



## *Of Socrates Sold Lab Services*

### *Part 3*

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In the first episode, we observed an inept sales representative, John, make a sales presentation to Dr. Johnson's office manager, Betty, about his "me-too" lab service. She was unimpressed with his lab's offerings. Besides, the office was generally content with ABC Lab.

Socrates entered the picture, and Betty was willing to listen to his presentation as a courtesy. He used a much different approach than John — more professional and very inquisitive. Socrates exposed problems Betty did not feel were issues at first glance; but, once they were discussed in more detail, she understood the problems more vividly. In effect, he revealed "unrecognized" problems and described "unanticipated" solutions. Socrates categorized his solutions into *strategic* and *operational* benefits, helping to paint a clearer picture. He described a "benefit bucket" into which he placed these advantages.

In this episode, Betty schedules an appointment for Socrates to meet briefly with Dr. Johnson. This stands as a good move for three reasons: (1) Socrates could speak directly with the provider about medical aspects of his lab, (2) it demonstrates Betty felt it was important enough to have Dr. Johnson involved and (3) it shows a form of *action* on Betty's part, as opposed to the verbal interaction with Socrates, which might keep going .... and going .... and going with no end in sight.

Socrates' commitment objective for this up-coming meeting is to have the doctor agree to a trial run of using Good Lab.

We pick up at the initial part of the meeting with Dr. Johnson:

**Socrates:** *“Nice to meet you, Dr. Johnson. As Betty has already mentioned to you, she and I have had a couple of discussions about your ABC lab service. I am certainly prepared to talk about my lab, but if you can give me your perspective on what you expect from a good laboratory service, we can focus this brief meeting on your needs and interests.”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Well.... that’s a first! I don’t see reps very often, but if I do, they usually do the talking — and I don’t recall anyone asking me what I thought about a certain product or service. Well, let’s see here .... ABC Lab. I guess it’s about four or five years I’ve been using them as my primary lab. They’re pretty reliable — they pick up and have my reports available usually the next morning. They call me with critical results. I would say, in general, things are going smoothly from my point of view.”*

**Socrates:** *“I should first recap one of the things I explained to Betty in our first meeting — that we take customer service very seriously. We work hard at minimizing wait times on the phone because we understand the effect it has on our clients. In fact, we have a person answering our phone as opposed to most other labs who have a recorded auto-attendant. Our clients tell me they appreciate our personalized service. What’s your opinion on that?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“That is rare these days. I see your point. What else makes your lab so different from ABC?”*

**Socrates:** *“We have many differences, but I don’t want to reel them off because a number of them may not mean a thing to you. I need to find out what’s important to you from a patient care point-of-view. For example, Betty mentioned you get your preliminary culture results faxed to you the following afternoon. Do you find that optimum for your practice or would you prefer an earlier result?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Well, it would be better to have it earlier, but the afternoon is what I am accustomed to. That’s the way it’s always been. You can’t rush a culture — those little critters have to grow, you know.”*

**Socrates:** *“I certainly understand. But, the difference lies in the time of day a technician plates your cultures. As you know, Good Lab sits right here in town, and your lab — ABC — is about an hour and a half away. While it may not appear to be much difference, it can be a big discrepancy when it comes to things such as processing your patients’ samples. Our courier can collect your specimens in the early afternoon and return to the lab by the middle of the day. Because we set up routine testing immediately, we can plate your cultures right away, allowing for early preliminary reports. ABC Lab receives your specimens in the evening, and by the time the Microbiology Department begins to plate cultures, the clock strikes mid-night or later. This could translate into 6 or 7 hours difference between the two labs..... which means,*

*with my lab, your patients could be treated much earlier than they are now. Do you think they would appreciate that kind of medical care?*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Yes. I would say so.”*

**Socrates:** *“And one more thing, Dr. Johnson — you would have a competitive advantage over the other area doctors who use ABC. What are your thoughts on that?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Hmm-m-m-m. I see your point. It’s always good to have a competitive advantage. I never really thought the lab I use could offer any kind of leverage for me. That’s a good point. So..... what else differentiates your lab?”*

**Socrates:** *“How does your rep keep you informed of changes in the lab, such as new tests, methodology changes, or clinical practice guidelines?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“As Betty probably told you, I usually don’t see representatives due to my heavy schedule. I don’t even recall his name. I ask Betty to talk to him when he stops in. I’m not sure how often that is, frankly.”*

