



Of Socrates Sold Lab Services

Part 1

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Socrates, the Greek philosopher, lived from 469 BC to 399 BC. At around 2,400 years ago, he became a master at something withstanding the test of time — asking questions as a means of persuasion. Huh? Socrates could persuade extremely effectively — and he wasn't even considered a salesman! With this great facility of persuasion, we need to consider what it would have been like for Socrates if he had sold laboratory services.

Before getting into the specifics, let's take a look at what may typically happen within a client/rep interaction — especially a first-time visit by an inexperienced sales representative whom we'll name John. He's calling on an office manager named Betty. She works for Dr. Johnson, an internal medicine doctor who also has a nurse and two front office staff.

John: *“Nice to meet you, Betty”*

Betty: *“Nice to meet you, John. What are you selling today? I don't have much time, as I'm in the middle of an important project involving a patient's insurance.”*

John: *“Oh, OK. I'll be brief. As my card states, I am with Acme Laboratory. Here's a marketing piece showing our capabilities. As you can see, we are a full-service clinical lab, offering next day turnaround time with high quality results. Our Client Services Department has an excellent reputation, and you can easily reach our pathologist in case the doctor has questions. We have a courier who can pick up your specimens, and we also have several convenient Patient Service Centers. We offer on-line requisitioning and result reporting. Our lab provides the necessary specimen supplies. We accept most all insurances. I was hoping this office would like to give my lab a trial run to see how it compares with your current lab service. By the way, what lab does Dr. Johnson use?”*

Betty: *"We use ABC Lab with whom we've been doing business for quite a while. Their service has been fine. I see no reason to change lab vendors now — they give us all of the same attributes you mentioned. Thanks for stopping by the office. I'll keep your card and literature for future consideration in case we become disenchanted with ABC Lab."*

John: *"I see. Well, OK then. Thanks for seeing me today. I'll see you later."*

If Socrates were sitting in as a manager on this sales call, he would be jumping out of skin with frustration! Let's see what might happen if Socrates, himself, made this call on office manager Betty:

Socrates: *"Nice to meet you, Betty."*

Betty: *"Nice to meet you. I have only a few minutes. What are you selling today?"*

Socrates: *"Actually, I'm not selling anything today. My card indicates I'm with Good Lab but, because this is our first meeting, I only want to ask questions to get some background on your office and the labs you use."*

Betty: *"That's OK. What would you like to know?"*

Socrates: *"First off, what lab would you consider as your primary lab?"*

Betty: *"We use ABC Lab as our primary, but we also use DEF because of one contractual insurance obligation."*

Socrates: *"Is there anything ABC Lab obliges you to use them? I'm thinking of things such as hospital ownership, EMR connectivity or donation, friends with a pathologist..... those sorts of things."*

Betty: *"No, we're independent and have no ties to any other institution or laboratory."*

Socrates: *"Tell me, Betty, how long have you been using ABC as your primary lab?"*

Betty: *"I guess it's been about 5 years now."*

Socrates: *"What sold you on using them in the first place?"*

Betty: *"Well, let's see..... as I recall we were having specimen pick-up issues from the previous lab. The sales rep from ABC stopped in on the right day because we were pretty upset. A number of samples had to be re-drawn because of that fiasco."*

Socrates: *"I see what you mean. So, should I assume things have been satisfactory since you changed to ABC? Or have there been any problems along the way?"*

Betty: *“Oh, sure. We’ve had our little issues, but the lab fixes them, and they get back on track.”*

Socrates: *“Can you tell me about these ‘little issues’?”*

Betty: *“It’s been things like duplicate reports, an occasional missed test, waiting on hold for Client Services, a billing problem every now and then... those little itch-it things. But, frankly, the only thing bothersome with any regularity is waiting on hold for Client Services. The rest moves along fairly well. I mean, they pick up, and we get our reports. It’s pretty basic stuff.”*

Socrates: *“You mentioned ‘waiting on hold’. How does that affect your staff’s productivity?”*

