

## Building Better Customer Relationships – Take 2

Last month Tudog presented the case for developing relationships as an essential part of succeeding in business. The article contended that the connection is based on the proposition that people buy from people they like and trust. Whether communicating via email, telephone, or face-to-face, it is essential that we convey the critical aspects of Respect, Competence, Value and Trust. This month's article expands on the notion of communication as a key to better business relationships and focuses on using conversation as a means of leveraging your skills to reap the benefits and getting those contracts signed and executed.

Good communication skills are the foundation of all good relationships and are critical in developing and sustaining trust. The key to good communication is acceptance and adherence to the rule that communication should be 75% listening and 25% asking questions – so you can listen some more. Certainly good communication also includes writing skills and presentation abilities, as well as body language and seemingly innocent elements like posture and eye contact.

Communication also includes *what* message you are seeking to transmit. When meeting with a customer make your sessions a bit different from the norm. Demonstrate that you are on a fact-finding mission to understand their needs (and how you can meet them) by focusing the meeting on them. Imagine their delight when they receive your attention instead of you presenting them with a pile of brochures that scream “buy, buy, buy”. Kick things off by asking a few key questions and then sit back and have a productive conversation by keeping your mouth closed and your ears open. Use silence and body language as an effective conversation tool.

For example, if your prospect is currently buying from the competition, a great conversation question would be – What do you like best about buying from them? Then, sit back and listen and no matter how much he raves, 9 out of 10 times they'll add some balancing negative issues you can later leverage as hot buttons to present the impression of added value. By exploring the weaknesses in their current relationship you are able to identify areas that are critical to the prospect that are not now being satisfied. The door this opens would have remained closed had you approached in a typical manner and dominated the conversation.

You don't need to engage in a staring contest with your prospects but eye contact is essential in building trust. Smiling while you listen is a positive show that you are both interested and enjoying. Being a super conversationalist builds relationships that establish trust, so remember to be a memorable and pleasurable conversationalist by maintaining the eye contact and at the right time interject with the proper nod or, wow, incredible etc. By not only showing interest, but the proper level of respect for what you are being told, you will find that the person will continue to be interested in talking with you (revealing more useful information and giving you the chance to create an even better impression).

The next important part of the conversation is to ask clarifying questions. Don't just ask questions, ask the right questions that display your interest and serve the purpose of discovery of issues such as timelines, decision processes etc. Asking additional questions portrays that you care. Keep the conversation going and insure you're on the path of developing a strong relationship based on:

- Shared Interests – Develop a personal bond.

- Shared Understanding – Understand your prospect and display a genuine differentiator from the competition.
- Shared Expectations – If you share his expectations, you can deliver.
- Predictability – When you set expectations and deliver, you build confidence that you'll be there when needed.

When you earn a level of trust and have good communication, you discover more common interests leading to deeper shared understanding. In time these lead to shared expectation and mutual predictability and this cycle is the cornerstone of successful client – vendor relationships.

At the end of the day, relationships bring value to all parties and are the foundation of business success. Developing positive relationships will determine your success at landing and maintaining business. Conversation is a critical foundation for any communication, so before picking up that phone or entering that conference room, remember the fundamentals of good conversation – close your mouth and open those ears.