**Socrates:** *“This may, in fact, be a significant basic difference between the two laboratories. Do you feel it’s important to know about changes in lab medicine?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Well.... sure. But things don’t change that often with the lab. I mean, I’ve been using the same basic lab tests for years, and I only order tests when I feel it’s clinically relevant or when I do an annual physical.”*

**Socrates:** *“I don’t doubt that, Dr. Johnson. That’s a responsible approach to practicing medicine. My point is this: lab medicine does change with fair regularity. Not only could it be the introduction of a new test, but also a new methodology that offers greater sensitivity and/or specificity. Besides testing and methods, manufacturers develop new and improved transport supplies. In addition, the various medical associations, including the CDC, continually update their recommendations. For example, there is a proposed new algorithm for HIV screening. And, the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases has very recently developed guidelines on testing for food allergies. The point I am making is that I can be a resource for you to keep you updated with changes not only with laboratory medicine, but also with clinical practice guidelines. How do you think this may impact your practice?”*

**Dr. Johnson:** *“Yes, I see your point. It can be a distinctive factor for me. Do you have anything in writing about this new HIV algorithm and food allergy testing?”*

**Socrates:** *“Yes, in fact, I have information in my office, and I’ll be happy to bring it to you, since you expressed interest.”*

**Dr. Johnson:** “Good. I’d like to see it.”

**Socrates:** “There are other examples I can briefly share with you that help you with patient care. I mentioned before about changes in methodology. Let me ask you, have you had a time where you strongly suspected a C. difficile infection, but the C. diff results came back as negative?”

**Dr. Johnson:** “Oh, sure....it happens every now and then. I guess the method is not very sensitive. Why do you ask?”

**Socrates:** “Good Lab has been performing C. difficile testing for many years using the standard EIA methodology. However, we have recently changed to a state-of-the-art qualitative PCR assay. This has a much higher sensitivity than the typical enzyme immunoassay. Do you see that benefiting your practice?”

**Dr. Johnson:** “Well.....yes, I guess so. I’d like to see some clinical papers on this subject. It’s good to know you offer the more up-to-date method. I must admit, it puzzles me when I see a negative result, because my clinical suspicion — in some patients — tells me C. diff is the causative agent of diarrhea. I usually end up repeating the test — sometimes more than once.”

**Socrates:** “This is simply another example indicating how I can be a valuable support to your practice. Most people regard a lab as just a lab — simply an organization running tests and returning results to the provider. But, Good Lab provides far more than a routine service. We give our clients value — and that’s what I promote. It distills down to the question: Who would you rather use — a lab acting in a simple transactional manner or a local lab that sees the relationship as a joint-venture, keeping you informed of related topics?”

**Dr. Johnson:** “Hmm-m—m. You have given me something to think about, Socrates.”

**Socrates:** “That covers a number of things separating Good Lab from ABC Lab — attributes demonstrating both strategic as well as operational benefits. Before we go further, may I ask if there are any areas you feel I need to cover?”

**Dr. Johnson:** “I think that’s it for now. I may have some later follow-up questions. I’ve got to get back to seeing my patients. Thanks for stopping by.”

**Socrates:** “Allow me to briefly summarize some of the benefits I have discussed with you:

1. We offer a very personalized service, not only when your office calls the lab, but also through me as your personal representative — someone who keeps you informed of the latest in lab testing.

2. *We minimize phone wait times for your staff, allowing them to be more productive and do the job they're supposed to be doing.*
3. *Due to our local presence, Good Lab can process your patient's specimens during the day, allowing for better turnaround time. It also can be impressive for your patients — and it helps distinguish your practice from other doctors in the area using ABC Lab — giving you a competitive advantage.*

*I'd like to propose the next most logical step is for your office to give Good Lab a try. There's no firm commitment — just try us for a few patients to see how we do. If it looks like there stands a good fit, we can expand the relationship over time."*

**Dr. Johnson:** *"Sounds like a plan. I will tell Betty to work out the details with you to give Good Lab a trial run. We'll see where it goes from there."*

After Socrates left the office, Dr. Johnson commented to Betty, *"You know, that's the first time I can remember where I thought I was satisfied with something, but someone got me thinking otherwise. He asked a number of good questions. He talked my language."*

Like all good sales representatives, Socrates performed a mini-critique of how things went after he left the office. His commitment objective was to get the doctor to designate some specimens to Good Lab for a trial run. Mission accomplished. He could have done a better job, he thought, of asking Dr. Johnson if there were any pressing issues about his lab. Instead, Socrates allowed the doctor's comment of *"...things are going smoothly..."* as an indication there weren't major irritations with the lab service. In addition, Socrates recalled he asked a number of "closed" questions in which the client could have replied with a yes or no answer. He knew that using "open" questions would have been a better technique, allowing the client to expand his thoughts. Overall, however, he was pleased with how the conversation unfolded.

