

100

BEST SMALL
BUSINESS
SALES TIPS

THE REFRESHINGLY SIMPLE WAY TO
GROW YOUR SMALL BUSINESS



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Welcome

Hello! Regardless of your level of sales experience, this book aims to help you the small business owner learn – or rediscover – proven ways to increase your chances of closing more deals.

Let's face it; no matter what we sell, we all experience many of the same challenges. Selling is a demanding profession. I don't promise to have all of the answers, but my tips will increase your selling capabilities.

This eBook is an easy read, with content that really works if you apply the tips to your sales strategy. I hope you enjoy and profit from the time you spend reading it!

All the best,

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Chapter One: Know What You Are Selling

No one is going to buy from you if it isn't very clear what it is you are actually selling. You add a tremendous amount of value to the buyer if the benefits of your service are clearly articulated. What you need to know depends on what you are selling and who the targeted prospects are.

Tip #1 Personalize What You Sell

If you or I go on a job interview we would be asked many similar questions about ourselves. We'd be expected to be able to explain everything there is about us, and why we should be hired. Good interview questions can reveal things about us we might not have even considered. Buyers are like interviewers; you'd better know your offering.

Tip #2 Seek Out the Experts

If possible, try to learn from those who have been successful with what it is you are selling. Buying lunch here and there can pay big dividends if you can pick the brain of someone who really understands your business. They don't even have to be in sales--in fact it may be better if they aren't. I call these folks the subject matter experts (you'll learn about them in the next chapter).

Tip #3 Test Your Knowledge

If you feel like you have a good understanding of your service or offering, try your pitch on someone. You have to start with a small amount of knowledge and work your way up. Can you explain your service in two sentences? Give it a try. Keep trying until you can.

Tip #4 If You Don't Know the Answer, Say So

No matter how much we know about what we are selling there are going to be times we don't have all the answers. I own my own business, so you would think I know everything there is to know about my offerings, but I don't. If you don't know the answer to a prospect's questions, make sure you clearly understand the question, write it down, and tell them you honestly don't know but will find out. Then follow up with the answer!

Tip #5 The More You Know the Better You'll Be

Creditability is a big part of selling. If you are not trusted by the buyer, you are sunk. You'll gain their respect if you are knowledgeable and helpful during the selling process, so the more you know about your service, the better you'll do in sales.

Tip #6 Plain English Please

It's easy to get all caught up in industry jargon and terminology. My background is mainly technology sales. We have three letter acronyms for everything--including three letter acronyms (TLA). Using this language simply doesn't work with prospects. It's crucial that you display your knowledge, but not baffle your listeners with jargon they don't understand.

Tip #7 Role-Playing Rocks (sometimes)

I'm not a fan of role-plays when they are used to test your selling skills (after all, a good sales person is a better listener than talker). However, they can be useful for discovering the depth of your knowledge. Find someone who really knows your service, and role-play for them. This is a good way to test your knowledge without burning through a bunch of prospects.

Tip #8 Know Why Customers Buy What You Sell

No matter what you sell, you need to know why prospects buy things and how they may use them. I use a pool guy because I don't like maintaining our pool—but I do like using it. Our pool cleaner got the business because he made it clear that I could just enjoy the pool, and he'd take care of everything else. He knew my needs and delivered the service.

Tip #9 Take Notes and More Notes

I forget things pretty easily. Scattered all around my office are composition books full of the service and service knowledge I need to do my job. I've had a few sales people come in for training classes and not take a single note. It was not only disrespectful of the presenter's time, but a lost opportunity to learn more about our offerings.

Tip #10 Try the Mom Test

I've sold some very technical services to sophisticated markets. And I've learned that, no matter how complicated the technology, you must communicate your service knowledge in a way anyone can understand. I always try out my knowledge pitch on my Mom. She's a smart person but doesn't know anything about the markets I sell to. If she can comprehend my service pitch, grasp the value it provides, and asks questions, I've likely nailed it. It doesn't have to be a Mom; try a friend, bartender, or the mailman. You'll be amazed at how they want to help you succeed.

Tip #11 BS is BS

Tell the truth, no matter how much you want the business. Integrity is paramount to being successful in sales. If you remain truthful to your prospects and clients, you'll establish yourself as a credible resource, even if you don't win the deal this time. Do the right thing every time.

Tip #12 Service Knowledge Goal Setting

Pick a few elements of your service that you want to learn more about. Put together a plan for obtaining and using. Don't try to boil the ocean. Start with small bites and work your way up.

