Best of Trusted Advisor Associates

eBook Series

Trust-Based Selling

Welcome to our eBook

It's been a long time coming - but the "Best of Trusted Advisor" eBook series is now a reality.

This particular eBook showcases eleven of our favorite blogs and articles on Trust-Based Selling.

We invite you to read and enjoy. And of course, we'd love to hear your comments.

Sincerely,
Charlie & Andrea

Selling Is a Mental Game

ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION

THINK LIKE A BUDDHIST, SELL LIKE A ROCK STAR

THE PARADOX OF SELLING

CAUGHT BETWEEN THE GRINDING WHEEL OF SALES

Think Like a Buddhist, Sell Like a Rock Star

by Charles H. Green

We'll get to sales. First:

> "Terrible drought, crops dead, sheep dying. Spring dried out. No water. The Hopi, or the Christian, maybe the Moslem, they pray for rain. The Navajo has the proper ceremony done to restore himself to harmony with the drought. You see what I mean. The system is designed to recognize what's beyond human power to change, and then to change the human's attitude to be content with the inevitable."
>
> 'Sacred Clowns' by Tony Hillerman

THINK LIKE A BUDDHIST

This viewpoint – what the Navajo call "hozho" – is similar to the Buddhist idea of seeking detachment. Attachment – particularly attachment to outcomes – is the source of pain and suffering.

Too far afield? Try these examples:

- How many parents do you know whose intense desire to see their kids go to Harvard resulted in the kids' rebellion?
- How many people do you know whose obsession with not getting fired contributed to their getting fired?
- How many times have you wanted to hit the ball so hard that you faulted / shanked / struck out?

Being over-eager, reaching too hard, wanting it too bad, can bring the exact opposite result. Call it karmic justice, bad form, or just life.

But that's trivial. That's not what I'm talking about. That's not the real meaning behind the Navajo / Buddhist allegories.

SELL LIKE A ROCKSTAR

Recall some hard-won wisdom from the school of hard-knocks sales.

People like to buy, they just don't like to be sold. Get out of the way, stop trying to control the customer. Let the buying side of the relationship be the driver.

People buy what they need from those who understand what they want. Purchase decisions are driven not by connecting the dots between customer pains and sellers' products, but by alignment of the seller to the buyer's persona.

SPIN Selling. At the risk of over-simplifying Neil Rackham's landmark sales work, the central idea of the Situation-Problem-Implications-Needs-Payoff acronym SPIN is to first listen, and only later to define solutions.

People Buy With their Hearts, and Justify it With their Minds. Justification is not a trivial matter, but buying decisions are heavily emotional. We resent being emotionally manipulated, while we appreciate being emotionally understood.

All these hard-won insights share (at least) one thing in common: They all take the customer as a given, and work to move the seller instead. They're about getting in harmony with the drought – not about praying for rain.

The rock stars of sales are those have internalized these truths.

THE SMARTER THE SALESMAN, THE BIGGER THE SIN

It's been my observation over the years that the smarter the seller, the bigger the violation of the "Buddhist" rule, i.e. the more they are attached to an outcome, the more they try to control the buyer – and they worse they sell.

There are probably a dozen reasons for this: high product complexity attracts "smart" people, for example, as do highly quantitative metrics. Think of what it takes to sell leveraged buyout deals, bespoke synthetic financial assets, high-end CRM systems, or corporate change management initiatives.

Smart people easily jump from "This is a complex product," to "I've got to show I can master the complexity to get the sale." And so they practice elegant rebuttals to arcane objections, forgetting that objections are just rationalizations for emotional disconnect.
Our brain is a pitifully weak weapon for changing another's heart. Relying on it often produces the opposite result. First, embrace the drought.

To be a rock star, first give up attachment to being a rock star.

The Paradox of Selling

by Charles H. Green
This article was first published in 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.

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 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 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.

Caught Between the Grinding Wheels of Sales

by Charles H. Green

A workshop participant recently said something that instantly took me back a few decades. I remember feeling exactly as he described it:

> What am I supposed to do? On the one hand, I genuinely want to do right by my client. At the same time, my firm is depending on me to drive revenue there. They're not asking me to do anything wrong, of course, but the pressure is there nonetheless; it's on me to figure out how to do it, how to ring the bell. And I've got to make it happen; it's my job.
>
> I feel caught between two grinding wheels: everyone's nice about it, but that just makes it worse. I don't know how to make both sides happy, and it's just grinding me down.

Exactly. Boy do I remember that. And if you sell systems, or professional services, or complex B2B services, I bet you can relate too.

So here's what I've learned that's kept me away from the grinding wheels for a long time now.

