Situational Fluency

By
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I was recently invited by a diagnostic laboratory industry company to present at their yearly conference. The topic they asked me to elaborate on was what makes a master-class laboratory sales representative. In so many words, why do some sales reps win new customers more often than others?

As I reminisced vis-à-vis my 42 years of being in the reference laboratory industry, I thought about those select top sales winners that reported to me—and I reflected hard about what made them persistently successful. I also considered a number of representatives that were not consistent stars as a corollary to that notion.

<u>Situational Fluency – The Difference</u>
The term *situational fluency* aptly describes what top-producing sales reps strive for in their day-to-day client interactions. It refers to fundamental, fluent and supporting competencies that constitute a professional salesperson's ideals and general aura.

1. *Credibility*
It is certainly no secret that good salespeople must establish credibility with their customers and prospects. This *sounds* so fundamental, but my postmortem client discussions following their switch to a different lab (notwithstanding political reasons) has sometimes yielded a different story: the decision-maker and/or highly influential staff member(s) held a marginal credibility feeling and rapport with the field rep. On the other side of the spectrum, those clients that embraced their rep because he/she was visible, helpful and credible tended to maintain their relationship with the lab—irrespective of service miscues.

Most people define credibility as "integrity"—i.e., someone who demonstrates honesty. But, integrity exists only as the root of the tree. Adding to integrity stands *intent*, *competence* and *results*. While integrity is static, these additional "above-the-ground" concepts equate to situational circumstances. If, for example, a prospect perceives your intent as too aggressive, your credibility will take a nosedive. If you come across poorly prepared or unknowledgeable about your lab's capabilities, it also impacts your credibility. And the same holds true if you promise something and subsequently don't deliver on it. Again, keep in mind that these three constituents—intent, competence and results—are *situational*. Integrity is binary. You either have it or you don't.

I have noticed excellent sales reps concentrate on heightening their credibility by doing these things:

- Ask insightful questions
- Educate clients (supplemented with informative hand-outs)
- Concentrate on learning about their own lab and the competition
- Concentrate on expanding their industry knowledge (e.g., test names, brief clinical background, disease states, billing, connectivity, etc.)
- Follow through quickly and competently with both client and company requests/obligations

2. *Knowledge*
Master class representatives have a thirst for understanding the client's situation (i.e., *situational knowledge*). They also want to have *capability knowledge* of their own lab. This includes not only lab tests, but also the many facets of lab operations, courier routes and protocols, transport supplies, test methodologies, turnaround times, IT connectivity, billing, and—most especially—the competition. Successful reps take all of this capability knowledge and mash it up against the competition. It is from this punctilious comparison that makes constructive differentiation possible—and mandatory. I've noticed average salespeople speak in "glittering generalities" about their lab's comparative distinctions. Sales winners, however, dive deep and get granular.

It also should be stressed that most top-producing representatives have a yearning to learn the clinical aspects of the job (relative to the type of testing their lab performs). Because we are dealing within healthcare, it remains clear that those who sell a lab service should have a broad understanding of common disease states and associated tests. General clinical knowledge helps to skyrocket credibility when a field representative talks-the-talk. I've witnessed it in action. It works.

3. *People Skills*
It's obvious that field representatives need to communicate in a friendly and professional manner. One aspect of this I have noticed from very good representatives is that they occasionally use the person's name during a conversation. Our name is the sweetest thing we hear—it's simply a human predisposition to respond (or think) positively when someone speaks our name (bringing a sense of "warmth" to the discussion). Certainly, you don't want to over-use this tactic, because it sounds phony and creepy. But, mentioning someone's

name once or twice within a discussion can be very helpful in building rapport. As an encouraging sub-point to this, using a person's name may produce a reciprocal effect: people sometimes feel inclined to say (and remember) your name, as well.

Some of the typical characteristics I have noticed with reps that possess good people skills are:

- They have a sincere desire to assist others in the pursuit of goals.
- They "tune in" to the feelings and needs of others and treat people accordingly.
- They work at managing relationships and building networks in order to maximize rapport.
- They create an environment of trust and credibility and are consistently approachable.
- They not only use *rational* explanations, but also bring *emotion* into the conversation.

Books have been authored on the subject of interacting with individuals. Just read Dale Carnegie's 1936 book, *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. Even though it was published over seventy-five years ago, many people consider it a bible within the sales discipline.

4. *Selling Skills*
Selling skills are taught and learned—they are not something a person is born with (thus, refuting the phrase, "*He's a natural-born salesman*"). Everyone knows that top sellers are friendly, outgoing, persuasive and likable. But, these attributes, by themselves, do not always make a top-ranked seller.

Selling skills include devising a strategy and employing appropriate tactical efforts. Considering strategy first, sales winners aim to improve their questioning skills by asking relevant questions, taking notes and listening carefully. They know that initially babbling about their lab's wonderful attributes is contrary to an effective sales technique.

Within the "strategy" section is a sub-item called Basic Differences. Many people within a client's office hold a commodity attitude about labs. But highly skilled representatives aim to challenge that concept. They understand that differentiation is one their most important strategic and tactical activities. They know that an effective way to highlight their lab's strongest benefits is to *back-track* by asking questions.