Betty: *“Well... it does bog one person down occasionally. We have a busy practice, and I need my staff doing their regular jobs — not being held up on the phone with the lab.”*

Socrates: *“How else does waiting on hold impinge on your staff’s productivity?”*

Betty: *“Sometimes if it’s a nurse on hold, and the doctor needs her, it causes frustration on both people’s part. One time, the nurse had to give the phone to our receptionist because the doctor needed her right away. As I recall, it created a commotion — not to mention resentment toward the lab.”*

Socrates: *“Would you find it more productive for your staff if they didn’t have to wait on hold for extended periods?”*

Betty: *“Why, YES, of course! But I’m sure no lab can promise that kind of service. I mean, who doesn’t have to wait on hold? It’s just the way businesses operate these days.”*

Socrates: *“You’re right, Betty. It would be hard to guarantee no wait times. But let’s keep this thought for a second, because there’s something else I want to ask you related to this subject. When you call your lab, do they have a recorded auto-attendant answer the phone, requesting you to push certain buttons for various departments like Billing, Couriers, Supplies, Client Services and so forth?”*

Betty: *“Sure do. But we’ve come to accept it as doing business. I mean, very few companies have someone who actually picks up the phone when you call. It would be novel to work with a vendor who doesn’t have a recorded answering message!”*

Socrates: *“I know what you mean. But we take personalized service very seriously.”*

Betty: *Oh? You mean your lab has a receptionist answering the phone?”*

Socrates: *“Absolutely. Personalized service is part of our company’s DNA — we take great pride in it because most of our larger competitors do not offer it. So, let’s return to the other issue you mentioned about waiting on hold. I have something here you might find interesting. Our lab monitors the in-coming call hold time statistics each day. We calculate the median so by the end of the month, our lab can show a daily average of hold times. I have a copy of last month’s statistics..... as you can see, we averaged 12.7 seconds for hold times. However — a great deal of the time — our clients connect through immediately without any waiting. When you take into account our personalized service and minimal wait times, do you see those as improvements over the service you receive from ABC Lab?”*

Betty: *“Why, yes, I see what you mean. But, I’m not ready to go through the hassle of changing labs just because of wait times or someone answering the phone.”*

Socrates: *“I understand, Betty. But just keep these operational and strategic benefits in mind, because there are other unique aspects of our lab as opposed to the service you get from ABC Lab. I’d like to build a “benefit bucket” so, during our subsequent discussions, I can make deposits. In addition, part of my responsibility acts as an educator to keep clients and prospective customers current on lab-related issues. It could be a new test, a more sensitive methodology, an update on clinical practice guidelines, changes in ICD.9 codes and so forth. May I stop in again at another time to keep you and the doctor abreast of these developments?”*

Betty: *“Sure, Socrates. You can stop by when you’re in the area. I must admit the feeling around here is all labs are pretty much the same. But you have already explained a couple of differences we’ve never really considered.”*

Socrates: *“Betty, I hear similar comments all the time. But, I can assure you there are many contrasting aspects of our lab you and the doctor might find interesting. As I said in the beginning, I’m not here to sell you anything today. We don’t know each other, and I am more interested in first building trust between us. I want to find out your situation before I spout out all kinds of — what you may consider — parity or worthless features. I understand you have limited time today. Thank you for seeing me. I’ll give you a call before I stop in the next time to see if you have a few minutes to talk about ways in which my lab can benefit you, the office and the providers.”*

Commentary

You can easily see why Socrates had a better outcome than John.

Let’s first consider John’s scenario. He did a number of things wrong, not the least of which was — right away — pushing Betty to think of *future* events (i.e., using his lab). But, it’s the *past* that Betty knows, and she (like most prospects) is not ready to think about the future (especially when things are going relatively smoothly with the lab). Notice John immediately handed out a general capabilities brochure as he began his

presentation. He will eventually learn not to give *anything* to a customer while he proceeds to talk. Betty was distracted between his presentation and the brochure and, thus, did not give serious attention to either! Also, John presented his lab's services without finding out anything about the office practice — i.e., the past. He had no idea what was important to Betty (or the doctor), so he might as well been a circus barker, blurting out features to anyone who will listen. For all intents and purposes, Betty was bored by John's approach, so her immediate reaction was to express her contentment with their current lab and get him out of the office. Finally, notice John suggested a "trial run" of his lab services, but quickly followed it with a question — a poor sales technique.