WHAT YOU MUST REMEMBER

Here's the thing. Three things, actually.

Thing 1. You can't make people do what they don't want. Trying to do so just makes it worse. And much 'selling' rhymes with trying to do just that. (One of my favorite findings in Neil Rackham's great work SPIN Selling is that attempts to teach 'closing' actually made students worse at closing).

Thing 2. If you help other people, it predisposes them to help you. And "help" comes in many flavors, including – very much including – just plain old listening. Listening to people predisposes them to listen to you. And listening to you tends to increase the odds of their buying.

Thing 3. Principle-based behavior beats tactical behavior. If your actions are always based on short-term self-interest, others will not trust you. If your actions are based on principles, others will see it and trust you, including in the buying process.

If you accept Thing 1, you'll lose less. If you start doing Things 2 and 3, you'll win more.

If you think rightly about these three ideas, and act on them – you can escape that feeling of being ground down. Here's how.

PUTTING THE BASIC THINGS TOGETHER

In the happy event that your offering is better than your competitor's, don't blow it by over-reaching. Be calm, open, and natural. Be forthright, but confident that your offering can speak for itself.

If your offering is worse than your competitor's, don't blunt your sword. Admit it. Do what you can to help your client, including – yes, I'm serious – recommending your competitor (you'll gain hugely in credibility). Then go back to your product people and convince them you've got a product problem, not a sales problem.

In the most usual case – your offering is comparable – you do not win by clever pricing, sexy presentations, or ingenious politics. And frankly, winning by adding more value or being cleverer at content is over-rated. Because let's be honest: your competitors are more or less as smart or clever as you are. Expertise these days is a commodity.

Where you can win is by playing the long game, and the principles game. If you consistently aim to help your clients, being forthright at all times about what is in their best interest, they will notice. And you will get more than your "fair share" of business, i.e. more than just the share you might expect based solely on quality of service offering.

Because buyers prefer to deal with principled sellers who have their long-term interests at heart, rather than with serially selfish tacticians. For proof, just ask yourself and your firm how you behave as buyers.

ESCAPING THE GRINDING WHEEL OF SALES

Back to my workshop participant, caught between the grinding wheel of sales. How to escape it?

The answer is an inside job. It requires recognizing that all the tension comes from an inability to accept the Three Things:

- We feel tension when we try to get people to do something we know they don't really want
- We feel tension when we try for what we want, rather than what helps the client
- We feel tension when we try for the transaction, not the relationship.

So – don't do that.

You must believe in and act on those principles. If you decide the principles need a little nudge, that somehow they're not strong enough on their own, then you are simply willing yourself back into that space between the grinding wheels. If you can't live your principles, you will not benefit from them. Nor would you deserve to.

But if you can believe and act on them, you no longer have to worry. Just do the next right thing. Be client-helpful in the long term. Don't Always Be Closing: instead, Always Be Helping.

Work hard, but don't spend an ounce of your effort on trying to get others to do your short-term selfish bidding. Let your competitors play that game, because it simply helps you play yours.

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

What if your boss doesn't buy it, you ask? Tell them you need 9 months to prove it. If they refuse to have anything to do with your view, then you must either come to peace with the grinding wheels, or accept that you'll be happier in another place. The good news is, many managers are quite educable in this regard, particularly if you begin to deliver the numbers, and 9 months give or take is about enough time.

What if your clients don't buy it, you ask? In my experience, about 80% of clients react the way I've described above. The others are either nasty people or monopolists, and they are the ones you should willingly cede to your competitors.

You can stop feeling ground down any time you choose to, starting now. Just choose to Always Be Helping.

Unconventional Sales Wisdom

ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION

CLIENTS DON'T BUY SOLUTIONS, THEY BUY PROBLEM DEFINITIONS

GET REAL OR DON'T CALL ME

DON'T HANDLE OBJECTIONS LIKE SNAKES

STOP TRYING TO CLOSE THE SALE

Clients Don't Buy Solutions, They Buy Problem Definitions

by Charles H. Green

I read an awful lot written about the role of value creation in sales, and I think it's often misconstrued. So here's a provocative statement: People don't buy your value proposition – they buy your problem statement, and give you the sale as a reward.

VALUE: THE USUAL SUSPECT

If sales were like the movie Casablanca, and you rounded up "the usual suspects" for getting the sale, at the top of the list might be "demonstrated value." Salespeople like to think that the reason they got the job was they did a better job at "adding value," "demonstrating value," convincing customers of the "value proposition" they put forth. "Go with us," salespeople say, "and you'll get the greatest expected value."

