

Passing the "Tell Me More" Test

By Jill Konrath

Establishing a business relationship with a new prospect is a lot like walking on a balance beam. Every single move you make has consequences.

When you execute it flawlessly, you're in a perfect position for your next move. However, any misstep on your part sends you into recovery mode. Sometimes you're able to bounce back, but other times you fall off and are out of the competition. To make it even more challenging, stone-faced judges ruthlessly evaluate how well you execute each move and its level of difficult.

Sounds an awful lot like sales to me! The early stages of the sales process are fraught with difficulties. Prospects assess your every word to determine if it's worth their time to meet with you.

That's why so many sellers get excited when prospective customers say, "Tell me more." It means they've scored a perfect 10 on their first routine - one they've practiced and fine-tuned for months. Then, without thinking, they launch into their second routine. What they don't realize is they have to pass this "Tell Me More" test before they can advance further in the competition.

And it's so darn easy to blow it then.

Recently I worked with a large services firms. Like everyone, they're struggling to crack into new accounts. We worked on crafting strong value propositions, creating enticing voicemail messages and engaging customers in a discussion.

I could tell what they'd created would work. So I asked what they'd say if a customer said, "Tell me more." They replied ...

"Our company has been in business since 1997. It was formed by four separate firms - each with it's own expertise in the communications field - that came together to address the greater challenges faced by global companies today. Since our merger, we've been growing at the rate of 28% annually, now making us the leading provider of these services in the country. We offer a full range of services for all your marketing and communications needs including."

They flunked. Nice answer, but not the right answer. It bores clients. It turns them off. They've heard it a hundred times before. It's all about you, you, you. They could care less about your self-serving pablum.

Okay. Now you're confused. The prospect wanted to know about your company. They asked you to tell them more. And now I'm saying don't. You're probably thinking it's rude not to answer.

I just had that same conversation with a Six Sigma consultant yesterday. He gets really excited when corporate decision makers say tell me more. It's a sure sign to him that they want to know all about his methodology. He responds ...

"The process we use to achieve these results involves pulling together a team of people from several different functions to analyze and address your critical business challenges. First of all, it's absolutely imperative to have senior level commitment in order to make this work.

"Before any session, I conducted thorough interviews with key executives and other stakeholders. Then, when we get together we use a variety of proven tools such as customer value mapping and process mapping, as well as a systematic, integrated tactical approach to help you achieve objectives ..."

I yawned. My eyes glazed over. Because I hear things from the customer's perspective, it was painful for me to listen to. "Stop, stop," I cried. "It's not what they want to hear."

He was confused. They'd wanted to learn more and so he'd explained his process to them. But he was also a "root cause" kind of guy and, since the response he was getting wasn't spectacular he was open to suggestions. Here's what I told him.

When you're in the early stages of working with a prospective customer, the answer to "Tell me more" is not an overview of your firm. Nor is it a description of your process or methodology. Nor is it a request for more in-depth information about your products.

The people you're talking to are sitting at their desks struggling to get everything done with fewer resources and in less time. It's an impossible, never-ending task with no relief in sight. So that's what you focus on - the challenges or issues your product or service addresses.

In responding to them, your primary goals are to develop your credibility as someone who is intimately familiar with the issues they face and to demonstrate your ability to deliver results. You do this by:

- Expanding on how tough it is for companies to achieve their objectives using outdated systems or processes. Talk about all difficulties that arise, the bottlenecks and the workarounds, the frustrations. Mention the ramifications on other areas in their business.
- Sharing a story about a particular customer you recently worked with, how they were doing things when you initially started working together, the problems they faced and the impact of these problems on their business. Then briefly summarize the outcomes.
- Then you wrap it up by asking a question that engages your prospect in discussing the issue in greater depth.

For example, if you say, "Tell me more" to me, I'll respond:

"The biggest challenges facing sellers today is cracking into corporate accounts. Decision makers never answer their phone. They roll all calls to voicemail and they never call anyone back. Most all direct mail goes into the trash and emails from strangers are considered spam.

"You may have the greatest product or service in the world, but if your people can't get their foot in the door, it's all academic. Most sellers I work with are extremely discouraged. They've tried everything they know, but it's not working. I help them figure out what it takes to succeed in this crazy business environment.

How big of an issue is this for your company?"

That's what you need to say to pass the "Tell Me More" Test. Those words don't just roll off your tongue without thinking though. You need to practice and prepare like everything depends on it - because it does.

Your prospect is the ultimate judge of the effectiveness of your "tell me more" response. If you don't advance to the next step, your routine needs more fine-tuning. When you do get that next meeting set up, you'll know you scored a perfect 10.

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