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Barriers to understanding

Here's how sales managers can help their staffs better interpret what prospects are saying

Question: Members of our sales team pursue opportunities they perceive to be "live ones" but which, in reality, are requests for "free consulting." Those consultations waste valuable time and resources. As their sales manager, how can I help them better understand the hidden meaning behind the other party's communication?

Answer:

Barriers to understanding are often so subtle that the sales professional may not even consciously recognize them. Sometimes the reason the real message is missed is because of the skill in how the message was delivered. An encouraging tone of voice, eye-to-eye contact, a positive nodding of the head, can disguise an ambiguous message.

To resolve this, schedule time in the field with each of your key players who fall into this trap on a regular basis. Then listen. Really listen to the dialogue that takes place between the sales professional and the prospective client.

Listen for words or phrases that sound like a commitment will be forthcoming, but in reality, are stall tactics.

For example, let's say the sales team member asks the important question, "When do you expect you will be making the decision?" And the prospect says in a most engaging manner, leaning forward with his or her head nodding up and down, "Soon." The sales person's impression is "I've got a live one." But in reality, there is no substance behind the prospect's comment.

The correct response from the sales person should be, "When you say 'soon' what specifically do you mean? Are you looking at next week, by the end of the month, or by the end of the quarter?" It's best to give the other party a range of options. This directs the other party to be more specific.

To assist you, we've listed six common language patterns that will help you to categorize the cause:

1. Ambiguous statements – These are words or phrases whose meanings are open to interpretation by the listener. For example:

Often	Seldom
Always	A lot
Sometimes	Almost always
Never	Rarely
Usually	Frequently
Most of the time	Quite often
Occasionally	Typically
Responsive	Flexible

What do those words really mean? Only the presenter knows for sure. The words are often used intentionally to misdirect the other party.

Skilled negotiators know that understanding the other party's roadmap is essential when determining strategy. Therefore, they never leave a conversation without having the other party clarify the meaning behind a communication.

When ambiguous words are used, they repeat the word or phrase and ask, "What specifically do you mean by ..."

2. Generalizations – People remember and emotionally react to big issues, opportunities and things that are outside the norm. Generalizations leverage this principle. When one or more situations arise, the other party may present it as the rule, rather than the exception to get a 'high priority' response. The intention is to put you on the defensive so you feel compelled to make concessions.

To illustrate, let's say one of your team members walked into a meeting with a client who opens the conversation by saying, "Your company never meets a delivery schedule. You need to fix this or you're out."

The most effective way to handle this is to ask for more information. This is best accomplished by repeating the word or phrase as a question. In this case, the counter-response would be: "Never?"

Generalizations are sometimes a lazy way of taking a position or stating an opinion. Therefore, it's important to remain non-confrontational and to ask questions that uncover the real facts. So in this case, you would follow up "Never" with, for example, the following: "Let's take a look at the last 10 shipments. Purchase order No. 10256; we have that order delivering on 7/25 at 9 a.m. Does that match your records?" Etc.

3. Deletion – This is when the other party either intentionally or accidentally leaves out key pieces of information so the meaning of the mes-

sage is skewed. Points that don't support their position are deleted to influence your reaction.

Always take time to review, at least in your own mind, the information presented. Think about what you are being told from each of the key stakeholders positions. Ask questions about how they have already responded, what their expectations are, or what they might say or do in response to a specific course of action. Flush out the gap. It means being proactive, not reactive, and that takes emotional discipline.

4. Assumptions – When there is a lack of information, some personality types will jump to a conclusion, assuming they know what the other party wants, needs or expects. The results can be devastating relative to the investment of time, energy, resources and even reputation. As best as possible, it is important to confirm your interpretation first, before taking action.

5. Comparisons – People often use comparisons to see what your reaction will be. Words like fewer, more, better, and less than create a comparison situation. For example, a buyer might say, "You need to be more competitive with your pricing." Well what does, "More competitive" mean to him or her? And compared to what? Again, the proper response is to clarify the meaning, "When you say more competitive, what specifically do you mean?"

Top negotiators know that people don't always mean what they say, or say what they mean. They see themselves as a facilitator in the negotiation process clarifying needs, wants and expectations. They strive to minimize their risks by eliciting information and not by emotional interpretation of poor communications.



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