Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC

Do I Have the Right Client Relationships?

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Go ahead—just ask a lab salesperson how important relationships are to their business success. Most everyone will say, "*Well…. let's see now*. *If you deduct political ties, hospital/corporate ownership, managed care contracts, ACO directives and anti-compliant schemes—relationships are everything*." Indeed, it's frustrating for sales reps to increase business within their territory when dealing with "uncontrollable circumstances." The one option remaining is to foster effective customer bonds—and it's essential for two primary reasons: (1) it provides protection against marauding competitors and (2) it helps secure new business. In other words, you win now—you win later.

Reps instinctively think they develop strong ties with customers. They don't give rapport-building specific, conscious thought—it's their inborn personality to "be friendly and out-going." However, it's the *other* side of the equation that looms higher in magnitude: how each *customer* regards the sales rep. Many field staff's opinions of how their customers view them are frequently higher than their customers' actual opinions. The goal for the rep, however, is to strive for the highest level: to be thought of as a *trusted partner*.

This paper addresses the psychology behind relationship development and offers suggestions on how to accomplish it in a business setting. In the end, the reader can ask him-herself: *do I really have the right client relationships? Is there anything I can do to bolster any of them*?

"I Have a Terrific Relationship With All of My Accounts and Prospects"

In my over 40 years in the reference lab industry—the majority in sales management—I have heard all too often a salesperson explain to me they have *wonderful* relationships with their accounts. This is where the phrase, "the devil's in the detail" shines in the spotlight, because the relationship level will certainly vary with different customers.

First, let's choose a specific client and a certain individual with whom the rep ostensibly has a "wonderful" rapport. Is it with a physician, the office manager, the person preparing lab specimens, the front desk person, a nurse, or a medical assistant? It stands likely that someone doesn't have a tight bond with everyone within a particular client (office-size dependent). From a business perspective, it's possible that *could* matter. Sociable sales representatives frequently cast a wide relationship net within their accounts and prospects simply because it's within their DNA to do so—and it's also strategically important to do so.

Secondly, considering this ostensible tight bond the rep claims to have, how does that *employee* regard the field person? As mentioned previously, the rep may intuitively decipher a client's feeling in a different way from what the contact person thinks (e.g., "wishful thinking").

Third, building a strong, credible relationship with the decision-maker—in addition to those that have high influence—should be an essential ingredient in a field rep's strategic recipe.

Fourth, what barometer does a field person use to know the rapport with their contact is "tight"? The rep knows the name, title, job responsibility and (hopefully) degree of influence of his contacts, but what background profile does he/she have on these individuals? What are their favorite books, movies, food, vacation spots or hobbies? When is their birthday? Also, does the marketer have this kind of dossier on others that are influential? And, most importantly, does the sales rep *act* on any of this knowledge through conversation and/or interesting articles? This is central to creating good relationships.

An Important Component: Sharing

When fostering business relations, you have to ask yourself what you know that is particularly important and unique to certain people. You can't guess or always believe exactly what someone else tells you. The key is what they, *themselves,* have told you. This sharing process truly creates power within a relationship.

Assume an office manager casually remarks she enjoys photography as a hobby. You subsequently search for an interesting photography article on-line (or magazine) or an intriguing picture. During the next encounter you share it with the client ("*I was thinking of you when I saw this.*") Sending a birthday or get-well card also carries significance in rapport building. The more a rep can uncover personal preferences and background data from the decision-maker and highly influential staff members, the greater the possibility to perform unselfish acts. Doing this establishes an interesting dichotomy: the more you give, the more you gain. Doing (or saying) something thoughtful is not a one-time event—it should occur at periodic, common sense intervals.

There needs to be a word of caution. In the lab industry a field rep must be knowledgeable in the topic of compliance. There is no suggestion the marketer should give anything of financial benefit to a client. Building customer rapport should be a prime objective—but accomplished with professionalism and within compliance guidelines. There is a professional way to go about it—the opposite of which is a manner that appears awkward and self-serving (possibly even annoying).

Effective Actions

The problem many sales reps face is the fact prospective customers steer clear of devoting time talking to a competitor lab marketer because there's no need—there's nothing wrong with the current lab service. Instead of immediately turning around and exiting, the field rep should routinely hand out their business card and, perhaps, a nominal giveaway (e.g., a company pen). At the same time (and in future visits), the marketer can leave an appropriate medical topic (e.g., a description of a test or methodology, a brief journal abstract or a CDC/OIG announcement). Best practice is to write a short note to the recipient at the top of the page (e.g., "*I saw this, and I thought it would interest you*"), sign your first name and attach your business card. Most everyone has an appetite for learning or reviewing a topic (irrespective if it is a current customer or prospect). Being perceived as a conduit for education (i.e., adding value) formulates a good strategy for creating credibility.