We impute this decision-making process to our customers, too. If they bought from us, it must be because we did the best job of creating potential value – maybe modified just a bit by their confidence in our ability to deliver on the value we promised.

This value-centric view of selling confirms all the biases of today's salespeople: it's a matter of producing challenging ideas, grand scopes, clearly articulated solutions. The winners are those who conjure up the right mixture of smarts, expertise, and hard work.

So we like to believe.

THE TRUTH: IT'S THE PROBLEM DEFINITION

My old colleague David Maister once said, "The problem is never what the client said it was in the first meeting." And while at the time I thought he was being slightly hyperbolic, I came to believe he was, in the real world, exactly right. A perfectly defined problem rarely requires outside expertise – it just needs a purchase order.

Consultative sellers get called in for other reasons.

The reason is, buyers – consciously or unconsciously – want the benefit of sellers' expertise. They are open – more, or less (often less) – to learning from the seller.

Yet arguably the most common error of sellers in consultative sales situations is – they blindly accept the customer's definition of the problem.

If the problem definition is wrong, then a solution based on it is going to be wrong as well. Worse yet, a fully worked out proposal grounded on a faulty problem definition becomes increasingly tenuous. Buyers acutely and painfully recognize this, and this fact explains why so many consultant CRM systems are full of entries that say "died" instead of "lost."

Clients don't want to admit the definition was wrong from the get-go, so they simply stop returning calls, the sellers get resentful – and everyone goes off to try the same thing all over again, getting, of course, the same results.

The problem definition is the heart of the matter, for two reasons. The obvious reason is if you don't solve the right problem, you'll just make things worse, and as noted above, that becomes increasingly clear to all concerned.

But there's a deeper, psychological reason. If you as a seller can truly engage a buyer in a joint process of discovery, you then trigger something magical: a willingness to explore openly the true issue, and a willingness to engage your expertise in the pursuit.

The result is huge: an expertise-based joint journey of discovery, with a greatly enhanced likelihood of a better problem definition, and a vastly higher level of acceptance of that problem definition.

GETTING THERE IS WAY MORE THAN HALF THE BATTLE

A joint discovery of problem definition requires an openness and a willingness to collaborate on the part of the client. No client I've ever met starts out that way – no client has ever come to me and said, "Gee, Charlie, we're really not sure what's wrong here, but we kind of hope that maybe if you talk to us, things might get better."

Instead, clients come to sellers with the usual set of highly defined problem definitions, desired solutions, and specifications for how those solutions must be tailored to their organization. It takes a great deal of skill to get to the point where you can mutually confess imperfection, and go on a joint journey.

It's the opposite of that old "I'm OK, You're OK" paradigm – it's more like "I'm a Fool, You're a Fool, Let's Figure This Sucker Out Together." (And you don't get there by quoting Maister about how their problem definition is wrong, either).

Having gotten to a point of mutually confessed imperfection, the best problem definition begins. And when you do get to a great problem definition, the amazing thing happens.

The client doesn't buy the best solution: instead, they reward the firm that did the best job of helping them define the problem. You're not getting paid to do the job – you're getting rewarded for having created the best ah-ha for the client – the ah-ha that says, "Ah, yes – that is indeed precisely the issue that we've been having all along here. That's the heart of the matter."

Having gotten that ah-ha, why in the world would a customer then hire someone else to deliver on the vision you've jointly created? Why would you trust anyone but the ones who created the bond with you to develop the insight to actually get you over the river? You just wouldn't, that's all.

Clients don't buy value: they buy the people they have come to trust. In particular, they hire those who have helped them define their problem in a way that they can finally see their way clear to a resolution of their issues. The project, the sale, is not "the thing" – it is simply the currency of reward for having best-defined the problem.

Get Real or Don't Cold Call Me

by Andrea Howe
This article originally appeared on forbes.com

When did financial advisors become telemarketers?

Here's a transcript of a voicemail I received a few weeks ago from a financial advisor named RW—someone I don't know who represents a major company. It wasn't technically a cold call, I suppose, because I had a relationship with the company about a decade ago through my former financial advisor. But it certainly wasn't a warm call. And while RW said nothing whatsoever offensive on her voicemail, it was a perfect example of how the choice to be robotic instead of real kills trust and loses business.

Here's the script she read:

> "Hello, this message is for Andrea Howe. This is RW calling from ABC Financial in Minneapolis. I hope you're doing well.
>
> "I'm a financial advisor here calling to introduce myself but also looking to set up some time to speak with you over the phone to review your finances and discuss any of your concerns and what you're working towards.
>
> "So please call me back at 555-555-5555, extension 555.
>
> "Again, that's RW with ABC Financial. Thank you so much and I look forward to speaking with you soon. Have a good one."

