

## Everybody's in Sales

### Hey, who here is in sales?

Try asking that question to a group of business people some time. The hands that go up immediately are the obvious ones. In other words, the people who have “sales” in their titles will confess. As for the others? Very few others will consider the possibility for a moment that their jobs include sales of any type.

If you feel like being even bolder, try asking that same question—who here is in sales?—to people in higher education! Even fewer will be willing to admit that part of their job requires presenting a sales opportunity and closing the deal. Even those of us on the customized training side of community colleges are often slow to realize that delivering high quality, affordable workforce development offerings is only part of our jobs—selling them to those who need them is equally, if not more, important.

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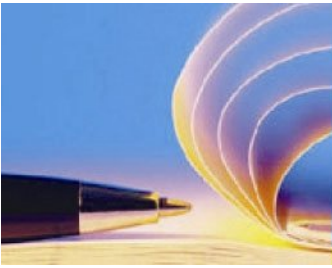
Why are people so slow to embrace the concept of being a salesperson?

Maybe it's because when people hear the word “sales,” visions of Rodney Dangerfield as the salesman in *Used Cars* dance through their heads like sugar plums. Or maybe their first association with the word “sales” is of hangdog Willie Lohmann from the Arthur Miller play, leading his life of “quiet desperation.” Still others may think of the fast-talking, superficial salesmen from movies like *Tommy Boy*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *The Tin Men*. At the end of the day, these stereotypes and caricatures lead most people to prefer a root canal with no anesthesia to being involved in sales.

Get rid of the false perceptions caused by the entertainment industry about sales, and the answer to the question “Who's in Sales?” is one word: Everybody. The reality is **we are all in sales.**

On the micro level, we are all in a position to have to “sell” our ideas to our families and friends every day. Knowing how to provide people with information in such a way as to persuade them to buy into your idea—whether it's about which restaurant to choose, movie to attend or house to buy—is the basis of the subtle art of sales.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us take that same concept up a notch in the work environment. Regardless of our position, we must sell our ideas to our colleagues and work groups. What part of the new project do we tackle first? Why should you be the presenter? Who's going to develop the evaluation tool? Need to fund a new position in



your department for FY 2006? You'll need to sell that idea to your boss. In short, when you have an idea about how something should take place, it is up to you to "sell" that notion to those around you.

Whether you're selling something directly or indirectly, a few basic ideas can put you in a better position to negotiate assertively and meet your objectives.

### 1. The Opening (Meet and Greet)

The first phase of the sales process is the Opening. Take a few minutes to focus on THEM. Get personally and professionally acquainted. Put them in the mood to talk. Talk about their interests, but in your mind, always keep focused on an agenda. (A true rule for sales is your agenda is written, verbal or developed with the client—it's up to you to decide which of the three it will be, but you must have one!)

### 2. Questioning

If there's one thing I know about human nature, it's this: people love to talk about themselves. Give them free reign. Ask about the **current state** of their business, organization or department. What are their **challenges** right now? What **goals** are they striving for? In other words, listen, listen, listen! You'll find as you become more accomplished that the most effective sales pitch relies far more on listening than talking—pay attention!

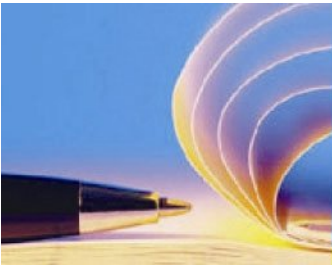
### 3. Match your products/services with the needs

When you have a good idea of what's happening with the potential client—and not before—suggest ways that your products and services can ease their challenges and help them meet their goals. Talk to them very specifically about other businesses that have used what you have to offer to solve similar problems. One of the secrets of sales success is the ability to paint a picture in the customer's mind about how what you have to offer will meet their needs.

For example, the sales staffs I have led at community colleges have taken an Evidence Book with them on all calls with prospective clients. A very specific record of successes as reflected in newspaper articles, letters of reference and testimonials, the Evidence Book **shows** potential customer what your college does more effectively than the staff could ever **tell** them. A ringing endorsement from third parties is far more credible than your own glowing appraisals could ever be.

### Close (The Next Step)

People often fear this step. They are afraid to ask for the order. Getting to the next step is often as easy as saying "What days of the week would be best for you to offer this class?" or "Would you prefer to pay all at once, or will you require a payment plan?" Don't assume the person you're talking with knows where to go next. Direct them to the sale. If you don't develop this all-important part of your sales process, you'll find yourself leaving a lot of business on the table.



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Going through these four steps will keep you on track during the encounter, but before you make contact keep these three things in mind:

## **1. Know your Service**

Become as familiar as you possibly can about the course offerings you have. Knowledge is power, and you can convert this knowledge into contracts if you work at it.

## **2. Create Strategic Activities**

Knowledge may be power, but thinking without action doesn't get the job done. A sales team must develop a series of straightforward, measurable activities that help put your programs and services in front of the right people. Try setting a minimum number of potential-client or priority customer contacts each team member must make per week-- contacts made by mail through a newsletter, email or phone. Set goals for the number of events each person must schedule and coordinate to bring in potential business—things like events and conferences. Require each person to make a certain number of presentations in the community each year at organizations like your local Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club or other service groups.

## **3. Generate Revenue**

This item will take care of itself if Items 1 and 2 above are addressed appropriately. Setting individual sales goals and targets is important, but it also helps to have a team financial goal that everyone is trying to achieve together. Keep each other posted through weekly sales meetings that focus on 3 agenda items: Contacts Made, Contracts Pending and Product Knowledge.

Perfecting the sales process takes practice, but it also takes education. At community colleges I have led, we have invested time and resources in quarterly sales training to lead us to achieving our personal and team sales goals. In my experience in taking two community colleges from deficit to profit, I have concluded that this type of sales philosophy is one of the missing links that stands between getting the opportunity to serve your customers and having them choosing another vendor.

At this point, if you are not able to convince the customer that your community college's customized training options are the best solution to their workforce development needs, you have done them a disservice. Those of us who have worked with business and industry for many years know that community college-based options are every bit as effective as significantly higher priced options from private consultants. Learning how to present the full picture of our programs and services appeals to the nobler motivation that underlies all the work we do: to help people. We can't deliver the services our potential clients need if we can't get the opportunity to present our initiatives thoroughly, and help them make a decision.