



Of Socrates Sold Lab Services

Part 2

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In Part 1 of this series, we observed John, an inexperienced lab sales rep, ramble through a presentation to an office manager named Betty. While this office (Dr. Johnson's) had no major ties of ownership or EMR connectivity, Betty did not appear the least bit interested in evaluating a different lab service. Overall, the office remains satisfied with ABC Lab as their primary vendor, despite a few minor inconveniences occurring infrequently.

Following the bland and inept discussion with John, Betty perfunctorily agreed to see another lab representative called Socrates. This gentleman took a far different approach with Betty. He demonstrated his knowledge about his own lab and of the competition. Socrates was also very inquisitive, knowing that asking the right questions at the right time stands as the key to the sales process. Before he left Betty the last time, he told her he would call to set up another brief meeting. The following conversation ensues once he arrives at the office:

Socrates: *"Thanks for seeing me again, Betty. I appreciate your time."*

Betty: *"No problem, Socrates. As usual, I have some matters I am attending to, but I'll give you a few minutes. I'll make it clear, again, we're happy with ABC Lab, but I think it's a good idea to know what else is out there in case of a major problem, forcing us to make a switch."*

Socrates: *"Indeed — a good philosophy. The last time I was here we talked about a couple of differences between ABC and my lab. In summary, it was the fact our lab takes a very personalized approach to customer service. Another difference is our minimal — if at all — hold times for Client Services. You agreed both of these attributes seemed to be an improvement over your current lab service."*

Betty: *"You're right, Socrates. I feel both aspects are different than what we're used to. But, as I said before, we're not looking to change labs right now because the office is basically content with ABC's service overall. I don't want to build any false hopes with you."*

Socrates: *"I certainly understand, and I'm not expecting anything right now. I still consider myself in the "get-to-know-you" stage. I need to uncover some additional points about your practice. For example, how long does ABC Lab maintain their results in the computer before being archived?"*

Betty: *"I think it's about a month."*

Socrates: *"Have there been times when your office has had to retrieve a report older than 30 days?"*

Betty: *"On occasion. Someone calls the lab and makes the request, and then the lab sends it over the fax machine. It's no big deal."*

Socrates: *"Would you agree it would be more convenient to get it off the computer as opposed to spending time waiting on hold to speak to someone?"*

Betty: *"Well... sure..... but, we're just accustomed to handling it that way. Why do you ask? Does your lab hold results in your system longer than 30 days?"*

Socrates: *"In fact, we do. We have them accessible up to a year! All it takes is a few key strokes to retrieve a report. Do you see it as a potential time-saver for your staff and, in essence, improving your staff's productivity?"*

Betty: *"Yes, I guess that would be helpful in a small way."*

Socrates: *"I would define this as an unrecognized problem now being brought to light with an unanticipated solution."*

Betty: *"You're right — I never thought of it as a problem until you described a better solution."*

Socrates: *"I'm going to put this operational advantage into my benefit bucket for later consideration. So far, my bucket contains two operational and one strategic benefit. I know you're busy, Betty, but I have one more area I'd like to investigate. How many times does your ABC courier stop by your office?"*

Betty: *"Our lab guy stops by in the early afternoon — I think it's around 1:00 or 1:30 PM. And then he returns just as we're closing."*

Socrates: *“Does the courier drop off your early specimens at the lab before he comes back for the last pick-up?”*

Betty: *“Gosh, I really don’t know. I just assume they do — but, now that you mention it, no one has ever told me if they do or not. We initially asked for a twice-a-day pick-up because it’s what we had with our previous lab. ABC accommodated our request.”*

Socrates: *“From what I have been told from other clients in the area, the courier does not return to the lab because it’s located so far away. The cost of gasoline — as well as the time it takes — does not make it feasible. You can certainly check with your driver, but I would be surprised if he made a special trip to the lab. Assuming he doesn’t return, it begs the question: why bother having a pick up at an earlier hour if the samples are just going to ride around in the courier’s car for the rest of the afternoon?”*

Betty: *“You’re right. It doesn’t make much sense. I’ll check with our pick-up person to see what happens to our specimens.”*

Socrates: *“This is another basic difference I’d like to point out. When I meet with prospective clients, I tell them up front when they should expect their specimens to arrive at the lab. If so happens we also offer an early pick-up. But, the difference is our courier for this area returns to the lab around 3:00 PM. This means all of the specimens get processed immediately —bloods, cultures — just about everything. Tell me, Betty, do you know when the lab has preliminary culture results available?”*

Betty: *“Sure. It’s the following afternoon sometime.”*

Socrates: *“Has it ever caused a problem with patient care?”*

Betty: *“I guess you wouldn’t call it a problem, per se. It’s just what we’re accustomed to.”*

Socrates: *“Do you think that offers optimum patient care? I mean, in the grand scheme, isn’t getting the correct antibiotic to the patient as soon as possible what the doctor would like to do?”*

Betty: *“Oh, sure. Quickly administering the right drug is ideal. Dr. Johnson is just accustomed to taking care of it later the next day.”*

Socrates: *“This is where our strategic benefit of processing your samples in the afternoon comes into play. Our microbiology techs plate your cultures immediately, allowing for preliminary results much earlier than the next afternoon. This means Dr. Johnson can initiate the appropriate antibiotic sooner, providing excellent care. Do you think Dr. Johnson and your patients would appreciate that sort of benefit?”*

Betty: *“Well... I suppose so. I never really thought about being able to get prelims any sooner than we do now.”*