I give her credit for having a pleasant voice and demeanor, and for being brief. And that's about it.

LET'S GET REAL

Mahan Khalsa wrote a book in 1999 called *Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play*. I bought it based on the title alone. He defines the term "getting real" as being authentic and truthful, saying what you mean and being congruent with what you value.

Putting myself in RW's shoes, I bet she hates making these calls. If she's honest, she probably feels as awkward leaving those voicemails as the receivers feel listening to them. And she's probably frustrated that while she's a good advisor with real talent to offer, she's not getting as many new clients as she'd like.

In the spirit of getting real, here's what I wish RW had said—for both our sakes:

> "Andrea, this is RW calling from ABC Financial in Minneapolis. You have no idea who I am and, from your perspective, no reason whatsoever to give me the time of day. And I'm sure time is something you have precious little of.
>
> "Here's what I know: it's been ten years since you were an active client with ABC. And every year you get a call from someone like me because our database tells us it's time to check in with you. You probably hate these calls. I apologize on behalf of my company and my colleagues for the time we've wasted with you in the past.
>
> "My guess is that it's likely that your financial advisory needs are being met. Ten years ago you were starting your own business and poised for success. I bet you've come a long way in that time.
>
> "If by chance your financial advisory needs aren't being met, or aren't being met to your satisfaction, I'd like to have the opportunity to be of service. I would gladly offer a free portfolio review as a way for you to get to know me and show you what I could do for you. There's certainly no obligation to say yes to the review, or to say yes to doing business together after the review. You can count on me to not waste your time if we talk, and if at any point we reach the conclusion that it doesn't make sense to go any further, then we won't go any further.
>
> "If you've gotten this far in the voicemail, thank you for taking the time to hear me out.
>
> "My personal cell number is 777-777-7777. I'll gladly take your call any day, any time."

GETTING REAL GETS RESULTS

The second version—the one I call the Get Real version—could be a script too, as long as it is delivered with some actual human feeling behind it.

Let's compare the probable outcomes for each version of the call script:

	The Actual Version	The Get Real Version
Probability of getting my positive attention	Zero	High
Probability of getting a call back	Zero	Medium
Probability of winning my business back	Zero	Low
Probability of getting a referral from me, even if we don't do business together	Zero	Low - Medium
Probability of getting my negative attention and getting written about on Forbes.com	High	Zero

You tell me: which version has the better probable payoff?

My finances are personal. Trust is personal. This is my plea: Let's get real or stop wasting each other's time.

Don't Handle Objections Like Snakes

by Charles H. Green
This article was first published in Raintoday.com

I googled "sales objections," and got 43,000 hits. Amazon yields 80 references. It's a popular topic—objections are what we fear most when we think of "selling."

The titles indicate how "objection-handling" is viewed. 90% of the verbs that go with "objection" are either "handling" or "overcoming." (Occasional mention: "eliminating," "crushing"). And why not? How dare those clients "object" to our wonderful propositions!

All those verbs ooze negativity. The very language we use suggests that "objections" are the enemy—something nasty to be overcome, gotten rid of, dealt with—better yet, conquered, crushed or destroyed.

The way most of us would view having to handle snakes.

NEGATIVITY

Here are some typical negative quotes from various selling books. (Note they almost all are based on tangible products businesses, rather than professional services—which makes them sound all the more jarring to a services client's ear).

ON THE ROLE OF OBJECTIONS

An objection from a customer can and should be overcome by the closer. There should be no excuse for not overcoming a legitimate, honest objection from the customer. This is the closer's job: to provide answers, get an agreement, and conquer (close).

A TYPICAL LOGIC STRUCTURE OF AN OBJECTION-HANDLING SESSION

Salesperson: "What is the reason you are not buying?"

Client: [states his objection].

Salesperson: "Is that the only reason?"

Client: "Yes."

Salesperson: "Then, if [eliminates objection] would you buy?"

Client: "Yes."

SEVERAL ELECTED OBJECTION HANDLING TECHNIQUES

The Boomerang: yes, it is expensive, but I don't think you would want to buy your wife a cheap present.

The Conditional Close: you say you want a red one. If I can phone up and get you one, will you take it today?

The Deflection: Yes, I see what you mean…mmm…Now let me show you the range of finishes you can have…

The Feel/felt/found Model: I understand you feel about that. Many others have felt the same way. And what they have found is that….

These are manipulative, yes—but that's not the point. They all place us in opposition to the client. They cast the client either as the enemy, or as a hill to be taken.

From this standpoint, "objections" are bound to feel like handling snakes.

