



Backtracking Into Basic Differences

By Peter Francis
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Over the course of more than 40 years involved with selling and promoting laboratory services, I have occasionally noticed some sales reps' faux pas. A common one occurs when a field person has an opportunity to speak with a provider or an office manager. Perhaps due to nervousness, inexperience or lack of training, the rep begins by providing a "features dump" of their various laboratory aspects. This may not be surprising because he/she knows that time is (usually) limited, and blurting out a number of features may create customer interest, and, therefore, may gain some traction within the conversation. Here's an example from John, the sales rep from ABC Lab, talking to an office manager:

"Nice to meet you, Mary. I know you're busy, so I'll be brief. I'm sure you've heard of our laboratory—ABC Lab— because we provide excellent lab services for other clients in the area. Some of the things that I've been told why our customers like us is that we offer reliable 24 hour turnaround time for routine testing, and our client services department always calls immediately with abnormal results. We also have three convenient drawing centers, and patient feedback has been very positive about the short wait times. Our lab offers a broad test menu, which ultimately improves turnaround time. I should add that we have the capability to interface into any electronic medical records very quickly. Finally, we can bill most insurance companies directly.

Let me ask you: What kind of issues are you experiencing with your current laboratory?"

To some readers, John's description may sound appropriate, because it offers—within a short period—a global description of the lab's key services. In addition, John ends with an open question, obliging the customer to react. However, some readers may shake their heads and whisper, "*This is a classic example of what not to say. Sales people from any full-service lab could utter virtually the same thing! It all sounds so..... so vanilla.*" I agree.

Basic Differences

Every laboratory has basic differences over their competition. However, when I was a *de novo* field rep in the industry, my strategy was to stumble on a potential customer who was upset with some aspect of their lab service. After all, I believed my laboratory offered essentially the same thing as everyone else: pick up specimens and report routine testing the following day. It's very simple. It's very transactional. I quickly started to realize that underlying this elementary arrangement of pickup-and-delivery sits a world of differences, and the client's selection of a laboratory rests on discrepancies—even very subtle ones—between one lab and another. As my competitive juices matured, I realized that if I couldn't figure out a way to differentiate my laboratory, the *client* would do it themselves—or with the help of a skilled competitor. Stopping in at the exact moment to find an irritated customer produces a shotgun, non-strategic approach—and it requires sheer luck. Yes, it happens, and it's like hitting the lottery when it does. But my boss expected me to make my quota each month, and I was not in the “sheer luck” business!

Knowing Your Lab—And Your Competitors

Successful field people know their laboratory inside and out. This includes lab operations (e.g., testing menu, certain methods, various departments, turnaround time, etc.), billing, IT connectivity, courier logistics and supplies. Indeed, this is a tall order, and it demands significant time and effort to grasp all of this concentrated intelligence. On the other side of the sales equation, sales winners possess almost a mirror image of these segments for each competitor—allowing the art of differentiation to blossom. Skillful reps attain this knowledge through observation (in the field and website), asking clients and reviewing the competitor's sales collateral. Simply calling the competitor for certain generic information is another investigational mode.

Obtaining Good Client Background Information

In the fictional John/Mary scenario outlined earlier, a sales issue surfaces because John initially started rambling on the subject of his wonderful lab. He didn't ask Mary (at first) about implicit or explicit needs. Naturally, any portrayal about lab services presented this way will most often fall on deaf ears. In fact, it's *detrimental* for the representative, because it compromises his/her credibility from the start! Assuming the client doesn't initially express a need/problem, the only way to create an effective strategy is for the rep to ask insightful questions to (a) gain important client background information in order to construct an appropriate strategy and (b) discover recognized *and* unrecognized needs. Throughout this questioning process, the representative can usually gain a sense of the client's feeling toward their incumbent lab. And, when I say, “client's feeling”, I speak of the *specific* individual with whom the salesperson interacts. We all have our own opinions, but the people that count in this situation are (a) highly influential staff (frequently the office manager, but possibly others) and, most importantly, (b) the final decision-maker. Gullible field reps have a tendency to interpret comments and opinions from one medical support person as unanimous. This is why it remains important to

triangulate facts and impressions from several sources—especially the decision-maker.

Even Keel Feeling

Let's assume some brief questioning has occurred, and the representative discovers an “even-keel” response (from Mary, the office manager)—there are no critical issues. I'll make another assumption that the field rep's lab (ABC) is located in town and offers same-day results for routine tests. In this example, XYZ Lab's location is a number of hours away and cannot provide same-day testing. Consequently, the field rep has a basic difference she's very excited to discuss. This is where backtracking into differences becomes a significant strategy. I'll refer to the representative as Shelly from ABC Lab. We pick up the conversation after Shelly has asked several questions. (*Note: the examples offered in this paper may appear fairly simple and obvious—but they make the point.*)

Shelly: *“Mary, from our brief discussion, I see you're content with XYZ Lab, and there aren't any critical areas that need to be addressed. Let me ask you, what does the doctor do when he sees a patient, and he would like to have immediate results— such as a CBC, glucose or PT/INR?”*

Mary: *“He usually sends the patient to our local hospital if they're really sick. They draw the sample and call us within a few hours.”*

