

Trust Matters Blog



Selling from Inside Your Client's Shoes

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You know the phrase, "Walk a mile in someone else's shoes." It's short for empathy, understanding them so well you can intuit what it feels like to take a long walk—wearing their footwear, no less.

Let's adapt that idea to selling. What if you could understand your client so well that you could intuit how it feels to be sitting in their seat in a sales meeting, sensing every nuance along the way?

Shall we give it a try?

Sales Meeting Time T-minus-10

It's 10 minutes before meeting time. You arrive early, and the receptionist ushers you into the conference room and offers you coffee. You nervously drum your fingers on the laptop you brought to introduce yourself and your firm to Claudio and Taciana. They are CEO and COO, respectively, of the relatively new marketing automation firm C3PX. You spoke by phone with Taciana to set up this meeting. You're optimistic, marshaling your nervous energy as you mentally rehearse your key points for the

nth time.

Claudio. Meanwhile, Claudio wonders if he has time to call his 19-year-old daughter at college. Actually, whether to call her at all. Things are not well between the two of them—they haven't been since he and his wife divorced last year. Teenage girls can be so—difficult. And it seemed like she so often took sides with her mother.

Meanwhile, C3PX is doing well—sometimes too well. Claudio just signed another line of credit extension. The good news was the firm's credit was good. The bad news is he wants to pay down some debt, but there was always a need to invest in some new software or process. The meeting in 10 minutes may be another example—a necessary expense, but not welcome in terms of cash flow.

Claudio hopes Taciana can take the lead on this. He's been leaning a lot on her lately. Is he holding up his end of the bargain? Or is it welcome to her—a chance to grow into the business? But what if she's growing too fast and taking over some of Claudio's roles as CEO?

Taciana. Taciana is running late. She's just finished a meeting with HR, and she is concerned the experienced hire recruiting program is short of target. She wonders if she'll need to postpone the ops team call this afternoon until tomorrow, though she did that last week as well. Is she getting a little overloaded? Does it show?

Taciana has mixed feelings about this meeting. On one hand, she genuinely liked the phone call she had with you. She felt you sounded sharp, competent, and confident. But she can't help worrying about your service offering.

Does C3PX really need your kind of service at this point in its growth? You offer some great services, but with them comes another level of complexity. Are the benefits worth it? Should they get along for another 12 to 18 months? What if some new technology comes along and leap-frogs your offering?

Also, is this going to be yet another Taciana-solo project? "Sure, I'm the COO," she thinks, "but that doesn't mean I have to do everything. Am I leveraged enough? Will Claudio think I'm empire-building if I try to delegate? But if I don't, how am I going to get time to spend with my husband? We've been trying to get more time together; he has a demanding job, too. I hope Claudio takes the lead in this meeting."

Sales Meeting Time T = 0

It's time. You take a last look at your phone just as the door opens. In walk Claudio and Taciana.

You all smile and shake hands, then pass out business cards. You each reject offers of more coffee and strategically settle into your chairs, all the while smiling and uttering meaningless phrases in non-committal tones.

The meeting commences.

Like all meetings, it commences on multiple levels. There is the overt agenda to be discussed. There are first impressions, flooding each of you as you quickly take into account the others' appearance, sound, bearing, and manner. Are you who they expected? What's different? What does that mean?

And are they who you expected? What did you misjudge? What did you get right? Can you afford to focus on that and pay attention to what's being said? Do they seem a little rushed? What does that mean? Are they going to sit through your deck, or should you skip it? When should you bring up price?

You can ask them to tell you a bit about their situation, but you can't do too much of that. These days no one has time for someone who hasn't done their homework. Yet neither can you waste time proving you've done your homework. What does it mean that they placed their iPhone next to them? And so on.

Behind the Scenes

The internal dialogue is endless—and that's just yours! What about the dialogue inside Taciana's and Claudio's heads? How important is this inner cacophony? And what should you do about it? Ignore it? Address it? If you choose to address it, how do you do it?

The truth is those internal dialogues are not trivial. They are important. You need to address them. Most of all this is a great opportunity cleverly disguised as an awkward social moment. You can dramatically affect the whole sale, and the whole relationship, by how you conduct yourself in the first few minutes regarding these internal dialogues.

Small Talk Isn't Small

The idle chit-chat we engage in is a potent social ritual. The point is not to find out that you both went to Ohio State or love basketball or have kids. Those are proxies.

The real issue at stake is whether they can trust you—in a very specific sense of that word. It's what we call "intimacy" in the trust equation. Do they feel safe being who they are in your presence? Do you laugh at the right moments—with the right kind of laugh? Do you wince at the right statements—like when Taciana mentions meeting overload? When they say, "Tell us about yourself," do you remember that mostly they're just being nice and then turn the conversation to them?

Do you have the emotional courage to raise your eyebrows when Claudio says, "Teenagers—am I right?" and invite further comment should he choose to go there? When one of them raises price concerns, do you respond with curiosity and say, "Tell me what's behind that concern?" Or do you reply with a canned defense of your value-for-price? Do you have the nerve to say, "I'm sensing a little bit of stress from each of you. Is this decision a source of concern to you?"

This isn't about your value proposition. It isn't about proposing challenging questions or asserting your qualifications. But it's critical. The buyer/seller interaction is many things, but it's first and foremost human. First impressions matter, and not just about clothes and looks.

What buyers want is to feel at ease, trusting, and confident they can be authentically themselves with you and not have to look over their shoulders when dealing with you.

Buyers make up their mind about this subconsciously, and they do it very quickly. Trust in this sense doesn't take time; it takes courage, connection, and empathy. Don't be afraid to let your guard down. Doing so shows others that can do the same with you from the get-go.

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