Tip #13 Be a Service Expert, Share the Knowledge

You'll be amazed at how your professional life will change when you gain a decent amount of service knowledge. Not only will selling become easier, but you will also become a resource for others. If you work in a larger company where new sales pros are being hired, volunteer to share your knowledge with the "new kids."

Tip #14 It's An Ongoing Process

Being in sales is a life-long learning process. You have to commit to learning as much as you can about your service. Buyer's needs change often. If you can't keep up, you'll lose the sales.

One day I was traveling through O'Hare Airport in Chicago. I overheard a business professional on the phone with, I assume, someone from his own company or maybe a supplier. He asked a question that for years has stayed with me, "How can I sell something when I don't even know what it is I'm selling?" Answer: You can't.

Chapter Two: You Need a Team

Whether you work in a corporate environment or are self-employed, you need a team to support your sales efforts. The best sales professionals realize this. Having an internal or external team to back you up is a smart way to sell. The team adds value by providing you with knowledge and support. If you are the leader of the team, make sure you leverage all the skills your team-members bring to the table.

Tip #15 See the Big Picture

Remember that there will always be competing needs among members of your team. This is what drives the overall business. For you to be successful, solid services and services provided by others are essential. The factors that drive your success such as creative thinking and negotiation are often not the same within support teams. Success is typically driven by predictability which is often disrupted by good sales efforts.

Tip #16 It Really is a Team

Working with the operations team is a partnership – remember that despite the competing goals, both teams are mutually dependent. To the extent that you can leverage the common drivers and offer a shared vision for success to both teams, you are much more likely to get what you need.

Tip #17 Everyone Loves Doughnuts

When in doubt, bring doughnuts. Food is an excellent way to recognize efforts or ease tensions during high intensity periods. Find a food that everyone appreciates—it doesn't need to be elaborate or expensive. Doughnuts, pizza, chicken wings all work well.

Tip #18 Job Well Done

Recognize the efforts of your support teams often. Being recognized for good work is sincerely appreciated. When appropriate, remember to recognize the efforts of the management teams as well.

Tip #19 Keep Them Informed

Keep the operations teams informed of pending sales and opportunities, and provide updates on progress even when not successful. Key elements such as sales opportunities are important for the entire company to share, and these communications are often overlooked.

Tip #20 Being Sensitive Can Be Cool

Be sensitive to the feelings of others. In particular, do not share information regarding reward trips or other forms of recognition that are offered only to the sales teams.

Tip #21 Bumps in the Road

Early and frequent communication is key, especially if there may be a problem. Be proactive about looking for and anticipating those client and prospect decisions that could impact the operations and support teams. Highlight these early, especially if additional support or modifications may

be required. This allows for a planned response when these problems do arise.

Tip #22 Reasons Behind “No”

Development, client support and professional service teams often work under significant constraints, such as budget limitations. If the response to a request or enhancement is a resounding “no,” look beyond the negative response and consider the reasons for the answer. Often the teams are as motivated to deliver upon your request as you are, but are simply limited by internal policy, processes, or budget. This can be as frustrating to them as it is to you.

Tip #23 Take Them with You

Involve the support teams in sales demos when possible, even if just as silent observers. It is sometimes difficult to fully appreciate the market drivers until you hear them first hand from clients and prospects.

Tip #24 We’re All in it Together

Share your excitement with the operations teams. The overall goals and objectives in driving success within the company are the same.

Many of us in sales like to think of ourselves as cowboys or lone-wolves. We are out in the field every day, chasing new business to close. Anybody not in sales back at our company just gets in our way. I used to have this mindset but not anymore. It’s just plain wrong.

Chapter Three: Target Market IQ

Invest the time and energy it takes to understand your target prospects. Laser-like focus in this area will pay big dividends. Consider the types of potential customers that fit your ideal sweet-spot and put them in groups. Think locally, too--what sells in Boston may not go over the same way in Madison. If you know who you should be calling on and why, your sales results are going to escalate.

Tip #25 Know the Market You Sell Into (Business to Business)

Regardless of the service, you need to have a high-level understanding of the market you are going after. In a business-to-business sale, research the buyers you are targeting. If you're going after a bank, for instance, you should know that big banks have different needs than small banks. Selling to a group of doctors is different than selling to a solo practice.

Tip #26 Know the Market You Sell Into (Business to Consumer)

Selling to consumers can—and should--be researched and segmented as well. Think about the demographic of the prospect you are targeting. Every fall I'm amazed by how rabid college football fans become. They'll buy anything with a favorite team's colors and logos. I heard of an entrepreneur who made a lot of money selling satellite dish covers with college logos. That was a sales person who understood the market they were selling to.