After the call, John felt satisfied with Betty's answer of keeping his card and literature on file. He reported back to his sales manager: *"I had a nice exchange with Betty at Dr. Johnson's office. While the office appears to be happy with ABC Lab, Betty kept my information and thanked me for stopping by. This is a good sign, boss, and I think I've got a good strategy with this client. I hope they eventually have problems with ABC because it will put us in a good position to get our foot in the door."*

Hmm-m-m-m..... sounds like John does not know the words "strategy" and "hope" should not exist in the same frame of reference.

Now we turn to Socrates. Out of sixteen times he spoke to Betty, more than two-thirds of the time he asked a question. Was Betty eager to get rid of Socrates? It didn't appear so. The questions were focused on her situation. He began the visit by stating a clear objective: he was not there to sell *anything* but to be the seeker of information. He knew it would lower the invisible — yet always present — defensive sales shield.

One of the first things Socrates did was to *qualify* the account by asking if there were any ties to another laboratory or organization such as a hospital. This is a key point, because it immediately helped Socrates understand the political situation. He knows that when politics and emotion are at play, everything else becomes secondary.

Take note that, as with most sales encounters in the laboratory business, clients typically say that "everything is fine — there is no need to look at alternatives." However, Socrates took what appeared to be a "little issue" and got Betty to build it up into a larger-than-initially-thought situation. He did not immediately blurt out a solution (something inexperienced sales reps typically do). Instead, he asked *consequences* of the hold times, which, in turn, forced Betty to re-think the problem. In addition to the operational benefit of minimal hold times, he also brought up a strategic benefit: more personalized service when answering the phone. In the end, he asked her a solution-based question to gain her buy-in of the two benefits as being an improvement over the current situation. While she agreed, Betty was not at the "tipping point" — yet.

Another relationship edge Socrates knew was to occasionally interject Betty's name in the conversation. People love to hear their own name; infusing it into the dialogue added a positive psychological personalization to the exchange.

Socrates talked about a “benefit bucket” — a good metaphor that says more “good stuff” will be added. He knew there are three types of benefits — operational, strategic and political — and he hit on two out of three. He allowed the dialogue to flow naturally, yet respected Betty’s time. Socrates emphasized he wanted to build a business relationship, something many marketing people fail to verbally express or even think about when visiting a prospect for the first time. Customers find it novel and refreshing when vendors create an atmosphere of wanting to get to know them and help them as opposed to John’s inexperienced approach of sell, sell, sell.

Finally, Socrates asked permission if he could stop by again. Nascent marketing people often forget to make this request. This stands as a psychological advantage, creating an additive effect on a relationship. Rarely will people tell a sales person to never return. Receiving permission equates to a “baby step” toward developing a stronger rapport.

The one thing Socrates did not do — which he should have — was to get some form of “movement” or “advance” from Betty. This strategy, when done correctly, helps to engage the client more into a joint venture environment. By asking Betty to do something, irrespective of how small it may be, it affirms a psychological willingness to work together. Oh, well.....our man Socrates is not perfect!

Summary

Long before this sales call, Socrates came to the realization that being inquisitive offers many advantages. He understood that asking questions demonstrates his interest in the client — and that it also creates a balanced discussion. Another principal point: questions uncover hot buttons. And, most importantly, he realized questions *persuade* better than any other form of verbal behavior. The reason is that people value more what *they* say and their *own* conclusions *more* than what they are told by someone else.

The American poet, e. e. cummings, laconically said, “*Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.*” Had Socrates and Mr. Cummings lived in the same time period, Socrates would have held him in the highest regard, probably carving that axiom in stone! Questioning techniques remain as important today — if not *more* so in business — as it did more than two thousand years ago.

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this series.

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