Shelly: *“I'm putting myself in the patient's shoes when I say this: would you agree that it's inconvenient for the patient to make a separate trip to the hospital, pay for parking, and, once inside, ask where the lab is and then wait a while before they're called to get their blood drawn—all of this when they're not feeling well?”*

Mary: *“Well, yes— I see your point from a patient care standpoint. Perhaps it's not very convenient after all.”*

Shelly: *“What do you think would be a better solution?”*

Mary: *“I guess if we could draw the patient when they're here, have the lab pick it up and then call us back ASAP. But, that can't happen, because the lab we normally use is several hours away.”*

Shelly: *“This is where our laboratory has taken routine testing to the next level. Our policy is we don't batch our routine testing like many other labs—we process and analyze them immediately as they come through our door. Because of our proximity, we offer a very efficient and convenient service for the doctor and your patients.”*

What has happened here? The first thing is—and most important—Shelly simply didn't expatiate on the “local lab and turnaround time” basic difference to Mary. No— what she did was to *backtrack* her thoughts by using several anodyne questions that effortlessly finessed *to* her differentiation. Just as important, she brought *emotion* into the conversation by explaining how the patient might feel by

making an inconvenient trip to the hospital and undergoing several associated annoying details. It is highly probable these concepts had not even entered Mary's mind—not until Shelly connected the dots (thus, revealing an unrecognized problem). Marcel Proust, the well-known early 20th Century novelist, was quoted as saying: "The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Indeed, Shelly provided the "new eyes."

The second important component of this conversation surrounds the fact that Shelly asked Mary *her* opinion of a solution. This sheds light on a very essential human tendency: people value what *they* say and their *own* conclusions more than what they are told by someone else. Consequently—in response to a simple question—Mary explained what *she*, herself, thought would be good for her patients. All Shelly had to do was illuminate how her laboratory could satisfy that desire.

Another Example

In addition to how Shelly's local lab could enhance the service for this office's patients, there are other basic difference areas that Shelly discovered. One was the time of day for specimen pickup. During the questioning process, she found out the XYZ Lab courier stops by around 4 PM. Shelly knew, of course, her driver was far more time-flexible and could make a later stop—guaranteeing pickup for all samples. The following conversation centers itself on backtracking into a benefit, as opposed to Shelly blurting out a statement.

Shelly: *"Tell me, Mary, what time does your courier typically stop by to collect your specimens?"*

Mary: *"It's usually not any later than 4 o'clock in the afternoon."*

Shelly: *"Does that meet your needs?"*

Mary: *"Yes, for the most part..... but there are some days when the driver can't wait because she has to meet a certain time schedule. Specimens being collected at the time or even later have to wait until the next day."*

Shelly: *"The clients I have spoken to have said they want everything to go out the day it's collected. They feel it impacts patient care if there are delays. What's your feeling about this?"*

Mary: *"Yes, I see your point. It can be annoying at times. It doesn't happen every day, but we're accustomed to it when the driver misses some specimens."*

Shelly: *"Would you like to know how my lab works around this issue?"*

Mary: *"Yes, I would. I'm curious."*

Shelly: *"This is how ABC Lab operates: because we are located here in town, we can provide your office with a pickup schedule that suits your exact needs. We can*

retrieve all of your specimens on the day you collect them, guaranteeing they get processed shortly after our courier picks them up. In turn, this provides optimal turnaround time and excellent patient care.

There are several points to make about this conversation. Because Shelly had already researched her competition, she knew her competitor had restrictions on their courier pickup schedules. Thus, instead of *telling* Mary about her lab's adaptable courier timetable, she "retreated" within her thought process—did a mental U turn— and started with probes that lead *to* the discrepancy point she wanted to make.

There are a couple of other subtle aspects. In one instance, Shelly raised Mary's curiosity ("*would you like to know how....*"). Sales winners know that people tend to respond positively when asked a question like this and, secondly, building the client's curiosity is a powerful tool: the customer *wants* to know more—and *eager* to listen.

Another detail in this conversation is that Shelly employed a psychological phenomenon called *social norms*. She mentioned "other clients" wanting to have same-day pickup. Psychologists know that people's behavior is largely shaped by the behavior of those around them (thus, *social norms*). In particular, people are often motivated by their desire to conform with the group—especially if it's a group with which they identify. Consequently, Shelly explained that *other* doctor's offices expect a later pickup, inferring that Mary might want to jump on the bandwagon and be on par with everyone else.

The final element about this exchange is that Shelly highlighted one rational and one emotional benefit (improved turnaround time and better patient care). She had been trained to not only use rationalization when selling, but, more importantly, to bring *emotion* into the conversation. Emotion trumps rationalization. Period.

Summary

The sales process is not an exact science, but there are certain activities that have proven to be very effective. One example is employing "backtracking" questions to demonstrate key differential aspects. It remains critical for the field representative to fully understand his/her own laboratory, as well as the competition. The successful rep learns to focus on contributing relevant insights to the conversation by developing skillfully phrased inquiries that lead down the path to the client's *own* discovery—heading *to* the differentiation objective. Consider that as opposed to the rep going off on a tangent and leading *with* basic differences (b-o-r-i-n-g!). As a consequence, backtracking stands as a very useful and adroit component in differentiating. It takes thought, and it takes practice—but it pays major dividends in building credibility *and* sales opportunities.

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