The usual, negative, approach to objections is part of a wrong set of beliefs, including:

- The purpose of business is to make a profit
- The purpose of selling is to get the revenue
- The purpose of closing is to get the sale
- The purpose of objection-handling is to get the close.

You can't get rid of the snake-handling feel without getting rid of this snakes' nest of bad thinking.

Here's an alternative, positive set of ideas:

- The purpose of business is to add value where none existed
- The purpose of selling is to jointly articulate and point the way to greater value
- Closing reflects agreement on a common view of the greater value to be created
- Objections vaguely indicate lack of agreement on a view of a greater value to be created.

RETHINKING OBJECTIONS

At the outset of a professional relationship, we bring some strong ideas about how to add value. So do our clients. This is as it should be. Working collaboratively with the client to take the best of both perspectives creates the maximum value.

The concept of "objections" undermines that potential synergy. It suggests that selling is a struggle of ideas, a contest of wills, and that our job is to persuade the client of the superiority of ours. Hence we get objection-"handling." Like snake-"handling", it has overtones of danger—if we don't know the tricks of savvy handlers, we're likely to get bitten.

But we don't need to go there. If we can approach the client with an open-minded, curiosity-driven, adventuresome, mutual attitude of discovery—then "objections" no longer look like snakes. They are simply emotional statements about the buyer's readiness. They are information, not attacks.

Of course, there will always be issues of timing, budget, politics and alignment. We need to proactively identify them along with the client. To do any less is unprofessional.

Then there are the issues your tummy tells you are emotional, not rational. Price is a common one, but any objection can be nominally about one thing, and in fact about something else. Most objections have multiple layers.

The temptation is to treat every "objection" as being about what it claims to be. But people buy for emotional reasons, then justify it later in rational terms. We must deal with the emotional underlying the rational.

Sometimes this is best done overtly ("I get the feeling you're not happy about this; can you say more about it?") Other times, it is enough to tacitly acknowledge the feelings. The point is to deal with the underlying reality.

SPEAKING THE NEW LANGUAGE

We and our clients get stuck in the old language of "objection-handling" and "closing." We need new language to communicate new approaches, but also to signal ourselves and others that something fundamental has shifted.

Here are some phrases to get rid of, and some new ones to add.

1. Get rid of the word "objections" itself. The term suggests a negative reaction to something we proposed—but this shouldn't be about us! Let's start with the client, not with us. Start with the idea of a client's concerns—not ours.
2. Every client is concerned about change itself. They simply want to know that they have covered all the bases, that they haven't left anything out. Our role is to help them make sure they have thought of everything—and, where there are answers, to articulate them. And where there are not, to articulate that too.Your client does not want an advocate, but a trusted advisor. Help them by uncovering all their concerns, not by "handling" their "objections."
3. Get rid of—completely—the old "if I could meet this objection, then would you buy?" language. It is manipulative, but more importantly, it is all about you and your objectives—not about the client.
4. In initial conversations, start a joint running list of issues and concerns that the client has. Share that list at all times—and work on in it jointly. Introduce issues with the phrase, "If I were in your shoes, I imagine I'd be concerned about…" Make sure that you include some emotional and political issues on your list, e.g. "I would imagine you'd be concerned about how your internal clients will perceive the price you end up paying; is that right?"
5. At several points—particularly after resolving some concerns—look jointly at the list and say, "How are we coming along here? Is this process helping the decision? Are we meeting your time schedule? Are there any concerns that have emerged since we last talked that we need to get onto the list?"
6. If at any point you sense hesitation, say, "I sense that you've got some other concern here that we haven't written

down. Is that right? Is it the process itself? Tell me how you're feeling." You need to use direct, honest talk here, otherwise the client can withdraw—in which case the trusted relationship you're working to cultivate can fall down. Honest, unselfish concern is the antidote.

Your objective is not to handle the objection, or close the deal, or get the sale. Those things happen naturally, as outcomes—as long as you don't make them goals. Making them goals turns your client into objects, and you end up handling them like snakes.

Don't handle objections; help define and solve client concerns. Let go your concern about the outcome—paradoxically, that willingness the outcome go will improve your outcomes.

Stop Trying to Close the Sale

by Charles H. Green
This article was first published in Raintoday.com

When was the last time you "closed a sale?" What's your success rate in "closing" sales? Better yet, when was the last time someone tried to "close" you? Did it work?
Was it a positive experience?

Here's a guess at your answer. For a significant percentage of your sales, it's hard to identify where "closing" happened-the decision just got made, or didn't.

When you do try to close, you often feel uncomfortable; worse yet, more often than not, it doesn't work. When someone tries to "close" you, it generally doesn't work—and when it does, you often buy despite the seller's close, rather than because of it.