### Commentary

Socrates interacted with the doctor fourteen times — and all but three of them involved a question. Notice, too, that Dr. Johnson asked Socrates four questions throughout the discussion, imparting a sense of interest.

The doctor was impressed and surprised at Socrates' first comment: *"I am certainly prepared to talk about my lab, but if you can give me your perspective ....."* This statement offered a couple of important points. First, it demonstrated Socrates was prepared. Second, he used the word, *perspective*. The aim was to get a dialogue underway, so hearing someone's viewpoint equates to a terrific method to generate conversation. The doctor immediately understood the meeting was about *Dr. Johnson* — and from where he sat, it meant the priorities were in the right order.

Take note of Dr. Johnson's perfunctory — yet common — attitude toward his lab: "*They're pretty reliable.*" For those who sell lab services, people hear words of satisfaction most of the time. However — a BIG however — prospects do not use a checklist about points with their lab service. He/she may forget a particular need or simply not realize an important issue. Therefore, Socrates asked questions *corresponding to strategic strengths of his lab*. He honed in on *unrecognized* problems and provided *unanticipated* solutions. In essence, he brought to light a little whirlpool under the placid water, helping Dr. Johnson think about specific subtleties of his practice. Socrates understood he needed to create more than just rational reasons for using his lab. He wanted to bring *emotion* into the picture. Thus, he discussed (1) the lab's locale (with associated benefits) — a rational component, (2) improving patient care — a rational and an emotional aspect, and (3) a competitive advantage over other area providers — a creative comment that highlighted another emotional element.

One interesting point — Dr. Johnson did not know his lab representative's name. This did not escape our astute salesperson, and it indicated no strong personal ties stood in the way for Socrates.

Socrates stated how most people feel about labs — they are all the same. While the doctor did not say anything, he was probably nodding his head internally with agreement. However, Socrates immediately blasted through that thought with his statement: "...*we provide far more than a routine service.*" He asked a rhetorical question, "*Who would you rather use — a lab acting in a simple transactional manner or a local lab who sees the relationship as a joint-venture....?*" This was a very rational, yet provocative, question — no doubt, poking intensely into Dr. Johnson's mind ("Yeah..... that does make sense. Why am I using a lab who doesn't offer more?").

One might argue the point that Socrates should have immediately provided the supporting medical papers on the superiority of the *C. difficile* PCR method and the updated clinical guidelines. However, Socrates felt that, in order to continue the process of building credibility and trust, it would be more effective if he returned to the office. It would help to differentiate himself by offering a valid business reason when asking for an appointment. This is in contrast to other lab reps who drop in on a casual basis with nothing important to say and needlessly usurp the staff's time in the process.

Now, the "close." Socrates proceeded through three important steps: (1) he asked if there were any additional questions, (2) he summarized the important points and (3) he suggested the next step. Note he did not *ask* for the business — he *proposed* the idea of a trial run. Socrates knew effective salespeople do not ask for the business, they *suggest*. It has a stronger psychological push.

## Summary

Over 2,400 years ago, Socrates developed a method of persuasion one could classify as “low-pressure selling” — specifically, asking questions instead of telling. Through inquiry, he led people to their *own* judgment, because he knew individuals value *more* what *they* say and their *own* conclusions as opposed to what someone else tells them.

In a world in which most people are happy with their lab service, Socrates knew he had to guide prospects to unveil things they hadn't thought too much about because, as stated in our scenario, “...*that's the way it's always been.*” Did Socrates work for a mega lab that offered a wide range of services? Hardly. But, he thoroughly understood the differences of his laboratory over the competition. He recognized that if he was going to be successful, he could not wait for ABC Lab to falter. That could take years, if at all. No — he “worked” the differences to a win-win outcome by asking questions — and listening. Socrates' motto became, “Questions Are the Answer.”

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