Socrates: *“Betty, I describe this as another unrecognized problem — and combining it with another unanticipated solution. My other clients appreciate it when I offer this type of business insight. I want to add this benefit of earlier preliminary results to my benefit bucket. This is the kind of strategic basic difference that can impact patient care. And, speaking of which, I have another illustration of helping improve care to your patients. If one of your patients has a grossly abnormal result — say a PT-INR — when does Dr. Johnson hear from the lab?”*

Betty: *“It’s the next morning.”*

Socrates: *“Do you think Dr. Johnson appreciates being notified of a critical abnormal result — such as a PT-INR — as soon as possible?”*

Betty: *“Oh, absolutely. After all, a test like that can save a patient from excessive bleeding.”*

Socrates: *“This is the point I want to make: because we return to the lab in the middle of the afternoon with a good portion of your specimens, we have results for the routine and important tests —like PT-INR, glucose, and electrolytes — before you close your office for the day. This, in turn, allows us to give Dr. Johnson a chance to act on the information immediately. How do you think that would improve the doctor’s patient care?”*

Betty: *“I can see how that might have an impact in certain treatment situations. I guess it’s almost like having a STAT test result.”*

Socrates: *“I’d like to also place this in the benefit bucket, Betty. There are additional advantages I would like to go over with you and Dr. Johnson, because they involve medical topics. Can you help me get an appointment with Dr. Johnson?”*

Betty: *“He normally doesn’t see reps — too many patients to get through each day. But.... let me talk to him, and I’ll see if I can get an appointment for you to speak with him for a few minutes.”*

Commentary

Socrates interacted with Betty eighteen times — and fifteen of them involved a question. Some of the questions were directed at discovering an unrecognized problem. There will be more on that topic later.

He began his reintroduction by summarizing the benefits of his previous call and restating Betty’s agreement they were an improvement over her current lab service. This

is important because it put a positive note on the beginning of the conversation. Betty remained steadfast in her situation that she was basically happy with ABC Lab, and she was not interested in making a lab change. But, Socrates continued to lower the sales defensive shield by explaining he wanted to better understand their situation, giving the impression he was not necessarily try to sell her anything.

Socrates began by inquiring about the length of time ABC holds results in their system before archiving. He already knew the answer from his competitive intelligence, but he did not say anything — he wanted Betty to tell him. He *asked* her if retaining results up to a year was a time-saver, to which she agreed. This is where he threw in the term, *unrecognized problem*, and then offered an *unanticipated solution* — two strong selling attributes. It was not an earth-shattering ah-hah moment for Betty, but it was one more difference, making a positive impact on the entire discussion.

Socrates knew his lab offered several advantages due to its proximity, as opposed to ABC Lab who was located many miles away. Instead of blurting out his lab was closer, he aimed the conversation towards his competitor and inquired about any additional pick-up times. He knew his lab was at parity of having an earlier stop, but Socrates didn't say anything about it. Instead, he honed in on another basic difference — processing lab samples at a much earlier time of day, giving way to improved turnaround (and thus, with a benefit of improved patient care). But, a very telling comment came from Betty when Socrates asked her if she was aware if her driver returned to the lab before the second pick-up: “...*I just assume they do.*” Socrates jumped on that by stating he was not aware they did, based on comments of other ABC clients. This created an ah-hah moment for Betty. He then asked the simple, yet obvious question: “...*why bother having a pick up at an earlier hour if the samples are just going to ride around in the driver's car....?*” This questioning — and Betty's subsequent realization — also casts somewhat of an aspersion on ABC — why wouldn't the rep or the courier explain to them there are no benefits to making an earlier pick-up? Is the only reason because they want to be competitive with the other labs? It's on the verge of making the client appear silly for having two pick-ups but with no resultant benefit!

The credibility of Socrates is starting to build!

Staying on this strategic location benefit, Socrates pointed out the fact his lab processes specimens continuously, offering better turnaround time. This, especially, has patient care ramifications. But Socrates does not tell Betty this — he *asks* her if Dr. Johnson and his patients would appreciate that kind of benefit. He talks about preliminary culture results and receiving critical test values at an earlier time than currently happening. Again, he gets Betty to acknowledge a positive statement about Socrates' lab — and this remains psychologically important.

The conspicuous rule Socrates followed relates to uncovering a “dormant” or “unrecognized” problem. It stands as a state or source of difficulty in which the

customer is not fully aware. In essence, our astute salesperson aimed to show Betty there *are* differences that *mean* something to the practice. He explained the alternatives and better solutions compared with what the office currently receives through ABC Lab. But — and here's an important point — Socrates does not jam information down Betty's throat. He provides *insight* through questioning — and there is a huge difference between *information* and *insight*. Socrates has a wide range of experience with a number of customers and prospects, and he understands the problems that typically plague them (even unbeknownst to the client). He feels Dr. Johnson's office has become complacent about their lab service; they really do not know any better because, "...*that's the way it's always been...*" according to Betty. Socrates attempts to create the "ah-hah" moment. Betty begins to take notice because, as Socrates says, it "...*involves better patient care and improves office productivity...*" — two *very* hot topics in a doctor's office.

One final point: Socrates got the sale to advance because he asked Betty to do something for him: help him get an appointment with Dr. Johnson. He knows the optimum way to create a joint-venture approach is to ask the client to perform some task, however small it may be. As we saw in the first meeting, Socrates failed to do this. Like everyone, he's learning.

Because Socrates deposited more advantages into the benefit bucket, Betty was more amenable to get him in front of Dr. Johnson. We'll examine that conversation in Part 3 of this series.

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