Tip #27 Search Engines & Websites

Google, Yahoo, and Bing are all great ways to get smart about the market(s) you want to sell into. Market-specific websites are good sources of information as well. Most segments have associations with websites. Check them out, you'd be amazed at what you can find.

Tip #28 Trade Shows & Expos

Attending functions geared towards your target markets pays off big time. You'll find out the latest trends and what other companies are selling, plus you'll have the chance to mingle with prospective clients. If you aren't sure which events to attend, ask your clients and prospects. They'll be able to help you determine the trade shows and expos that are worth your time.

Tip #29 Join Associations. Participate, Too

A great way to gain market knowledge is to join associations related to your target markets. They are always looking for subject matter experts (you). Being a part of an organized group will give you multiple opportunities to learn new things and make connections.

Tip #30 Read Everything You Can Get Your Hands On

Books, newsletters, and trade journals related to your market segment can be great resources. Set these aside and read them when you can. You'll impress prospects when you can discuss relevant industry news. Credibility is critical no matter what you sell.

Tip #31 Research Your Competition (Part One)

You should know who your best and biggest competitors are. You have to be a good spy (think Burn Notice, even if you don't have the cool sunglasses) to keep up with what your competition is doing. Go to their websites and see what kind of industry content they have. Set up search engine alerts so that you know when they have a new announcement. Do online searches using the competitions name and see what pops up.

Tip #32 Research Your Competition (Part Two)

When researching competition, it's best to create pros and cons lists, so you can see how you stack up against your competitors. In some cases, what you consider a strength may be what your competitor views as your weakness. For instance:

You: "We are a small company that provides personalized service and fast responses to our clients."

Them: "That competitor (you) is small and has very few clients--they are not a long term concern for us."

Tip #33 Never Be Negative About Your Competition

Don't take your competition too personally. After all, they're just trying to make a living, too. Most importantly, never say negative things about your competition to your prospects. It's just not a good practice.

Tip #34 Be Organized

You'll be gathering a lot of market segment intelligence. Keep it organized and easily available. Set up folders on your computer that are specific to the research material you want to store. It's easier finding what you want when it is well organized.

Tip #35 Commit to Being the Expert

Early on in my sales career I was content on being just one of the guys. Making good money, traveling a lot, and just having fun. Later I realized I wanted more in my career. I invested time and resources into really getting good at the market I was selling into. Little by little, my reputation as someone who knew the space I sold in grew. You can do the same in your market.

Tip #36 Market Knowledge Goal Setting

Earlier this year, I decided to learn more about how companies in my segment were using online social networking. I knew how to use it, but wanted to know how my *market* uses it. Are you making similar knowledge distinctions?

I'm probably like some of you in that I love to sell, but I also love to be sold. A sales professional who understands me as a buyer and knows why I would want to purchase what they are selling is very close to a sale. I can't help it. However, I'm no pushover--I say no many more times than yes. Why? Many sales professionals don't take the time to find out my needs, and focus instead on what they are selling.

Chapter Four: Hello, It's Me

Our success in sales depends on keeping our supply of fresh prospects stocked as full as possible. Knowing what it is you are selling, having a team to back you up, and clearly understanding the needs of your market are great starts. However, you need prospects and must know how you are going to get them.

Tip #37 Cold Calling Do's

Before you pick up the telephone and smile and dial think about what you are going to say. What's your value statement? Why are you calling? Why should they want to talk to you? Put yourself in the prospect's shoes. What would a sales person have to say to grab your attention? This can be fun if you are creative.

Tip #38 Voicemail

If you get voicemail, hang-up. Your chances of someone returning a cold call voicemail are about as good as winning the lottery. You have no upside and lots of downside risk.

Tip #39 Email Prospecting- Don't Burn the URL

Email prospecting works, but you really need a good understanding of direct marketing to be successful. Leave this up to the pros and instead focus on traditional prospecting methods. Did you know that one SPAM complaint can jeopardize your companies URL? That's right, too many SPAM complaints and your URL is toast.

Tip #40 Have Fun

Not many of us like cold calling. It's a part of this business we all have to deal with. If you hate prospecting and have a bad attitude about it you'll likely come across as a troll to the prospect. Try to keep a smile on your face and have fun. If you sound like you are having a good time, the prospect will detect that and be more open.