A less successful tactical conversation might go this way: "*You know, we offer a special test called the serum porcelain assay*…..", and the client subsequently thinks, "*So what?*" The more appropriate way is to back-track into the basic difference by asking, "*Does the doctor see patients that present with ABC symptoms*? (Assuming the client agrees), *Our laboratory offers a test that helps to differentiate ABC from XYZ* *disorder.*" Asking questions raises the customer's awareness of a particular kind of need, and it creates client curiosity (client curiosity within a sales call is *always* a good thing!).

I have conducted research over the years by asking office managers, healthcare providers and other support staff what they look for in a lab vendor. Within the hundreds of responses there evolved three distinct areas:

1. Keep us informed of what's new and different
    - New tests, methodologies, medical abstracts—all designed to improve patient care
    - Non-medical information such as compliance guidelines, local market intelligence, etc.
2. Help make things convenient for the office staff, the doctor and our patients (e.g., quick resolution of issues, connectivity options, billing protocols, pick-up times, etc.).
3. Help us control healthcare costs.

I should hasten to add that the last bullet point does *not* specifically mean—in client billing situations—proposing low prices.   There are other ways to show how your laboratory addresses cost-savings, such as providing test algorithms for certain diseases, interpretive reporting, on-line requisitioning, non-invasive testing and so forth.

When top-notch sales reps scour their lab for basic differences that fit into any of these three categories, they are well on their way to demonstrating a collaborative effort to help the client. Relating basic differences *challenges* the customer's assumption that all laboratories equate to a commodity.   What you are doing is "reframing" a typical perception about labs. You are saying, "*I understand your world, and I'm not here to waste your time*."   It cuts right to the chase and honors the customer's time—and it shows you've done your homework. In other words, you've established yourself as a professional; someone worth talking to.

When framing the conversation, you *must* use supporting material during your basic difference discussion. Talk is cheap. Discussing clinical abstracts, Office of Inspector General (OIG) Fraud Alerts, CDC information, test algorithms, new assay or methodology marketing collateral, test report formats, lab-generated statistical reports—all of these examples remain essential in differentiating not only your lab, but <u>you</u>, personally.   It's more than delivering a presentation—you're forming a *compelling story*.   And, as noted earlier, you should employ both rational *and* emotional examples within the tactical discussion (e.g., things that pertain to good patient care).   Logic, alone, is usually insufficient to overcome the status quo.   It's best to combine logic with emotion. Emotion sells.

I'd like to share a quote from an office manager I once spoke to as a final point. This particular office in the Midwest had used their primary lab for a number of years, and it became apparent through conversation that the sales representative was very strategic in gaining and maintaining this customer. The office manager told me the following about their lab rep, Steve:

> *Whenever I meet with Steve, I feel like I learn something. He always brings useful information when he stops in. In fact, when he first started calling on us, he told us that his visits would usually include an educational piece that would be of interest to the doctor or the office. He made it his job, and he <u>still</u> does, to <u>add</u> to our business relationship. Oh, sure—we can get a simple transactional lab service from any area lab where they simply pick up specimens and transmit our reports into our EMR, but that's just a commodity—anyone can do that. We've never had such a collaborative relationship with a rep or a vendor. That's why we selected his lab. We appreciate his visits, because we know he won't waste our time."*

I have noticed sales winners perform in the same way: demonstrate their personal value-add *during* and *after* the sales process. In a way, it's like they're not selling anything. Their aim is to build credibility and to differentiate their lab with each encounter.

5. *Attitude*
Top ranked salespeople are always willing to work with clients in a spirit of openness and transparency, and they always act with the client's best interests in mind—first.

This kind of attitude may represent a different outlook from less savvy sales reps. A sales person that is product/service-focused considers "success" to be the sale. "*I'm close to getting this client. There are one or two things they're getting from their current lab that we don't offer, but I haven't said anything about it. I say, 'damn the torpedoes'—I really need to score this sale.*" A collaborative seller, however, starts with an attitude that the client's interests are of paramount importance, even if that means honestly telling them his/her lab cannot meet specific points. It's having a *collaborative attitude* that makes the difference. In the long run, these are the reps that earn lasting trust, loyalty and repeat business from customers.

<u>Summary</u>

Situational fluency translates into a combination of *<u>credibility</u>*, situation and capability *<u>knowledge</u>*, people and selling *<u>skills</u>* and *<u>attitude</u>*. Top-producing reps constantly seek to improve in all of these areas because they understand how effective—and necessary—these components are in their day-to-day customer interactions.

Many labs claim they train new hires, but their characterization of "training" is primarily an on-boarding initiative (i.e., touring the different departments, meeting the supervisors, reviewing the CRM tool, IT connectivity, sales forms, etc.). Indeed, these things are very important aspects. However—irrespective if the rep comes with industry experience or not—training should also comprise a basic overview of how the laboratory expects the field representative to strategize and present him/herself in front of customers. There needs to be a balance of training and development for situational and capability knowledge along with role-playing for selling skills. Everything should be taught and practiced from the way they open a sales call, the background information they collect and the insights they share with customers. A constant effort to improve upon *situational fluency* is what I've noticed make top-producers consistently stand above the rest.

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.*