The Trust Reader

CHARLES H. GREEN ARTICLE SERIES VOL. 5

FEATURING

THE PARADOX OF SELLING

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"The best way for a client to learn how to work with you is to let them work with you. Create a sample experience."

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THE PARADOX OF SELLING

BY CHARLES H. GREEN

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This article was first published on raintoday.com

One obvious purpose of selling is to persuade buyers to buy what you are selling. Most people have no trouble agreeing to that proposition.

And yet—the harder you try to get people to do what *you* want them to do, the more likely they are to push back, resist, and generally behave contrarily. Again, I think most people would agree.

Put these two statements together, and we can easily see selling as an ongoing struggle to get people to do what we want, without making them *feel* that we are trying to get them to do what we want. Selling has at its heart a struggle to reconcile these two truths. You want to sell. They don't want to be sold.

When two truths collide, one tends to lose, or they both tend to get watered down. But the way out is not to give up one goal (to sell) or the other (to not cause the feeling of being sold); it is to fully recognize both and transcend the apparent paradox.

It *can* be done. Here's how.

THE TENSION BETWEEN SELLERS AND CUSTOMERS

This paradox is hardly new. Sellers have palpably felt since time immemorial the tension to selling. Most sellers resolve the tension by one of three strategies:

Defaulting to Truth One: Hard-sell 24-7 to anyone who comes within feeding range;

Defaulting to Truth Two: Being nice and giving away money, relying on the hope that guilt will induce a sale;

Living with It: Internalizing some of form of denial, schizophrenia, or multiple personalities.

"Sellers have palpably felt since time immemorial the tension to selling."

But there is another way:

THE OTHER WAY: TIME, GIFTS AND TRUST

People resist being sold. But people love receiving gifts. In fact, receiving a gift induces a sense of obligation on the part of the recipient. Which suggests a strategy of gift-giving might be the best form of selling.

For services businesses, there is an analogue to gifts—it's what's called sample selling in product businesses. Sample selling in the services might mean brainstorming; a small project; a lunch-and-learn; a webinar; a series of articles; a series of conversations for which you don't bill time; sharing of some previous work.

Sample selling works even better in intangible services than in businesses with "hard" products. The best way for a client to learn how to work with you is to let them work with you. Create a sample experience.

But that's only half the problem. The other half is, if you set out to give a gift *with the express intent of inducing guilt-based buying*, you'll get the reverse—outraged backlash at what is perceived as bait and switch, duplicity, two-facedness. A gift has two features: it is open-ended, and it implies an ongoing relationship. (Think of Don Corleone's in the movie The Godfather: "Perhaps, some time In the future, and that time may never come, I will call upon you for a favor." It is non-specific; it is not legally or logically binding; but it carries huge emotional obligation.

When we try to use the language of the market: "If you give me this, I will give you that," "If you do this for me, I will do that for you," things change. That is the language of a contract, of money, of transactions.

We violate social norms when we offer a social good (like a gift), but really mean it as a market good ("you owe me"). In one case, there is no binding—yet we feel personally bound. In the other, there is explicit market binding—and we feel market-bound, not socially bound.

The trick is for the seller to give up attachment to the specific short term outcome of a particular gift to a particular buyer in a particular timeframe. To give a sample as a gift, not as an obligating transaction.

That power of a gift is unleashed if it is given without overt conditions of time or obligation.   But a gift is diminished

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if it is conditioned on anything—it turns the gift into a market exchange at best, a bribe at worst. If the gift-giver puts conditions on the recipient, the receiver immediately knows it is not a genuine gift, and the magic connection is ruined.

Applied to selling, this means a strategy of loosely controlled sample selling is far more powerful than a tightly controlled strategy of transactions. In simple terms, if you're generous as a policy to a sensible group of people in the short term, many of them will buy in the long term.

But only if you don't ruin it by trying to control them, by treating them transactionally.

