Five Critical Selling Skills for the Laboratory Sales Representative

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Representatives hired to sell clinical lab services require a special skill-set. In order to elevate themselves into the master-class arena, they need to know a variety of aspects: a deep understanding of how billing and health insurance coverage works, compliance, knowledge of transport supplies, familiarity of selected tests, what assays are of interest to certain specialties, various connectivity options, test methodologies, good territory management—all of this in addition to rock-solid selling skills. This paper will concentrate on five critical selling skills.

Skill Number 1: ***A Sales Process***. From time immemorial, salespeople understand intuitively that there are two basic components to sales: strategy and tactics. Within each category lies a course of action that the representative works on to lead his prospect toward a close.

Strategy translates into the process one uses to lay out the moves in advance—a carefully defined and detailed plan to achieve a long-term goal. The astute marketer knows he must place himself in the right place, at the right time and in front of the right people in order to make an effective proposal. It means knowing who all the key players are, how they feel about the rep's lab, how they feel about the incumbent lab, and knowing the strong and weak points of the competition. A portion of strategy also pertains to understanding the influence of each contact person and what constitutes the decision-making process.

The *tactical* aspect refers to the face-to-face application—a technique used to achieve an immediate or short-term gain. The master class representative knows cold the four basic components of a tactical sales call: preliminaries, investigation, demonstrating capabilities and obtaining commitment. Contained within these divisions are a myriad number of sales components that, when done properly, separate the excellent representatives from the average.

Skill Number 2: ***Pre-Call Planning***. Failing to have a valid reason to visit a client produces a variety of negative aspects for the company, the salesperson and the customer. The impact on the company could be (1) an extended sales cycle, (2) a reputation for hiring unprofessional representatives and (3) missed opportunities. The impression on the customer is (1) confusion, (2) wasted time and (3) no differentiation. Finally, the effect on the salesperson means (1) disorganization, (2) loss of credibility and (3) turning into a "professional visitor."

Credibility rises exponentially when the sales representative adds *value* to the business relationship. To add value means that he/she must plan ahead and develop a legitimate reason for wanting to see the client. When the marketer demonstrates knowledge that will help the client perform their job better, save them time, improve productivity, reduce errors, and/or enhance patient care, they are taking the right steps toward being respected and valued by the customer.

Skill Number 3: ***Investigating Skills***. Almost every sale involves employing a number of questioning techniques. Some of the more important ones are:

1. C*onfirmation* questions to validate your understanding of what you think is true.
2. *New information* questions that give you knowledge of the customer's situation (e.g., draw in-house, accepted insurances, decision-making process, final decision-maker, influencers, connectivity, billing, etc).
3. *Problem* questions that provide understanding of what the customer views as current issues.
4. *Consequence* questions that take a problem the client feels as small and turns it into a problem large enough to justify action.
5. *Solution-based* questions that develop the positive elements of the solution that you offer.

Developing the client's needs during the investigation part is the *sine qua non* of successful sales. Therefore, improving investigation skills is *the* most important skill to work on. It will help activate more business. Period.

Skill Number 4: ***Presentation Skills***. Using features such as, "We have 12 pathologists on staff to meet all of your needs" equate to low-wattage statements. Positive things happen when the sales rep ties a benefit to an explicit client need. It is one thing to say, for example, the pathology department of your lab offers a wonderful benefit, despite the fact the client has not expressed any true need for pathology consultation. The story becomes very different, however, when the customer states that the doctor has run into problems getting through to a pathologist. The account, especially the decision-maker, buys *benefits* that will help him/her, the practice, the patients and/or other individuals in the office. Presenting characteristics of the lab service (i.e. features) typically does little else than bore the customer. He/she must link features with benefits, especially following a situation in which there has been an expressed need.

Skill Number 5*:* ***Gaining Commitment***. Most sales professionals assert that closing skills are the most important aspect of any sale. Indeed, closing *is* important in the overall scheme of the sales process, but, as stated in Skill Number 3, it falls behind good investigating.

What, exactly, does "closing" mean? A close represents *anything* that puts the customer in a position involving some kind of commitment. It could be a commitment to set an appointment with the physician or it could be a commitment to start sending a particular test to a new lab. Most field reps feel that closing means, "getting the business." In reality, it depends upon what defines the initial objective. If the representative's commitment objective for the call is to request a copy of the client's test mix, and the client complies, then he "closed" for that objective.

Psychology research has found that in relationship-building sales (as opposed to a small sale where little relationship forms between buyer and seller), closing techniques—like all forms of pressure—become *less* effective as the decision size increases. If a sales rep asks a potential customer to make a very small decision, the prospect would rather say "yes" than to have an argument or feel embarrassed by walking away. Consequently, with a small decision, pressure appears to work. However, this is *not* the case with large decisions, such as choosing a primary laboratory. Inexperienced sales people may feel that closing techniques *cause* the prospect to say, "Yes, I'm going to use your lab." In fact, the way a sales person *develops the customer's needs* frequently leads to a positive outcome — not how slick he/she displays trite closing techniques.

There are four successful actions that a salesperson should engage to arrive at an opportune moment to close the sale:

1. Give special attention to the investigation and demonstrating capability stages during the sales call. At the center is building a client need that your lab can address.
2. Check for basic issues. Successful salespeople take the initiative to ask if there are any further concerns that need addressing.
3. Summarize the benefits. Before moving to a commitment, the good representatives summarize key points (benefits) of the discussion.
4. Propose a commitment. Rather than ask, *suggest* the next step. Many sales books and courses state that the salesperson should solicit the order: "Would you like to try our lab starting this coming Monday or the following Monday?" However, research has shown "asking" is not what a successful sales rep does at the point of commitment. Instead, he tells—or suggests—an appropriate next step. As an example, after the representative has checked for any lingering concerns and has summarized the key points, he/she might say, "Then I might suggest that the most logical next step would be for this office to try our lab by directing a few patients to our patient service center." Telling a person (or proposing) to do something is a more natural and effective method to conclude a call.

In summary, developing into a successful laboratory sales person requires a significant amount of dedicated study and hard work. Besides the obvious of learning the ins-and-outs of the lab, the competition, billing and so forth, practicing the skills listed in this article will help the sales representative improve his/her performance.

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