A *service*-focused seller leans more toward the egocentric side because his/her sales conversation fixates on closing the sale. A *collaborative* representative, alternatively, starts with recognizing that the client's *interests* are of paramount importance. Clients can easily sense the difference between these two approaches—and it's quite evident which tactic the customer favors (and with whom they would prefer to do business).

Climbing the Relationship Staircase

The "relationship staircase" reflects six levels you can have with another person (ascending from the bottom).

People who value a relationship with you
People who respect you
People who are friendly with you
People who like you
People who know your name
People who do not know you

The last two steps endure as the most challenging and time-consuming to achieve. Many business relationships sit at the "like you/friendly with you" stage. However, successful sales representatives yearn to progress higher, and they do so through their industry knowledge, asking insightful questions and performing unexpected, caring actions (including off-hand conversations). There are eight general areas a rep can uncover from key personnel in order to learn what someone treasures. It must be mentioned, however, that not everyone wants a relationship with a vendor; consequently, people may not feel comfortable giving out personal information. But, if the situation allows—and over time—the following themes are some suggestions:

1. Important dates
2. Special interests
3. Important people
4. Important goals

5. Major events
6. Favorite foods
7. Schools attended
8. Important places

Making a kind gesture or having a chat doesn't always produce immediate results (it may not produce *any* results), but it demonstrates interest in the other person. Most everyone has an invisible tattoo on his/her forehead that says, "Make me feel important." In fact, the longing to be appreciated is *the* most deep-seeded human-nature principle. Using this understanding in a business setting will do wonders to strengthen rapport.

What's In a Name and a Smile?

A field rep should remember to mention the contact's name during conversations. Our name is the most important sound we hear, and, when interjected appropriately within a conversation, it's a gesture of respect. But be cautious—don't over-use it, because it sounds false and "creepy." Occasionally saying someone's name not only "sweetens" the dialogue, but it will cause the contact person to want to remember (and possibly use) your name. If the customer reciprocates, you have spontaneously increased rapport.

The other suggestion is to smile. Think for a moment when you notice a baby smiling. This automatically conduces a similar, positive reaction from you! As such, you should intermittently use a real, heartwarming smile that comes from within—not an insincere or mechanical grin. There stands a long-held truism: salespeople that smile commonly tend to be more effective.

Losing *And* Winning Business

There exist numerous reasons why a physician's office will switch allegiance to a different laboratory. Barring political power plays and questionable compliance schemes, it distills down to two primary elements in successive order: (1) what's best for the office practice/patient care and (2) the client's emotional quotient of the incumbent lab and its field person. In a state of exasperation, the client simply expects service and/or result quality deficiencies to be immediately corrected (i.e., Point #1). But Point #2 may come to bear, because it involves the element of human compassion. The highly-valued field rep (or internal lab employee) can rescue the account through timely and effective resolution. However, if problems persist, there stands a risk the customer will shift his business elsewhere.

As an antipodal position to this adverse business scenario, there exists a tangential point: the representative can *gain* a new customer by (a) how a customer respects and values a lab rep (or someone working at the lab), (b) what kind of improvement will be made by changing labs (e.g., improved connectivity function, better communication, etc.) and (c) how much they feel there is a certain degree of collaboration with a *trusted business partner*. It has been said that—in situations where lab choice exists—at least *50%* of a client's decision rests with their opinion of the vendor *and* the associated individual with whom they consistently interact. This is no less important when it comes to up-selling. If a customer divides lab work between several vendors (using arbitrary reasoning), it's quite possible to have more specimens channeled to the "better relationship" lab.

"I Admit—Some of My Relationships Aren't As Good As They Could Be"

If the reader concedes there are accounts where the rapport is questionable, there is usually one (or combination) of four probable reasons:

(1) Some personal background information has not been shared between the rep and a highly influential person or decision-maker.

(2) The marketer hasn't acted on that knowledge (at least nominally through conversation).

(3) Not much (if any) in the way of additional business information has been provided that the client has found beneficial.

(4) The client doesn't intuitively perceive the field rep (or, possibly, the lab) as a strategic business partner.

Summary

Many lab field reps intuitively feel they have good relationships with most all of their clients. However, it's prudent to step back and evaluate strategic customers and prospects. Do you have an honest sense how your contact person views *you*? Where on the totem pole of lab decision-making does this person sit? Is your relationship with one or several key employees? Is there an opportunity to build a more robust connection with the final decision-maker and those that possess strong influence? Here is something to consider: if the field rep is asked to provide *customer* references regarding his/her performance and general personality, how many *decision-makers* would they feel comfortable indicating on the list? Hm-m-m… …now… let's see…

A field rep and the manager (or lab owner) may not consider allocating time to micro-analyze the personal associations within significant current and prospective accounts. But, it is widely accepted that having strong customer relationships translate to significantly higher account retention—*and* better future sales performance. As the axiom goes: you win now—you win later.

*Peter Francis is president of **Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC**, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional and productive representatives. He has written over forty articles on the subject of laboratory sales. Visit the company's web site at www.clinlabsales.com for a complete listing of services.*