



Social Norms

A Sales Rep's Best Friend

By
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It's widely known people primarily shape their behavior by the actions and manners of those around them—what behavioral scientists call “social norms” or “social proof.” In particular, people become motivated by their desire to conform with the group, especially if it's a group with which they identify. Another less formal term endures as the “herd theory”, because of the way many animals travel. Think about cows in a pasture for a minute. Sometimes a cow will start slowly meandering across the field, and other cows will follow. If, metaphorically speaking, one of the followers happens to speak English, and you ask her why she walks with the others, she undoubtedly would say, “*I'm moving in this direction because everyone else does.*” Irrespective if we're talking about a herd of cows, a school of fish or a flock of birds, the conduct remains the same. The direction of some can significantly influence other individuals in a group.

Social norms have existed throughout time, and commercial advertising executives have taken advantage of this. We see ads throughout the day and night for goods and services that attempt to motivate us by showing how “everyone else” benefits from a certain product.

Credibility – Popcorn Style

We all know the unmistakable sound of popping popcorn. The metaphor of this activity relates to naming references with a certain amount of fast-paced commentary. Client names should sound like exploding popcorn when confidently reciting an impressive customer list. My experience indicates many salespeople name maybe two accounts in the area, but then their “popcorn stops popping.” You can boost your skills by memorizing a list of “herd” references (say 5, 6), thereby establishing greater credibility and authority. The best way to enrich your “popcorn credibility” translates to improving your recall. You want to easily enumerate client references from memory—and it's simply a function of *practice*. It will be even better if you include the city with the account name. When done properly*, it's impressive, and your credibility will take several steps forward in a single bound!

*A word of caution: you, obviously, don't want to bore the customer as if you are reading from a phone book! You have to gauge the situation and client interest. The point is, mentioning account names and towns in *rapid succession* can produce an effectual portrayal of your lab's penetration.

Specifying names like popcorn popping connotes not only the definitive implementation of social norms, it stands as an excellent demonstration you know your business *really* well.

Using Percentages

Some laboratories send (or drop off) customer questionnaires to gain honest feedback on various aspects of their laboratory (courier, reporting effectiveness, turnaround time, result quality, client services, billing, field rep value, overall satisfaction, etc.). Naturally, not everyone responds; but, of those that do, tallying each section's score conduces to an important job. Assuming your lab receives high grades (especially in "general level of satisfaction"), you can use this percentage as another way of conveying popular opinion. *"In this year's client survey, X% rated our laboratory as excellent in overall experience."*

Additionally, if you market within an area in which you have a high percentage of customers, you can say, for example, *"X% of the _____ specialty in this town use our lab."* Social norms become most compelling when people see evidence that other offices—just like them—use your lab.

Leveraging The Herd—And More

It's the old story of "safety in numbers." This brings up the crucial question for a prospective customer: *"Would you like to know why we have so many satisfied clients?"* What's happening here divides into three fractions: (1) you are leveraging other clients (i.e., the "herd"), (2) you build credibility and (3) it generates *curiosity*. Whenever you engender client curiosity about your laboratory, well.....need I say more?

Objection Handling

In my training classes I have traditionally taught the *feel, felt, found* methodology for handling an objection. Here's how this technique works. When a prospect raises an excuse/objection, the sales rep acknowledges the concern by saying, *"I understand how you feel about ____ . Some other clients have felt the same way, but here's what they found when they started using my lab"* This technique has been used for many years by sales professionals and works fairly well. The problem exists when, reciting it exactly like that, it allows realistically for a one-time event. Otherwise, using it twice or three times (even at different visits with the same client) produces a scripted, broken record speech—hardly the positive impression you want to give!

Slightly modifying your approach can make a difference. Social proof accomplishes the same objective but becomes more substantial for the listener. I should state unequivocally that first empathizing with the client (*"I understand how you feel about...."*) clearly prevails when handling an objection. But, when you move into the "felt" section, you can let them know that _____ and _____ had a similar concern (i.e., not simply generalizing). Then ask, *"Would you like to know what they did to ensure their success?"* Most people will say yes. Rather than sound like you're "selling", you're letting them know somebody else had similar thoughts before they finalized their decision (it's especially effective if you name more than one account). This positions you as the *messenger* and not the "sales message."

Summary

During the sales process, you need to aim for two important components: (1) credibility and (2) a sense of momentum. You accomplish this objective by employing social norms. Since time immemorial, it has always been easier for people to follow the crowd, and that's why leveraging social proof becomes such a powerful strategy. You *challenge* the prospect's thinking by reassuring them they are, indeed, moving in the right direction (and minimizing risk).

Practice memorizing your "herd" roster so there is no hesitation. Make it an impressive length and include the town. Depending on the circumstance, it may not be appropriate to mention every name, but your client list transmutes to "arrows in your quiver."

Using percentages—if they're good numbers—allows for another good motivational methodology. People easily relate to numbers.

Building curiosity distills into the *sine qua non* of selling just about anything. Using social norms exploits this, especially when you ask the question, "Would you like to know why all of these clients are so satisfied with my lab?" If they say *no*, you have a crystal clear understanding of your position (more specifically, with that particular individual)! But, in most cases, human bias pries people's curiosity—and they say *yes*. In this case, the client has just handed you a golden opportunity!

As a post-script: even if your sales territory places you in a brand-new geography for your lab, you can still employ social norms by saying something like, "In the _____ area, X% of _____ specialty use us (or, "we have _____ number of clients"). Our business initiative involves transferring the same high service levels to physicians in _____ (city)."

The message stands very tall: every sales rep's tool kit should include insights into the power of social norms.

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