

CLOSING THE SALE WITH PROVEN SCIENCE

“Would you allow us to put a billboard in your front yard?” This was the question that a team of researchers, led by social psychologists Jonathan Freedman and Scott Frasier, asked residents of a California neighborhood. The researchers, who were posing as volunteer workers, would show each homeowner a picture that clearly portrayed how the large sign would obstruct the view of their house. Inscribed on the billboard was the crudely worded recommendation to “Drive Carefully.” The results of this experiment, which were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, were not surprising.¹ Most of the residents adamantly refused to allow the billboard to be erected on their front lawn. Only a paltry 17% agreed to the request.

However, when the research team went to a nearby neighborhood and posed the same request to its residents, they were stunned by the response. When homeowners in the second California neighborhood were asked to allow the billboard to be put in their front yard a staggering 76% consented to the request. After witnessing the stark contrast between those in the neighborhoods, one of the research assistants commented, “I was simply stunned at how easy it was to convince some people and how impossible to convince others.”² The question is why? Why would the majority of those living in one California neighborhood reject the obtrusive request, while most of those in another California neighborhood complied with the request?

Freedman and Frasier asserted that the reason the second group of homeowners overwhelmingly agreed to the daunting appeal was because this group had received a prior visit from the researchers. Two weeks earlier, the researchers had spoken with those in the second neighborhood and asked if they would be willing to display a small, three inch sign in a front window of their house. The sign simply read, “Be a safe driver.” This minor request was met with almost universal acceptance. Freedman and Frasier concluded that this seemingly trivial commitment influenced the residents to such an extent that when presented with the larger request of allowing a billboard promoting safe driving to be placed in their front yard, the vast majority complied.

The findings of Freedman and Frasier’s experiment were published in 1966. Since then, there have been hundreds of scientific studies that have confirmed that little commitments naturally lead to larger ones.^{3 4} For example, small commitments have been shown to boost charitable giving,^{5 6 7} increase show rates for blood drives⁸ and reduce smoking.⁹

The reason that commitments have such power is because they shape one’s beliefs and perceptions. There is also an abundance of scientific research that has verified that human beings have an innate desire to act in a manner that is consistent with the commitments that they have made. These factors are why small commitments are the building blocks of the decision making process.

The scientific research regarding how little commitments impact large decisions is extremely relevant within the context of selling. One of the most obvious and profound applications of this research is in the process of closing a sale. Today, most closing strategies are blatantly seller-centric and often

totally ignore the prospect’s decision making process. This is in spite of the fact that in recent decades there has been astounding breakthroughs in the fields of cognitive neuroscience, social psychology, cognitive psychology and communication theory regarding the factors that influence and even determine how human beings make decisions. In addition, at the Hoffeld Group, we have also conducted research analyzing prospects’ internal decision making process. Our findings have revolutionized what was previously known about how prospects arrive at a positive buying decision. We then deconstructed the decision making process into quantifiable steps that will guide sales people in selling the way that prospects make buying decisions. This innovative discovery is significant because when sales people sell the way that prospects internally make buying decisions, closing rates surge, sales cycles shorten and sales production escalates.

The conclusion derived from this research has yielded numerous valuable insights into how prospects arrive at a buying decision. One such insight is that the buying decision is not made in response to a persuasive message, but throughout a persuasive message. This means that when a prospect makes a positive buying decision, that decision is comprised of a series of small commitments that prompt the final commitment to purchase. This scientifically validated concept is groundbreaking because it redefines the process of closing the sale. Historically, closing has been viewed as the part of the sale when the sales person guides the prospect in making a decision to purchase a product or service. Since this is usually the first substantial commitment the sales person has asked the prospect for, it is here that sales people are traditionally taught to employ a closing phrase. The hope is that the phrase will induce the prospect to purchase. However, research has confirmed that this model is antiquated and ineffective.

Traditional Closing Methodology

(One Large Commitment at the Close)



The reality is that though a positive buying decision may be revealed at the close of the sale, it is being cultivated throughout the sale. For a prospect to make a positive buying decision at the close of the sale he or she must make strategic commitments to the fundamental value propositions of the sale. If these commitments are not made, then the prospect will be unable to make a positive buying decision.

At the Hoffeld Group we define the close as the final commitment of a positive buying decision. This final commitment is intertwined and even dependent upon the series of essential commitments that that prospect has already made throughout the sale. These incremental commitments are what naturally guide prospects through the progression of consent and prepare them for the final commitment of a positive buying decision.

Science Based Closing Methodology

(Incremental Commitments Throughout the Sales Process)



Furthermore, through the process of gaining prospect commitments to key value propositions, sales people will also be able to pre-emptively identify, neutralize or overcome any looming objections before the close. When asking for commitments from the prospect, the sales person will either receive the desired commitment, which will nullify the potential objection, or he or she will receive an objection. Many sales people falsely believe that if they hear an objection before the close they have failed. Yet, if a prospect has an objection and it is not dealt with, it will either derail the sale or cloud a prospect's judgment so that the likelihood of the sale will significantly decrease. If a prospect is contemplating an objection, but does not verbalize it before the close, the only one who is unaware of the objection is the sales person. Although, if the sales person identifies an objection early in the sales process, then he or she will have the opportunity to overcome the objection and steer the sale back on course. As a general rule, the earlier you can identify and overcome objections in the sales process the more likely the sale will occur. Contrary to popular belief, the least productive time to handle an objection is at the close of the sale.

Accordingly, the close should not be a stressful event that is plagued with objections. Effective closing is the logical consummation of the previous commitments made by the prospect. If a sales person is forced to exert high amounts of pressure upon the prospect at the close, it is a sign that the sales person did not obtain adequate commitment from the prospect to one or more of the central value propositions.

In summary, aligning one's selling behaviors with how prospects make buying decisions is an essential task. Science has proven that prospects decide to purchase a product or service incrementally. Consequently, when sales people obtain incremental commitments to the fundamental value propositions of the sale, they are helping their prospects make a buying decision and amplifying their likelihood of success.

About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the repeatable and predictable principles, which science has proven to create and enable influence, out of the laboratory and academic journals and apply them to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit HoffeldGroup.com.

Notes

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