

DO YOUR PROSPECTS SEE THEIR PROBLEMS?

It was one of the most revealing and amusing psychological experiments in recent years. Behavioral scientists, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, gathered random college students together and had them watch a one minute video.¹ The video consisted of two basketball teams, one wearing black jerseys and the other white jerseys, moving around a small space passing a basketball back and forth to those on their team. Prior to watching the video, the researchers asked participants to count how many passes were made by the team wearing the white jerseys. At the conclusion of the video, researchers recorded how many passes each viewer had counted. Then the researchers asked each participant if he or she had noticed anything unusual about the video. Half of the participants stated that they had noticed nothing abnormal. This surprised the psychologists because midway through the video a person dressed in a gorilla suit walked in-between the basketball players, turned and looked directly at the camera, thumped its chest and then walked off. In all, the person in the gorilla suit was clearly visible for 9 seconds. This experiment has been repeated numerous times by different researchers, with diverse audiences, in various countries and the findings are always the same.^{2 3} Half of the participants never see the gorilla. The question is why?

Simons and Chabris asserted that the reason half of those who watched the video did not see the gorilla was because of inattention blindness. The term “inattention blindness” originated from the 1998 book by the same title, authored by behavioral scientists, Arien Mack and Irvin Rock and published by MIT Press. Mack and Rock define the scientific principle of inattention blindness as the “total failure of perception under conditions of inattention.”⁴ Inattention blindness occurs when a person is focusing on one thing and, as a result, he or she does not notice the unexpected, however obvious or significant it may be.

Inattention blindness is not confined to psychological experiments; it is also a common occurrence in sales. Far too often, prospects develop inattention blindness regarding their problems. This is because the prospects are part of the system or process that is causing and sustaining the problem and as a result rarely will they accurately understand it. To further complicate this matter, sales people frequently struggle in assisting prospects with understanding the cause, scope and implications of their problems. This is a significant concern because until prospects recognize their problems and the pain it is causing they will view interacting with a sales person as a waste of time. In contrast, when prospects are aware of the severity of their problem and desire to solve it, they will instantly become an active listener as sales people present their products or services.

Guiding prospects in seeing the cause, scope and implications of their problems is a daunting, but essential task. The following are three straightforward, sequential strategies that sales people can employ to effectively assist prospects in fully understanding their problem.

- 1. Sales People Must Find Problems.** In the past, sales people were taught to be problem solvers. Yet, in today’s modern selling climate solving problems is not enough. To stand out from the competition, sales people must now be skilled at problem finding and problem solving. For example, research studies

led by renowned behavioral scientists Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identified that successful people focus on discovering problems.^{5 6} In fact, the research revealed that it was the discovery of problems, more than any special knowledge or skill that enabled heightened levels of achievement.⁷ Likewise, sales people who can uncover problems and bring them to the awareness of their prospects will neutralize their competition. When sales people find problems they are in a position to show prospects solutions to the problems before any competitors do. This creates a significant advantage because recent surveys indicate that the average sales person typically does not enter into the buying process until after it is 60% completed.⁸ In contrast, sales people who find problems are involved in the buying process from its origin.

When a sales person identifies a significant problem, prospects will reciprocate with increased levels of trust and loyalty. This will cause sales people to evolve into trusted advisors. However, sales people who cannot competently locate their prospects' problems will be unable to capably serve their prospects and will miss many selling opportunities.

2. Sales People Must Guide Prospects in Understanding Problems. After sales people have identified their prospects' problems, they must then assist their prospects in acquiring an accurate comprehension of the cause and scope of their problems. Until both the prospect and the sales person understand the problem, any discussion regarding the sales person's product or service will be unproductive. From the prospect's perspective, until the problem is fully realized, he or she will not be able to confidently recognize a viable solution. Make no mistake, if prospects do not know what their problem looks like they will also not know what a solution looks like. Furthermore, without grasping the magnitude of their prospect's problem sales people will be incapable of compellingly presenting their product or service. As Benson Shapiro and Ronald Posner wrote in their article "Making the Major Sale," which was published in the *Harvard Business Review*, "The salesperson's strategy should be based on the detailed information he has gathered during and after his analysis of the buyer."⁹ Sales people who do not adequately uncover their prospect's problem are forced to engage in feature dumps where they blindly list various features and benefits of their product or service in the hope that one may peak their prospect's curiosity. This inept selling practice does more harm than good because even if one feature or benefit does kindle the prospect's interest, the sales person has also given the prospect numerous reasons why his or her product or service is not a good fit.

3. Sales People Must Make Problems Hurt. Sales people must cultivate their prospect's awareness of the negative implications that their problems are generating. The more pain prospects associate with their problems, the more urgency there will be to solve them. Fostering this realization is accomplished by asking the prospect questions that guide him or her in disclosing the detrimental outcomes that the problem is generating. Frequently, sales people feel uncomfortable when asking such questions. Though, it is important to acknowledge that this feeling is one-sided. Once a problem has been exposed, asking questions that facilitate the prospect's recognition of the consequences of that problem will be well-received. Edward Bursk aptly commented on this idea when he asserted, "The buyer is 'opened up' by a question about his problems, a subject dear to his heart and sure to interest him."¹⁰

The reality is that all prospects have a myriad of problems. Prospects have often been dealing with

these same problems for years. This is why making problems hurt is so essential for the sale to advance. Until prospects feel the pain that their problems create, they will procrastinate and resist making a change.

For example, there are certain moments in life that you never forget. Two of those moments for me were when my son and daughter were born. My children were born roughly 2 years apart, at the same hospital. Nevertheless, there was a vast difference between how I drove to the hospital when it was time for each to be born. When my wife was pregnant with our daughter, she suddenly went into labor and began having intense labor pains. We quickly got into the car and raced to the hospital. Because of the pain my wife was in, I ignored all speed limits and red lights. A mere 20 minutes after arriving at the hospital, I was a father.

In contrast, when it was time for my son to be born, we pre-emptively went to the hospital before the labor pains began. This time we drove within the speed limit and red lights actually caused me to stop the car.

The fundamental difference between those two rides to the hospital was the pain my wife was experiencing. With our daughter she was in tremendous pain and as a result we had a strong sense of urgency to get to the hospital. With our son, she was not in any pain and so we did not have the urgency that only pain can provide. As a general rule, how much pain you are experiencing will determine how fast you drive to the hospital. Likewise, how much a prospect's problem hurts will determine his or her sense of urgency to resolve it.

Cultivating your prospect's understanding of the cause, scope and implications of their problems is the foundation that the entire sale is built upon. It is only after prospects recognize the severity of their problems that they will commit to making a change and consider the sales person's product or service as a possible solution. If sales people fail to guide prospects in committing to making change, the sale will stall and eventually die.

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 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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