

WHAT IS YOUR PROSPECT THINKING ABOUT?

“Try not to think of a white bear.” This was the peculiar instruction given to participants in a research experiment led by behavioral scientist Daniel Wegner.¹ Each participant was directed to sit quietly for five minutes and attempt to think about anything other than a white bear. The findings of this experiment, which were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, disclosed that in spite of their most valiant attempts to resist, the thoughts of the participants wandered to the topic of white bears at a rate of more than once per minute. This experiment has been repeated by various behavioral scientists with diverse groups of people, but the results are always the same. Those who participated in the experiments confessed that their minds were continually infiltrated by white bears.

What is remarkable about this experiment is that researchers devised a verbal stimulus that influenced the participants to such an extent that it affected their cognition. Neuroscientists define cognition as the “combination of awareness, perception and reasoning.”² The issue of how the human brain achieves cognition is one that has been meticulously studied by scientists for decades. This mountain of research has revealed astonishing insights into how cognition occurs and how it can be influenced.

The conclusions of this research are particularly relevant within the context of selling. The entire process of selling is dependent upon prospects being attentive, contemplating and committing to certain foundational value propositions. In fact, regardless of the product or service, for a prospect to make a positive buying decision that prospect must first pay attention to what a sales person is sharing. If this does not occur, the sale will die.

Take a moment and consider the following questions: When you present the central value propositions of your product or service, what is your prospect thinking about? How do you know if your prospect agrees with, understood or was even listening when you presented these essential ideas? Your answer to these seemingly strange questions will often determine the success of the sale. Though prospects may make eye contact with you, nod their heads or even mumble a noncommittal “that makes sense,” the reality is that most sales people have no idea what their prospects are thinking. The prospect may have been actively listening to you, or he or she may have been pondering something else entirely. This lack of awareness is a major problem that has devastated many sales.

Though there are numerous scientifically proven methods to enhance cognition and foster commitment to a persuasive message, one simple, yet highly effective way is through using what is known as a “tie-down.” A tie-down is defined as a value building statement that is converted to a question. Tie-downs are classified as an involvement trial close.

Tie-downs are extremely influential because they halt the flow of information and allow prospects to mentally digest and verbally assess an assertion of value. This assists the human brain in focusing upon and mentally processing what was presented.

Sales people are usually surprised to learn that tie-downs have actually been evaluated in scientific

studies.^{3 4} In the research studies, behavioral scientists, having no apparent knowledge of the sales term “tie-down,” described tie-downs as “tag questions.” Nevertheless, this research revealed some important insights regarding how to maximize the power of tie-downs. When the tie-down was communicated by someone viewed as credible and was attached to a compelling message, the research confirmed that the tie-down amplified the persuasive impact of the message. However, the tie-down became counterproductive if it was linked to a weak appeal or if the person conveying the tie-down was not regarded as trustworthy.

Sales people should apply these scientific findings by refraining from using tie-downs before they have established trust with their prospects. Also, as a general rule, tie-downs should only be used when presenting how a product or services fulfills the prospect’s primary buying motivators. This will ensure that tie-downs are only attached to the concepts of value that matter to your prospect.

Utilizing tie-downs in your sales presentation is a straightforward endeavor that will increase the likelihood of the sale. To construct a tie-down, simply add a concise questioning phrase onto the end of a statement of value. This will cause the statement to evolve into a question that the prospect must contemplate and verbally respond to.

The following are four examples of statements of value that are converted into tie-downs:

Statement: This would eliminate \$70,000 in expenses from your operating costs.

Tie-down: This would eliminate \$70,000 in expenses from your operating cost, wouldn’t it?

Statement: This new software will solve the production issues you spoke about.

Tie-down: This new software will solve the production issues you spoke about, would you agree?

Statement: This condo has the view that you said that you wanted.

Tie-down: This condo has the view that you said that you wanted, doesn’t it?

Statement: Waiting to install this equipment will cost you over \$9,500 per week.

Tie-down: Waiting to install this equipment will cost you over \$9,500 per week, won’t it?”

Too often, sales people fall prey to conveying value building statements about their product or service without getting buy-in from prospects. Tie-downs ensure that the sales person receives immediate feedback regarding whether the prospect understood and agreed with the concept of value. If the prospect did not comprehend or agree with the concept, then the sales person will have the opportunity to address the issue and advance the sale.

In summary, when used correctly tie-downs have been scientifically proven to enhance the persuasiveness of a message. Tie-downs also assist sales people in guiding prospects in being attentive to and contemplating the key value propositions that the sale is built upon. The results are that when sales

people use tie-downs their effectiveness increases and so does their sales production. Because when it comes to selling, focusing on what your prospect is thinking about is not an option, it is an imperative.

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

1. Daniel Wegner, David Schneider, Samuel Carter III and Teri White. "Paradoxical effects of thoughts suppression." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 1987. p. 5 - 13.
2. Michael S. Gazzaniga, Richard B. Ivry and George R. Mangun. *Cognitive Neuroscience*, 3rd Edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009). p. 3.
3. K. Blankenship and T. Craig. "Language and persuasion: Tag questions as powerless speech or as interpreted in context." *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 43, 2007. p. 112 – 118.
4. L. Hosman and S. Siltanen. "Hedges, tag questions, message processing, and persuasion." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 30, 2011. p. 341-349.