If that sounds familiar, you're not alone. The business development process for professional services-indeed, for most intangible and complex purchases-is hindered by this vestigial concept. You don't need to get better at closing. You need to stop it.

THE CULT OF CLOSING

The concept of closing probably goes back centuries. Think of itinerant peddlers, carnival barkers, open-air markets. You can hear closing "lines" being practiced today on infomercials and in street fairs (not to mention automobile dealerships). Done well (think Ron Popiel) they're part of the entertainment of buying.

By mid-twentieth century, the concept had gone mainstream. The concept of "always be closing" was taught in the well-regarded Xerox Sales approach and many others.

It lives on today. Here's what Amazon's search algorithm produces when the word "sales" is linked to a related term:

Sales	302.410
Sales Price	24,969
Sales Pitch	11,797

Sales Meetings	5,608
Sales Close	5,390
Sales Leads	5,270
Sales Buyer	4,756
Sales Quality	4,616
Sales Presentation	4,610
Sales Decision	3,041
Sales Qualify	691
Sales Screen	597

Clearly, the idea of "closing" is alive and well in sales. But that doesn't mean it's right for you. The higher your average sale price, the more complex the sale is, the more relationship-driven it is, and the longer it takes-the less "closing" is likely to help you.

WHAT CLOSING IS

Did you ever notice that all sales approaches seem to use arrow diagrams? It's because they conceive of sales as a process that is linear and rational.

Here is typical language, taken from an 8-step version of a sales process model:

The sales person checks that if they can meet the specification, then the customer will give them the sale ('If I…would you…' trial close). After dealing with any objections, the target solution is presented:

- Show features that meet customer needs (in priority order).
- Show additional advantages.
- Describe benefits that the customer is really buying.
- Explain how it works (but don't over do it!).
- Confirm that they are comfortable with all of this.

The customer now makes the final selection of the product to meet their specification and criteria and hence solve their problems.

The sales person summarizes benefits (Summary Close), asks for the sale (using their favorite close), discusses any logistics detail and reassures the customer that they have made a good decision.

There are two critical assumptions buried in this approach:

1. The purpose is to get the transactional sale
2. Buying is a sub-category of rational decision-making.

These assumptions are what make you as a professional squirm in your seat when trying to "close" a real-life professional services client.

MOTIVES MATTER

Why do (most) automobile salespeople try to close you?

- To qualify you as a lead, so they can focus on likely-to-buy customers
- Because if you walk out the door, you probably won't come back
- Because they feel you need that little "push" to make a decision

The first reason is all about them, not you; they come across as selfish and manipulative. The second is only a disguised version of the first.

The third infantilizes you the buyer; fine for the emotionally needy, not for most competent buyers. Of all the components of trust, the most important is low self-orientation. Think of low self-orientation as client focus for the sake of the client, not for the sake of the seller. Most client focus is the client focus of a vulture; when we find someone who actually seems to care about us as an end, not as a means, we are positively inclined to trust them.

This is the first major problem with closing: it is inherently seller-oriented. It is all about this transaction, here-now. It casts the buyer in the role of means to the seller's ends. It makes the customer an object.

It's bad enough when you're buying a car. How much worse is self-orientation when you're an accountant talking to a CFO? A publicist talking to an artist? A consultant talking to a CIO?

Motives matter. Closing is an inherently selfish perspective. To close is to put your needs ahead of the client's. That doesn't work.

HOW CLIENTS BUY

The other assumption buried in "closing" is the belief that buying is about rational decision-making. (Ironically, the old-time closing techniques stay purely emotional-see infomercials for an example; the rational add-on is one from modern corporate sales models).

If they haven't bought, so the logic goes, there must be a reason. If I can uncover the reason, I will remove the blockage to their buying. Repeated attempts to close (the ABC rule, Always Be Closing) make sense based on this logic.

But it's not quite right. As Jeffrey Gitomer puts it, "the buying decision is made emotionally, and justified rationally." Lawyers, consultants and accountants think this doesn't apply to their clients, but it most often does.

In almost all cases, you know more about your service offering than the client does. That's why they're buying you. But they don't want to become experts in your area of expertise-instead, they want to find an expert they can trust. Their need is not to make a rational decision-their need is to feel comfortable with a rational decision they have to make.

Unfortunately, the "closing" model plays right into three of the largest problems professionals have:

1. We talk too much about ourselves
2. We talk too much about our product or service offering
3. We push too fast to move to action steps.

