

THE SCIENCE OF OUTSELLING YOUR COMPETITION

After a long day of hiking, two campers began setting up their campsite when they noticed a grizzly bear step out from the cover of the trees and aggressively move towards them. One of the campers was instantly paralyzed with fear and stood frozen as the enraged bear approached. However, the other camper sprang into action and quickly pulled off his boots and took his running shoes out of his knapsack. The first camper noticed this and said, “What are you doing? You can’t outrun that bear.” Undeterred, the other camper slipped on his running shoes and replied, “I don’t have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you.”

This well-known, humorous story illustrates the important sales reality that a sales person’s skill level and selling process does not have to be perfect, but it does have to be better than his or her competitors’. Yet, outselling the competition is not a trivial matter. It is literally a survival skill. In today’s hyper-competitive marketplace there is an abundance of fierce opposition. In almost every industry there are more sellers than ever before. Sales people also report that their existing clients are bombarded with calls from competing sales people trying to acquire the client’s business. The way sales people respond to this highly competitive environment is vital because their ability to outsell competitors will be a key determiner of their success and the health of the organization they serve.

Leveraging Science to Outsell Your Competitors

Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that outselling the competition is a mission critical endeavor, there are few strategies circulating in the field of sales training that adequately equip sales people to actually do so. Most of the methods for dealing with competitors range from recklessly belittling them to simplistic techniques that do not work in the real world. In contrast to the overabundance of opinion based, shallow information on this topic, there are powerful scientific principles that sales people can use to defeat their competitors. There is an astounding amount of scientific research that has conclusively demonstrated the ways that a persuasive message can be modified so that it is more readily received. Furthermore, behavioral scientists have also vigorously studied how persuasive arguments can be defended against. When sales people utilize this proven science, they find that their ability to outsell their competition is heightened. What’s more, because few sales people are even aware that this science exists, competitors will have no clue how to defend against it.

Although there are numerous scientific principles that been verified to guide sales people in consistently outselling their competition, one of the most effective was developed because of a government initiative. At the conclusion of World War II and during the following decades, the United States Government implored behavioral scientists to identify reliable methods for protecting its soldiers and citizens from being influenced by enemy propaganda. In response to this request, social psychologist William McGuire published research in 1961 regarding how a persuasive message can be defended against.¹

McGuire asserted that one way to induce resistance to a persuasive appeal was through what he deemed, the *inoculation theory*. The reason he titled the concept the inoculation theory was because of its similarity to how disease inoculation occurs.² When a person is inoculated against a disease, a weakened form of the virus is injected into the healthy person. This assists the person's body in building up a resistance to the virus. Likewise, the inoculation theory is the idea that resistance to a persuasive argument can be enhanced by first exposing a weak, easily defeated version of that argument.

There have been a plethora of scientific studies that have confirmed that the inoculation theory reduces the likelihood that an individual will be persuaded by a request.^{3 4 5} The inoculation theory has been shown to keep youths from joining gangs and also stop minors from smoking cigarettes.^{6 7} It has even been used to prevent voters from being swayed by political attack ads directed at a candidate.⁸ Trial lawyers also commonly employ the inoculation theory in their opening statements when they declare a weak version of their opponent's case and then disclose its flaws.

The reason this principle is so influential is because it guides a person in mentally constructing and committing to arguments against a persuasive request. When a stronger version of the message is later presented, the person will automatically defer to the previously formed counterarguments.⁹ This is significant because research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* has confirmed that once people defend themselves successfully against a persuasive appeal, they will have more confidence in their decision and be far less likely to change their mind.¹⁰

Application

When applied correctly, the inoculation theory provides sales people with a proven method for selling against their competitors. For example, a number of years ago the Hoffeld Group was approached by an organization whose sales team was struggling against a larger competitor. In the past, when they had gone head-to-head with this competitor, they won only 36% of the time. However, we devised a multi-pronged competitive strategy that transformed how their sales team positioned themselves against this competitor. The outcome was that the company's win rates against this competitor skyrocketed to 74%. Though there were numerous scientific constructs that were deployed in neutralizing this formidable competitor, one of them was the inoculation theory.

While there are many ways that a sales person can apply the inoculation theory to outsell their competition, the following are two of the most common. First, a sales person can utilize the inoculation theory to proactively knock out a competitor during the sales process. This is accomplished through guiding your prospect in committing to one of your competitive advantages (which your competitor cannot match) as part of their buying requirements. After this has occurred you should assert, "One thing that is unique about [company] is that we are the only provider who offers [competitive advantage]. From what you have told me, it sounds like not having [competitive advantage] would not meet your needs, is that correct?" Your prospect will remain in agreement with what he or she has previously committed to and respond with an affirmative reply. You should follow-up with a question such as, "If someone proposed a solution that did not include [Distinct Value™] how would you respond?" This question will

prompt the prospect to verbalize an argument against the sales person's competitors.

Pause for a moment and contemplate the magnitude of what just occurred. The persuasive power of the inoculation theory was leveraged when a weakened form of the competitors' position was disclosed. Then the prospect was guided in committing to only purchase a solution that will deliver your competitive advantage. This declaration eliminates any competitor as a viable option.

Though, if your prospect was not primed correctly, he or she may respond to your question with a noncommittal statement such as, "If it is in line with my budget." This lack of commitment is an obstacle to the sale and consequently must be addressed. A recommended comeback would be posing the following question, "That is understandable, but assuming that it was in line with your budget, is there any reason you would ever consider a solution that did not have [competitive advantage]?" Of course, the prospect will answer, "no." Then respond with the question, "May I ask why this [competitive advantage] is important to you?" In answering this question the prospect will testify why your company is right for him or her and why your competitor is not. This will considerably enhance your prospect's perception of your organization, while at the same time decrease the likelihood that your prospect will buy from your competitor.

A second application of the inoculation theory occurs after the sale is completed. Often, when a sales person beats out other competitors in acquiring new clients, those competitors will continue to contact the clients and attempt to steal them away. The best defense against this attack is to use the inoculation theory to prepare your clients to resist your competitors. This can be done after the sale is closed, by simply asking the client, "Out of curiosity, what was the primary reason that you chose to move forward with us?" After the client has verbalized the reason why he or she chose you over a competitor, you should then state, "You had mentioned that you have been talking with [competitor]. It is likely that [competitor] will contact you in the next few days and try to get your business. What will you say if they contact you?" The prospect is prepared to answer this question since he or she just informed you of why they chose you over the competitor. This will set you up for success because through using the inoculation theory you guide your prospect in formulating and verbally committing to an argument against your competitor. This will strengthen your prospect's loyalty to you and significantly reduce the influence of your competitor. Also, if for some reason the prospect does waver and suggests that he or she may be tempted by your competitor you can address the issue and solidify the sale.

Summary

Selling against competitors is a challenging task. Yet, failure is not an option. Sales people create and protect an organization's most important asset, its customers. As management expert Peter Drucker famously wrote, "There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer."¹¹ Through leveraging the proven science of the inoculation theory, sales people will be better equipped to outsell their competitors. This will allow them and the organizations they represent to thrive in the opportunity that the marketplace is presenting.

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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