Tip #41 Cold Calling Don'ts

When your prospect answers the telephone don't be a Friendly Freddy. This means, don't try to make small talk (weather, sports, how's it going). Definitely don't ask them if you've caught them at a bad time. If you get voicemail don't leave a message.

Tip #42 Telephone Common Sense

Try to call from somewhere with little or no background noise. Prospects hate it when someone calls and they can't hear or understand someone they don't even know.

Tip #43 Caller ID

If you call on businesses, have your caller ID turned off by the telephone company. If a prospect sees you are calling him 10+ times a day you are going to get labeled as a sales person...or worse yet, a stalker. For consumer-based calling, turning off the caller ID is also a good idea. Consumers on the do not call list will not get your calls.

Tip #44 What's Your Edge?

What makes your service better than anyone else's offering? Identifying and effectively communicating your "edge" is key. Great customer service is an excellent edge...are you providing it?

Tip #45 Right Company, Wrong Contact

If you make a call and find out you've called the wrong person or department, turn it into an opportunity. Ask the person you are speaking with who you should call. When you follow-up with the new person, use the first person's name to add a bit of credibility... "I was speaking with Al in shipping and he suggested I call you." That sounds less like a cold call than it really is.

Tip #46 Research Your Prospect

Cold calling is easier if you have a lead-in from something you read or heard about the company. If you read in your local newspaper that a local ad agency just won an award, send the partners a congratulations note. Then you can follow-up later, re-congratulate them, and give them your pitch.

Tip #47 Research Your Prospect #2

Go online and research the backgrounds of the individual prospects you want to contact. You might be surprised about what you have in common with some of them. Maybe you worked for the same employer, went to the same college, or grew up in the same state. Anything you can leverage about a prospect's background will work to your favor.

Tip #48 Have a Little Competition

Prospecting is tough, but making it a game can lighten up your mood. Do you have other sales people in your firm? I've done this a lot during prospecting exercises and it works. Get the sales folks together and have an informal contest. Whoever gets the most leads that day wins bragging rights, lunch, beers, whatever you want to bet.

Tip #49 Measuring Prospecting Success

In direct marketing, companies often do A/B testing of campaigns. This helps them determine which of two ads works best. You can do the same with your prospecting messages. Think of two different ways you can pitch your service. Then try them out on prospects. See which one works the best.

Tip #50 One Prospecting Call Can = More Prospects

Every now and then, we luck out and get an awesome prospect from our calling. When that happens, you have a great opportunity while you have them on the telephone. Ask them who else they know who may have an interest in your offering. Make sure the initial contact knows you appreciate it. When calling the lead the first prospect gave you be sure to mention you were referred, and who referred you.

Tip #51 Data Gathering/Follow-up

When you have an interested prospect, try to gather as much information from them as you can before you end the call. Get the correct spelling of the name, email address, mailing address, title. Repeat it back to them to ensure it is correct. Send them a follow-up note after speaking with them thanking them for taking the call and restating any action items you may have discussed.

Tip #52 Don't Put Down What They Already Have

This happens a lot (it shouldn't). You find a prospect that is using another solution. Don't tell them how totally dumb they are, or how bad the competitor's service is. Instead, focus on the benefits of your service.

Tip #53 Send Me Over Some Info Blow-off

When a prospect asks that you send over a brochure or a website link that is often the classic "getting the sales guy off of the phone" routine. When this comes up, ask to schedule a time to discuss what you'll send them. This will help qualify your newfound prospect.

Tip #54 Celebrate

When you've had success with your prospecting, celebrate a little bit. Treat yourself for persevering through a tough day. I've also found that the great call can lead to another (remember the tip about attitude). If you sound like a winner who knows what you are talking about, prospects will be more likely to listen to your pitch. Celebrating will help you feel like a winner.

Tip #55 Don't Waste Your Time

Chatty Cathy's and Chatty Carl's are a huge waste of time. They'll take your calls, listen politely, and talk to you at great length. They will also never buy anything from you. As soon as you determine you have one on the call, terminate the conversation as nicely as you can. It's tempting to speak with them, but don't fall into this trap.

Tip #56 Duds & Brain Drains

I have three large companies I just refuse to call on. Over the years each one has wasted countless hours of my selling time. They have never once bought a single service from me (the typical MO is they bring in vendors, do a brain drain, and then build it themselves). Later in my career I might try again but for now they are on my do-not-call list. You should do the same if you have duds and brain drains in your sales territory.

