a manager. For example, stationery is often purchased by a relatively junior employee.
- 1.3** Before making contact, be clear what you want to **achieve**.
- For example, do you want to make a sale, set up a meeting, or simply ensure that the customer will be receptive to future contact?
- Prepare your pitch. Define which key benefits your product or service has for this particular customer and focus on them during your conversation (see **4**).

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about the services available to you.

- Anticipate objections and prepare responses (see 5). To do this successfully, you need to know your own product — and those of key competitors — inside out.

2 Getting access

2.1 If you are **telephoning** a customer, follow a few basic rules.

- Ring at the right time. People are naturally more responsive to calls in the morning.
- Get the crucial first 30 seconds of your pitch right.
If you fail to prepare your opening carefully, you have little chance of interesting the customer in what you have to offer.
- Check you are speaking to the right person. Ask what involvement he or she has in making purchasing decisions.
- Always get your customer's name and give your own, too.

2.2 Get **secretaries** on your side.

- Be friendly, not pushy. Ask the secretary to help you.
- Explain the benefit the customer will get from taking your call or giving you an appointment. Part of a secretary's job is to prevent unwelcome sales calls getting any further.
- Make a note of the secretary's name and use it the next time you call.

2.3 When you make contact with decision-makers, treat them **considerately**.

- Check that you are calling at a convenient time. Be ready to keep your call short.

2.4 Engage the customer's **interest**.

- Introduce yourself and establish the basis for talking. For example, 'Did you receive my letter?' or 'Your friend X suggested I call you'.
- Briefly outline the key benefit your product has for this particular customer.
- Ask if the customer is interested in what you have said so far. If so, go on to ask more questions (see 3). If not, ask if your product or service might be of interest at a later date.

2.5 Be prepared to be **persistent**, particularly if you do not have an existing relationship.

- If you get an immediate brush-off, try to keep the conversation going.
For example, if you are asked to put

something in the post, ask what in particular the customer is interested in.

- If customers say they need to think about it, ask what their concerns are.
- Stay focused on what you want to achieve. If you want a meeting, ask for one. Suggest a time and a place.

Customers prefer, and are less likely to cancel, meetings on their own premises.

- Use each time you make contact to build your understanding of the customer. Record details of the customer's circumstances and needs. Note down other useful information. For example, about budgets and decision-makers.

3 Asking questions

Whether you are selling face to face or over the phone, asking questions is essential if you want to understand your customer's needs. Do not attempt to sell at this point.

3.1 Make the customer **want** to answer further questions.

- Start with questions to which you know the answer will be yes. For example, 'Are you interested in reducing your production costs?'

3.2 Find out the customer's **situation**. Use open questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no.

For example, 'How do you plan to reduce your production costs?'

- Identify areas your product relates to and needs that it can meet.
- Try to establish what the customer's business would be worth to you.
- Show your understanding of the customer's field of business.
For example, 'Yes, now you are getting orders abroad, distribution must be more of a challenge.'
- Encourage the customer to ask you questions.

3.3 **Listen** carefully and take notes.

- Check you have understood the customer's needs by summarising in your own words what he or she has said.

4 Selling the benefits

Once you understand what customers are looking for, you must show what benefits they will get from buying your product or service.

4.1 Sell **benefits**, not features.

- Feature: This PC has a processor speed of 3GHz.
Benefit: This PC lets you do things twice as fast.
- Feature: This frying pan has a Teflon coating.
Benefit: To clean it all you do is wipe.

Features describe what a product can do. Benefits explain what these features can do for the customer. (See box, page 2.)

4.2 **Match** the benefits to the customer's needs.

- The same product may be sold differently to two different customers, according to their priorities.
For example, if you are selling a car, you might stress the benefits of its safety features when selling to parents of young children, while focusing on style and design when selling to a single person.

4.3 Stress the **knock-on effects** your product's benefits could have.

- For example, 'If your accounting software was easier to use, your accounts staff could spend more time chasing debtors.'

If customers seem hesitant, ask them what their concerns are (see 5).

5 Handling objections

Do not be put off by objections — they can be a sign that the customer is interested. Make sure that you handle them in a direct and positive way.

5.1 Show the customer that you take the objection **seriously**.

- Listen carefully to find out what the customer really means.
For example, 'The price is too high' could mean 'It's over my budget sign off' or 'I'd buy it if you gave me a discount.'
- Summarise what you understand the objection to be.

