

## Understanding the Buyer's Decision Process

Many of the world's best sales forces are the best because they have developed and use a systematic sales process. Having a map of the things that have to happen before a sale can be made provides a framework for sales planning and activity, reduces mistakes, and shortens new hire ramp-up time. However, what is conspicuously absent from most of these process maps are the things that prospective customers have to do each step of the way in order to buy. The truth is that the things that are done at any particular step or stage in the process could be a complete waste of time if the client doesn't do what they must do to move forward to the next step or stage in their buying process.

As sales professionals, you don't retire quota or earn commissions for anything that you do. You get paid on what your prospects do. When they sign a contract or issue a purchase order, then you make some money. You have to accept that you cannot control your prospects.

Account Managers or Sales Managers often ask, "*What do we have to do to close this deal?*" That is the wrong question. What you should be asking is, "*What does the prospect have to do in order to buy?*" and then the follow-on question is, "*What do we have to do to get them to do those things?*"

Whether or not you have or follow a systematic sales process, you should endeavor to understand and document your prospect's buying process. You must understand not only the things that have to happen throughout the selection and approval process, but who will be involved along the way.

Armed with a thorough understanding of the steps and stages of your prospects buying process, you can plan your work accordingly. Then every single move you make can be made with the specific intent of enabling or empowering your prospect to take the next step they need to take in order to buy.

In order for you and the buyer to understand the buying process, you need to ask questions. Lots of questions. Here are some questions that will help you and the buyer define and clarify what has to happen before a decision will be made: (example is for ad advertising salesperson – don't assume because you are not an ad salesperson that these questions won't work for you)

**What kind of results are you having with your current advertising campaign?**

**If your current campaign is not providing for you what you need it to how do you plan on discovering if another campaign might work better?**

**How have you managed to do so well in spite of the fact that you are not receiving from your current campaign what you really need?**

**How did you come to accept these less than satisfactory results from your existing campaign? What needs to happen before you and the other decision makers in this company will decide to do something different?**

**Can your existing advertising provide the results needed to take your business to the next level? If so, what has stopped it from providing the results before?**

**What do you and the other decision makers need to know or understand before you will be willing to solve this problem?**

**Since bringing in a new advertising strategy and plan would necessitate changes, what would your decision team need to understand before they'd be willing to help you through the change process?**

**What would they need to see or hear before they would be able to understand that this new process would not create chaos for them?**

**What I hear you saying is that you need blah, blah and blah from me to have the confidence that we can help you. Is that correct? What would you like for me to do next?**

Before you proceed to any next step, you should know and understand exactly what has to happen next in their buying process, and what you're going to do to make that happen. If you spend the time and money to go visit a prospect without a plan of what you intend to say and do to help them take the next step in their buying process then you are little more than a professional visitor.

Defining and documenting a useful map of our prospects buying process will take time, it will take effort, and it will require that you reach, qualify, and sell to all of the people who will play a part in the selection and approval process. You will need a lot of input and perspective because simply accepting any one person's opinion of their process leaves too many variables to chance and ultimately leaves you with too much exposure and opportunity for failure. Taking the time to thoroughly understand all of the things that the prospect needs to do in order to buy often makes the difference between the very successful and those who simply get by.

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