Tip #57 When the Prospect is a Jerk

It happens all the time. You are cold calling, have your happy game face on, and someone decides to take a bad day out on you over the telephone. The natural thing (at least for me) is to fight back. That's not the wise thing to do. Instead, smile. Thank them for their time and hang-up. Then move on to the next prospect. Don't get yourself all worked up.

Tip #58 Make It a Habit

It's easy to get a couple of leads and get sidetracked. You have to push prospects through the selling cycle, but you also have to accumulate new leads regularly. Make it a goal to prospect each day.

My first sales job was selling accounting software to travel agencies. I cold called on 20-30 business owners each day, door-to-door in cities all over the east coast. My goal was to get the prospect interested enough they'd want to come to our home office and see a demo. Prospecting was hard work then and it's still hard work today, but it has to be done.

Chapter Five: It's Show Time

In sales we have to hope for the best but plan for the worst. When the opportunity presents itself for us to make our sales pitch, we had better be prepared. We should know every imaginable question a prospect will ask and every objection that could be raised.

Tip #59 Know Your Meeting Audience

Know who you are going to be meeting with. What are the roles they play? Who do they report to? How long have they been a part of the company? Do online searches of the attendee names. Find out where they have worked previously. See where they went to school.

Tip #60 Goals (Prospects)

Make sure you completely understand the prospects' goals. If they have multiple things they want to hear or see during your meeting have your contact prioritize them. Make sure you understand 100% of the prospects goals in advance.

Tip #61 Goals (Yours)

OK, we're sales pros so we all want to make a sale. In many cases you might expect to close the deal during your meeting. In others, you want to simply advance the sales process as a goal. You need to be realistic in your goal setting.

Tip #62 Bait & Tackle

Selling is a lot like fishing, we want to catch (sell) something. Good fishermen match the bait and tackle to the targeted fish. You should do the same. Match your presentation to your audience. Selling to a crew boss of an oilrig is going to be different than selling to a New York banker. This sounds simple but I've seen lots of meetings where the sales pro didn't match the bait to the fish.

Tip #63 Handouts

I bring two types of material to my presentations. In one packet I have hardcopies of the meeting agenda, the stated goals (yours and the prospects), and an outline of the material I want to cover. Everyone at the meeting gets a copy of all of these items. The second grouping of handouts is additional information for the conclusion of the meeting. It might be brochures, reference lists, and contracts. Never hand these out before the meeting or you won't be able to retain the buyer's attention.

Tip #64 Know the Battlefield

We've already covered "know your audience". Now we need to understand the real roles they'll play in our sales process. This is where a whiteboard comes in handy in your office. If you don't have one, use a large piece of paper—but forget your computer for this exercise. Draw out an organizational chart with the decision maker at the top. Then connect the others based on reporting structure. Add anything you know about each contact. This includes whether they have prior use or knowledge of a competitor's service and/or may prefer such a service.

Tip #65 Advanced Planning

Get a lay of the land. Know where your prospect is located and how to get there. I give myself an extra 45 minutes to arrive just in case of traffic or getting turned around. I also strongly suggest finding out exactly which room you'll be meeting in, because it's critical to know the layout. How many people will be in the room? How will the chairs be positioned? Will there be whiteboards or projectors available?

Tip #66 Stand or Sit

I'm inclined to stand during a presentation to three or more people. For small groups I'll sit (don't take the decision makers chair). When it's show time, you should be the center of attention.

Tip #67 Names, Names, and Names

Introductions should always be a part of the meeting kick-off. Make sure you write down the names in a way that will allow you to correctly address each person in the group. Calling someone the wrong name is a huge gaffe you don't want to commit. I usually draw a sketch of the room and mark who is sitting where.

Tip #68 Restate the Prospect's Goals

Early on in the meeting, restate your prospect's goals. It's not unusual to have a bit of goal shifting in selling situations. If the goals have changed, you'll need to readjust your meeting handouts and make sure your attendees do the same thing. That way you are all in agreement before the meeting proceeds.

Tip #69 Know the Schedule

Before the meeting you should have found out how much time you have to present. You have created an agenda based on this time. During the meeting kick-off, reconfirm with your prospects how much time is available. They may now have less time than you thought was available, or you may have gotten lucky and they may have more time.

Tip #70 Death by PowerPoint

Don't try to bore your audience to death by having too many slides in your deck. I have a maximum number of 15 slides when I present. In fact I'll try to keep it under ten slides, which I'm able to do most of the time. You might even be able to get by without any slides (think of the UPS commercial whiteboard guy).