5.2 **Isolate**, test and address objections.

- If there are several, clarify what each one is before tackling them all, one at a time.
- Test each objection. For example, ask 'So, if I could satisfy you that delivery would be reliable, would you place an order?'

- If an objection is valid, address it and then ask if you have satisfied the customer's concerns.

5.3 The most common objection to making a purchase is **price**.

Try to find out exactly what aspect of price the customer is unhappy with before deciding how to respond.

- Demonstrate the savings your product or service would bring.
- Sell the full package you offer, including your reliable after-sales service and the fact that there are no hidden costs.
- Explain how payment terms, credit or financing could make a deal possible.
- If the individual you are negotiating with does not have budget authority for the level of spending you propose, consider breaking the sale up into several smaller deals.

6 Closing the deal

6.1 Create a sense of **urgency**.

Try to convince the customer that he or she needs your product now. Do not falsely state that a product will only be available for a very limited time in order to get consumers to buy there and then. This is illegal under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations.

- Link a quick sale to meeting the customer's own needs and deadlines.
For example, 'If you book the holiday now, we can get you the best rooms in the hotel.'

6.2 Look for **buying signals** from the customer.

For example:

- 'When would you be able to deliver?'
- 'What other colours do you have?'
- 'That would be really useful.'
- 'This is just what we need.'

Once you have spotted a buying signal, be ready to close the deal.

6.3 Take **responsibility** for closing the sale. Be positive and upbeat.

The simplest way may be just to ask, 'Can I take your order now?'

- Take your cue from the customer.
For example, if he or she asks about the price of a product, say 'So is that the product you would like to buy?'
- Propose alternatives. This makes it more difficult for the customer to say no. Ask,

'Would you prefer it in green or blue?'

- When only one objection remains, make closing the sale conditional upon removing this obstacle.
For example, 'If I can guarantee to bring the delivery date forward to meet your schedule, will you place the order now?'

Once you have asked for the sale, stop talking. Your silence encourages the customer to think things through and reach a decision.

6.4 Agree **actions** and confirm these in writing, including timescales.

- Confirm that you have understood correctly what the customer wants.

Give your customers good after-sales service, so that they will want to buy from you again.

7 Face to face

7.1 Prepare for **face-to-face meetings**.

- If appropriate, send a proposed agenda and ask if there is anything in particular the customer would like you to cover.
- Always confirm the time and venue for the meeting in writing.
But do not ring on the day to confirm a meeting is taking place. Given the option, customers often cancel.
- Make sure you arrive in plenty of time.

7.2 Use effective **presentation** techniques.

- Find out about your audience.
For example, if you are presenting the benefits of your contact management software to a sales team, you do not need to focus on how easy it is to install.
- Structure the presentation carefully.
In your introduction, tell the audience what the key points of the presentation will be. Deal with these in the main part of the presentation. Then, at the end, summarise again the points you have covered.
- Keep your audience involved.
Never read from a typed script. Use appropriate visual aids. If your audience seem bored or distracted, invite questions to get their interest back.

7.3 A face-to-face meeting is your best opportunity to build a lasting **rapport** with the customer.

- Be interested. Encourage customers to talk about themselves and ask them questions

about things that concern them.

- Show interest in the customer as a person. Remember personal information about family and out-of-office interests.
- Adapt to the character of the customer.
- Make your style positive and confident, and discuss your product or service with enthusiasm.
- Close the deal.

8 Legal obligations

Businesses in all sectors are banned from using unfair commercial practices to market and sell to consumers. Firms are also banned from advertising in a way that misleads other traders.

8.1 Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations.

- Commercial practices are deemed unfair if they mislead (by action or omission) or are aggressive (by intimidating or exploiting consumers).
- The regulations have banned 31 aggressive and misleading sales practices including: falsely stating that a product will be available for a very limited time only; exaggerating personal security risks in order to sell safety products; and refusing to leave a customer's house until they sign a contract.
- For a full list of the 31 banned practices, download a free guide at www.berr.gov.uk/files/file46035.pdf
- Businesses that fail to comply with the regulations risk fines of up to £5,000 for each offence imposed. Serious or repeated breaches could result in criminal prosecution.

8.2 Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations.

- It is an offence for businesses to advertise in a way that: compares products or materials that are not designed for the same purpose; confuses traders as to the advertiser and the competitor; or presents imitations of products bearing a trade mark.

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