When buyers buy, it isn't because their objections have been met, or they have been persuaded by rational arguments. It's because they've gotten comfortable with the decision. If they come to feel they trust you—that you have their interests at heart, you understand their concerns, you can be relied on, you will have a commitment to dealing rightly with the inevitable unforeseen circumstances-then they will hire you.

IN PLACE OF CLOSING

The very concept of "closing" is misplaced in professional services. It presumes a transactional, seller-centric, linear, rational model of decision-making about a product or service. Instead, what is needed is a client-centric model of arriving at a level of trust in the seller.

What does that look like? Probably a lot like what you do when you're successful:

1. A focus on the relationship, not the transaction
2. Sample selling that applies competence to the problem itself, rather than talking about qualifications (I call it Selling by Doing, not Selling by Telling)
3. A lot of listening-open-ended, plain old, paying attention for its own sake
4. Envisioning-helping the client envision an alternative view of reality, in rich detail.
5. As always, with trust, there is a paradox. If you stop closing, you'll close more deals. But only if you do it for the client's sake. You actually have to care about the client.

Sales Tools That Actually Build Trust

ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION

ARE YOU TALKING YOUR WAY OUT OF A SALE

FOUR ESSENTIAL FACTORS FOR BUILDING TRUST WITH SOPHISTICATED BUYERS

THAT'S NOT A CSF - THAT'S JUST A KPI

Are You Talking Your Way Out of a Sale?

by Charles H. Green
This article was first published in Entrepreneur.com

What's the best way to answer the question, "So, tell us a little bit about your company?"

If you're like most salespeople, you view this as a sincere invitation to rattle off all those key points you've rehearsed, all those selling points and value propositions you've developed, tweaked and improved with each pitch.

But when customers ask that question, they are not, in fact, all that interested in hearing about you. It's not that they're lying to you, their intentions are good. The problem is they never went to buying school, and frankly they just don't know what else to ask you.

Unfortunately, they use the words "tell us about yourself"—and we hear it literally. They're not interested in your story—they want to hear about their story. This is often the fork in the road that can send you down the path of literally talking your way out of the sale.

HOW DO YOU MAKE YOUR STORY THEIR STORY?

First, if the client asks you to tell them about yourself, you shouldn't embarrass them by refusing to do so. But you can quickly turn the conversation back to them. And once they start talking about themselves you have an opening to weave your story lines into theirs.

You may recognize this as a form of samples selling. Product salespeople know it well—instead of talking about the product's features, give the customer a sample. If you're selling cars, offer a test drive, if you're selling ice cream, hand out little wooden spoons.

The way you do samples selling in complex, intangible services is to actively engage the client in a discussion about their situation. Now, in the context of their situation, you can demonstrate your capabilities in a meaningful and relevant way.

You don't want to be a name-dropper or a show off (that's just annoying), but if you're having a serious conversation with the customer you'll easily find places to say things like:

1. “Ah yes, that’s just what Intel did in a similar situation,”
2. “So, doesn’t that leave you with just choice a and choice b?
3. “Most of the time, that ratio is less than half, isn’t it?”
4. “The majority of my clients choose to do X rather than Y; which way did you go on that issue?”
5. “Have you ever thought of outsourcing that process?”

Think of selling this way as showing, not telling. You are actively engaged in showing the customer how you fit into their story—and you’re helping them tell that story going forward.

Let your competitors sell by telling their story. It won’t work very well because the only story the clients are interested in is their own. You be the one to work your way into their story. Work your way into their story—don’t talk your way out of it a sale.

Four Essential Factors for Building Trust with Sophisticated Buyers

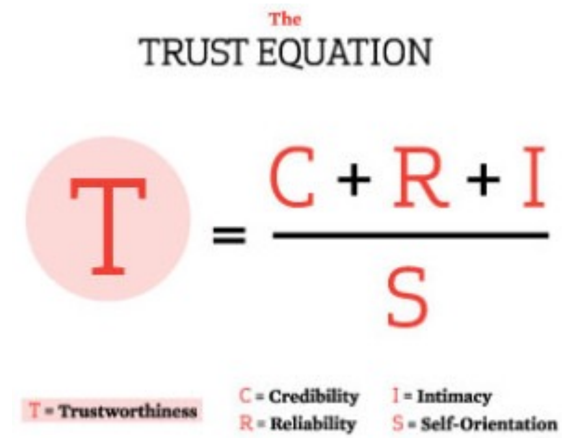
By Andrea Howe
This article was first published in Richardson.com

Here's something I've learned about sales professionals in the years I've been leading training programs: they're avid learners in hot pursuit of excellence. And for the best of the best, "excellence" is determined not by numbers, but by the difference they make.