Tip #71 Questions are Your Friend

I welcome questions during the presentation. They keep things interactive and engage your audience.. However, remember that you are in control of the meeting...don't let questions reconfigure your agenda on the fly. In other words, don't skip around your agenda to answer questions. When someone gets ahead of your outline simply acknowledge the questions and offer to address it later in the presentation.

Tip #72 Manage the Clock

Running out of time during a sales presentation happens frequently. You can reduce the risk by sticking to your own pace, not getting sidetracked, and watching the clock. Be subtle about it. I either use my computer's clock or glance at my watch when someone else is speaking and/or the attention is away from me.

Tip #73 Feature Fatalities

Don't try to baffle your prospects with feature names that simply mean nothing to them. Focus on the benefits of your service features and what they provide to customers.

What not to do: "My service provides key metrics tracking for your email campaigns."

What should be said: "My service lets you know exactly who opened your emails, how often, and who they forwarded to. Your sales guys can call on the hottest leads." Focus on the benefits.

Tip #74 Personalize Your Pitch

If you are selling to a cardiologist, don't keep referencing how well beauty shops that purchased your service are doing. You'll gain lots more credibility by referencing how others in the same market segment have experienced success with your offering. This will help you connect with your prospect.

Tip #75 Peanut Gallery & Naysayers

It's not unusual to have combative attendees in your audience. Take the high road and maintain your composure. Chances are, others in the room are used to the objector's poor behavior. They have either become immune to it or simply ignore it. You should do the same, while being professional and polite.

Tip #76 Pricing Prowess

There are lots of different ways to deal with the question, "How much does this cost?" I handle this by explaining my pricing model, without getting specific about the actual cost for this prospect.

For example: "Pricing is based on three components, upfront fee based on usage, training fee, and annual fee beyond the first year. As a follow-up to today's meeting I will prepare a formal quote and deliver it within 48 hours."

This way I keep the meeting focused on benefit selling to the prospect and not the actual cost.

Tip #77 Re-Restate the Prospect's Goals

At the conclusion of the meeting, I restate the goals that were agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting. I want agreement from the group that those goals were met. If there are unmet goals, I want to address them while I'm still in the room. If you sell over the telephone, you'll want to do the same while you still have the group or buyer on the line.

Tip #78 Who Owes Whom

It's not unusual to have a list of to-dos at the conclusion of the meeting. Towards the end of the presentation, make sure everyone involved (you and the prospect) knows who owes what to whom, and when the deliverables will actually be delivered. For example if you offered a referral, state when it will be delivered and push to schedule a call.

Tip #79 Pitching the Quote

OK, this is a good thing--you have a prospect and they want a price quote. You feel confident your service will benefit the prospect. Don't simply create a proposal including the price and fax or email it to the target. Schedule a time with the right prospect contacts, and walk them through it. Make sure they completely understand your proposal. This will make sure your quote is properly communicated within your prospect's firm or household.

Tip #80 Follow Through

Make sure everything you said you'd deliver to the prospect post-meeting is completed. How you perform for the prospect as a sales pro is often a way they measure how you'd perform as a vendor. Do what you say you'll do. Be prompt, professional, and perform beyond reasonable expectations.

Once I had a sales manager with a theory about planning...“Plan for the Worst.” He was a young guy back when the US still had a military draft. Sensing he was close to being selected, Bob decided to enlist voluntarily because he was promised a placement in a military band. Just weeks into his musical military career the band was transformed into a frontline flame thrower unit. That’s where Bob created his “Plan for the Worst” philosophy.

Chapter Six: Close the Deal

Sales isn't just about talking, we have to be good listeners too. If we do all of the talking we never give the prospect a chance to say, "OK, I'm ready to buy." If every objection and question has been dealt with, and the prospect is still engaged, it's time to ask for the order. You've earned the opportunity.

Tip #81 Do You Understand Your Prospect's Needs?

Sometimes we try to close the sale before it's fully baked. Do you really understand what your buyer's issues are? If you've taken good notes, run them by your prospect and see if they agree. If they do you've done a good job of listening. If not, find out what you missed.

Tip #82 Does Your Prospect Really Understand Your Solution?

OK, you know the buyer's issues. Now, do they understand what it is you what to sell them in order to fix these issues? Forget the features of your offering, focus on the benefits of your service. Is it a fit? Are you sure?

Tip #83 Have You Addressed Every Question or Issue?

Even the smoothest selling cycles (far and few between) have hiccups. If your prospect has raised questions or issues, make sure you have clearly addressed them...and then make sure the prospect is comfortable with your response(s).