WHY THIS IS SO HARD TO PRACTICE

The best salespeople practice this technique already: they freely give of their expertise—a tiny bit to everyone, a lot more to a select group of people. They don't expect sales from any particular person at any point—yet they definitely expect an aggregate amount of sales from an aggregate amount of leads. They don't know from just whom or when; but as long as the return rate remains high, they are quite happy not to be more controlling with any one lead.

Unfortunately, this line of thinking is the opposite of what passes for Received Wisdom in sales these days. Tools like Salesforce.com reinforce the idea of more control, not less; of smaller time increments, not longer; and of more metrics, not less. The dominant theme in improving sales is about efficiency, not effectiveness. Break it down, parcel it out, check it off.

In other words, every transaction is treated not only in isolation from others, but is broken down even more finely. Behaviors are sliced and diced, incentives more finely tuned. Qualifying the lead happens more and more frequently at shorter and shorter time intervals.

The net effect on the customer is to feel more and more mechanically processed. How does a buyer feel to be on the receiving end of a process which constantly evaluates his or her financial worth to the seller? Buyers will predictably feel resentment, and will push back. They don't want to feel sold, to feel a pawn in someone else's game. And any attempt to introduce social norms will backfire if they are tainted by overt commercial attempts at precise

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control. No one wants to be treated as a means to someone else's ends.

HOW TO DO IT

It takes a strong personality to not give in to the general business demand for short term and impersonal sales techniques. But the rewards of staying the course are great. The way to think about it mainly comes down to two changes: less control in timing, and looser control in metrics.

Timing. Take a longer view of the desirability of a particular lead. One-off gifts from strangers don't work as gifts; they just raise suspicion. It's the ability to show a sustained, genuine interest that offers the chance of a relationship. A focus on transactions kills relationships; a focus on relationships allows transactions to blossom. This doesn't mean you don't screen and exclude buyers; it means you do it more definitively, and less frequently.

Selling this way doesn't mean accumulating specific checkmarks—it means a periodic account review where the decision is simply 'do we keep investing in this lead—or not?' Maybe that review happens every 6 months, maybe a bit less. But it is not an ongoing, automatic, short-gated decision. If you're investing in a client, invest in them—until you decide not to.

Metrics. If you loosen up the timeframe, you can also afford to loosen up the criteria. In a longer timeframe, you no longer have to be bound by 3rd level input metrics to evaluate the worth of a lead: at a longer timeframe, things can get simpler. Are you being invited in, or not? Are they returning calls, or not? Is there a real project being discussed, or not? If yes, keep it up. If not, stop it. The decision metrics become far simpler, and selling can focus on relationships, not evaluating transactions.

THE PARADOX OF SELLING

Yes, you still want to sell what you sell. And yes, they still don't want you to control them. Don't choose one or another, and don't sub-optimize. By lengthening your timeframe and reducing the precision and number of metrics, you open up space for the natural human instincts to work. In that context, you can intelligently give the gift of sample selling; and you can reduce the need to control that gift. That way people can feel the natural inclination to reciprocate, rather than the resentful guilt or rejection that short-term control induces.

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YOUR CUSTOMER IS YOUR COMPETITOR IS YOUR PARTNER

Beliefs drive actions. Too many of our beliefs are from the prior era. That disconnect shows up not only in costs, but in select new-era issues.

This article was first published on Businessweek.com

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By focusing on sales through the twin lenses of process and efficiency, we run the twin risks of damaging client relationships and of poisoning the marketplace well.

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ABOUT CHARLES H. GREEN

Charles H. Green is a speaker and executive educator on trust-based relationships and Trust-based Selling in complex businesses. He is author of Trust-based Selling (McGraw-Hill, 2005), and co-author of The Trusted Advisor (with David Maister and Rob Galford, Free Press, October 2000). Charles has spoken before a variety of industry and functional groups. An engaging and content-rich speaker, he has taught in executive education programs for the Kellogg Graduate School of Business at Northwestern, and for Columbia University Graduate School of Business, as well as through his own firm, Trusted Advisor Associates. His work centers on improving trust-based relationship and business development skills for businesses with complex service offerings. Business development, and on building profitable trust-based relationships.

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