Tip #84 It's a Lousy Economy

The ole "It's a Lousy Economy" objection. No doubt the economy does stink, but is that the real issue? Or has an uncovered objection arisen? It's my experience that budget objections often mask some other issue that hasn't been uncovered. You need to dig deeper with this prospect to find out the real reason.

Tip #85 Drop-Dead Dates. Do They Work?

They only work if they are clearly stated and you intend to stand 100% behind them. Make your pitch, communicate the drop-dead date and if that date passes, pitch a new deal. I'm no fan of discounts, in fact I hate them. But I will sometimes add a minor service to the deal to sweeten it a bit. If the drop-dead date passes, the value add goes away without impacting the original price quote.

Tip #86 Close Them Until They Ask For You to Stop

I am a strong closer, I'll ask for the deal until the prospect tells me to stop or signs the contract. I don't have any special mojo when it comes to asking for the deal, I just ask for it and keep asking and asking and asking.

Tip #87 Is it the Price or the Terms?

Price objections are as old as selling itself. Often, a prospect will object to the price, but the terms are really the issue. For example, you're offering costs \$10k upfront and \$2.5k per year after the first year. For three years the prospect is into your deal for \$15k. Maybe paying 66% of this deal upfront is the real issue. I'd pitch the deal for \$5k a year and a three-year term. If you can be flexible, you might get the deal.

Tip #88 Don't Discount While You Close

Lots of sales pros are quick to discount. Not me. As previously stated, discounts are not a selling technique I use much. If you're in the final stages of a sales cycle, why would you be discussing discounts anyway? Pricing should have been discussed before the close. If the prospect had a price objection, you would have already dealt with it. Sometimes discounts are offered late in the game because the sale pro is simply afraid to ask for the deal. They want the prospect to make a move and think discounting will achieve the first move.

Tip #89 Why I Hate Discounting

Unless it's a national account where a discount program is justified, I just don't discount. The issue is that if your service is fairly priced, you really shouldn't have to. Another reason is that buyers often talk about the deals they have with vendors (you). You'll look really bad if Client A finds out he/she paid more than Client B did for the same thing. I've been in those meetings where this topic was discussed. It can be brutal. Don't discount if you don't have to.

Tip #90 Add Value

If a prospect is that close to buying and needs a way to make themselves feel they won, throw something in (an extra day of training, or couple extra months on the subscription or whatever you can dream up without giving too much away).

Tip #91 When to Use the Boss

I used to have a sales boss who only wanted to spend time with me during the last week of each quarter (we were a publically traded company and had Wall Street expectations to manage). He'd fly into town, yuck it up with my prospects, and played the big shot role pretty well. He also was not adding value to my deal. I didn't need him. I could have used him when the real blocking and tackling was going on early in the process.

Tip #92 Buying Signals

One clear sign is when the prospect runs out of objections, questions, and other time consuming tactics. Remember good sales pros are excellent listeners. Zero in on what they are saying. When they are done talking, go for the close.

Tip #93 Is Your Contact Really the Buyer?

Have you ever had a feeling that your guy, is not really "the guy"? It's happened to most of us especially in large companies. You settle in with someone who claims to be the final decision maker. Later, you get the sick feeling in your stomach that you've been played. They may be an "influencer" on the deal, but they are not the decision maker. Early on, really get an understanding of who is going to play each role.

Tip #94 Going Around Your Guy

If the deal has stalled and appears to be going cold I might leapfrog my contact. In some cases it could be akin to bridge-burning, but it's your call to make. I've done it many times, some with great results, others that came back to bite me.

Tip #95 Know the Buyer's Calendar

It stinks to count on a deal closing only to find out your prospect is gone for two weeks on vacation. As you build a relationship with your prospect keep updated on the status of his or her calendar. You'll have no problem getting that information if your sale has been baked properly.

Tip #96 Competition Woes, Johnny Come Lately

It happens. I hate it, but it happens. You are close to a deal and wham, up pops a last-minute competitor. You have to remain cool and confident at times like this. If you know your service and market, you'll likely be well-equipped to handle the situation. It's a crappy spot to be in, but stay in control of your emotions.

Tip #97 Know When to Give Up

Sound familiar? You are focused on one deal that has etched a permanent place on your sales forecast. Sometimes we have to know when to drop a prospect and just move on. It hurts because of the level of effort involved in selling. But in the long run you'll feel better about making the decision to move on.

Tip #98 I'm in the Neighborhood

Have a deal teetering on being a closed deal? Get in there and pick up the signed order form. Some of my favorite sales memories are bringing home the signed order form for a new sale. It's much better than a fax or an overnight delivery. I simply call my prospect, tell them I'll be in the neighborhood (even if it means driving all night across three states – don't laugh, I've done it) and bring them the paperwork.

Tip #99 Done Deal

You've just picked up your order (or received it). Immediately make sure every initial mark and signature line is completed correctly. There is nothing worse than having a signed deal held up (you don't get paid) because the paperwork is not correct. Take the time to check the order is in order before celebrating. .

Tip #100 Say Thank You

My handwriting is really, really bad. However, it doesn't keep me from writing thank you notes to my new clients. I write each member of the buyer's team I interacted with. You'll be amazed at how much clients appreciate the effort you've made (bad handwriting or not).

When I was a sales manager I regularly accompanied my direct reports on sales calls. I used to cringe when obvious buying signs from the prospect were not identified by the sales representative or worse yet, ignored. That of course provided a coaching opportunity, but I'm sure many sales have been lost because the sales professional didn't know when to close the deal.

First Bonus: Getting Past the Gatekeeper

Gatekeepers in business-to-business sales are common. They can be administrators, lower level managers, or paranoid switchboard operators. It can happen in business to consumer sales, too (think spouses or close friends). They are a part of selling and most sales professionals are just not good at dealing with them. If you can flip one from adversary to asset, you are going to see dramatic results in sales efforts.

Bonus Tip #1: Do Your Homework

Do you know the target's bio? What Boards do they serve on? Who serves on their Board? Who else do they know? Find a connection such as a board member who is an executive of an existing client, or member of a Board of an existing client.

"Hello Mary, we are currently working with XYZ company and your board member Jim Smith also serves on XYZ company's Board. I would like to schedule 15 minutes with George to share the value we are bringing to XYZ and how ABC Company can achieve similar results."

Bonus Tip #2: Use the Gatekeeper for Specific Initiative

You'll add a lot of value in the eyes of the gatekeeper if they believe you know what you are talking about. Try this approach.

"Hello Mary, I was referred to George, but I am certain he is not the person whom I should initially be speaking with. We are working with companies such as (Name 1 or 2 similar companies you are working with). Would you be able to direct me to the appropriate person within George's organization that would handle this initiative? Great, would you mind transferring me to her?" If you get transferred, he (or his admin) will see the call coming from the CEO's assistant and will certainly pick up.

Bonus Tip #3: Voicemail Can Work (Sometimes)

If you are transferred and end up in voicemail, DO leave a voicemail stating your reference from Mary in George's office. The person receiving the voicemail doesn't know you cold-called their company. They only know that the bosses' gatekeeper referred you to them and you are likely to get a call back.

Bonus Tip #4: Block your Phone Line!

Yes, many people think execs won't answer blocked calls. Wrong, they often answer thinking it is a call they may be expecting.

Bonus Tip #5: Call When the Gatekeeper Isn't There

This includes earlier in the morning, lunchtime, and late afternoon or evening. These are times that the gatekeeper is less likely to be there. I have done a lot of serviceive selling at 7am weekdays, and on Fridays after 5pm. Your prospect is going to be impressed that you call before or after traditional working hours.

Selling to an owner or executive in most companies is going to require going through a gatekeeper. Early in my sales career, the approach I used in dealing with gatekeepers was akin to driving a bulldozer through a nitroglycerine factory...not pretty. I hate to think about how much I cost myself by not knowing the correct way to work with (not around) gatekeepers.

Second Bonus: Quick Pitch Builder

We all need a fast sales pitch. Whether it's for cold calling, trade-show prospecting, or other opportunities, you need a well written and rehearsed quick pitch about what you are selling. It doesn't get any easier than this.

Fill In the Blanks

I work with: (your client market), who struggles with: (common client issues) and who would like to: (client's goals).

What separates me from: (my competitors) is that I: (your value proposition) and as a result my clients get: (why your clients love you).

Here is an example:

I work with retirement plan companies who have a hard time generating sales leads to grow their businesses. They want a results-driven marketing agency that doesn't damage their reputation. My solution is unique because my database contacts recognize me as a trusted source of relevant industry information. As a result, my clients receive high-quality sales leads and the database contacts learn new ways to improve their retirement plans.

About the Author

Kevin Adams is the Founder of ASKTRA and has 15+ years of experience running a small business. He earned a BA from DePaul University focused on Business Management graduating Phi Kappa Phi. In addition, he received an MBA with graduate honors from Regis University.

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