Use this four-part checklist to gain insight into ways to raise your game.

DO THE MATH

In this day and age, there are very, very few who dispute the importance of building trust in the sales process.



While trust-based selling is far from formulaic, it helps to approach it with a formula in your back pocket. That's where the trust equation comes in.

David Maister, Charlie Green, and Rob Galford first wrote about the trust equation in The Trusted Advisor in 2000. Eleven years later, Charlie and I reprised it in *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook*. It's proven to be a perennial favorite.

One reason for the trust equation's popularity is that it has many uses. As a conceptual framework, it demystifies what it really takes to be trustworthy. It can also be used in a more specific way to "score" a particular person (you) or a particular relationship (yours with a client). The key to getting the best use out of it is to understand the distinctions between each of its four variables, along with the direct impact of each on your sales success.

I've described each of the four variables below from most to least provocative. Here's the critical question: How do you fare on each one?

GET OFF YOUR "S"

We know him from a mile away: the stereotypical used car salesman who's all about him. I doubt there's a single person reading this blog who falls into that category because you wouldn't be interested in the kind of content that's posted here. That said, I bet there are a lot of readers who succumb to the self-orientation trap, as the trust equation defines it. I say that because we all do at one time or another, and more often than we realize.

Self-orientation is essentially about your focus—is it directed at you or your clients? It lives in the denominator of the trust equation; therefore it's the only one we want to be small, as it is naturally when you're focused on others.

For most of us, self-orientation expands in subtle and sneaky ways, such as when the high achievers among us succumb to "premature solutions," or when those who prefer to be in control begin to steer a conversation towards our own agenda, or when our desire to be liked interferes with our willingness to have tough conversations. Generally speaking, as our discomfort and anxiety increases, our "S" gets bigger and bigger.

And if these shoes don't fit you, take this litmus test: are you willing to refer your client to a competitor when you know the competitor will do a better job? If the answer is "no," or "it depends," that's high self-orientation in the works. It's also a failure to embrace a critical paradox of sales, by the way, which is this: the best way to close more deals is to stop trying to close more deals and instead get relentlessly focused helping your client make the best decision for her right now.

(And now you see why I said self-orientation is the most provocative variable for salespeople.)

If you're looking to transform your relationships with your clients, and your sales results in the process, then get off your "S."

GO SOFT

I work with a lot of professional services people who don't see themselves as salespeople and they almost universally assume the following about those who are: "They're great at the 'soft stuff.' They have to be."

Sadly, I'm not at all sure that's true.

If my direct experience is any indication, salespeople don't score any higher on the next most provocative variable of the trust equation, which is intimacy. And that's not because I'm leading remedial programs for the mediocre (in fact, it's usually the opposite). I believe it's because so many of us in business are taught, either directly or indirectly, to eschew anything that seems touchy-feely.

Intimacy is about safety and your ability to form and maintain relationships that are comfortable and secure for others. A trusted advisor (and an exceptional salesperson, which I'd argue are one in the same) is a safe haven for tough issues. So then intimacy is yeast to leavened bread: a have-to-have, not a nice-to-have.

There are many pathways to intimacy. Time on the golf course with a client is only one of dozens of options, and not necessarily your best one. Other possibilities include listening deeply and with a real demonstration of empathy, sharing something personal about yourself, asking questions others would be afraid to ask (in a respectful and appropriate way, of course), and telling your client something you really appreciate about her—just to name a few.

If you're not getting called in by your clients as early or as often as you'd like, do the work that's required to go soft.

TELL THE TRUTH, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT MAKES YOU LOOK BAD

People don't want to buy from people who know everything; people want to buy from people who know enough to meet their needs and who have a track record of dealing with others directly and honestly. In other words, they need to be confident in both the message and the messenger. That's because credibility, as the trust equation defines it, is as much about truthfulness as it is about knowledge and experience.

Building others' confidence in you as the messenger is harder than it sounds in a profession where the very dictionary definition of "sell" references synonyms like "betray" and "cheat." As a salesperson, you're doomed to some extent before you even walk in the proverbial door because the prevailing mindsets about the profession.

It is for this very reason that there is a silver lining: truth-telling in sales becomes a critical differentiator, especially when that truth is personally risky. Saying "I don't know" when you don't, and when you're a tinge (or a lot) embarrassed about that, is paradoxically one of the best ways to increase your credibility. Admitting you screwed something up when you did is another one—times 10 if you're afraid it might cost you the sale. The key, of course, is to be genuine about it all.

Do you have a client relationship where things have stalled in spite of your certainty that the message is clear and compelling? The problem might be the messenger. Ask yourself just how honest you've been willing to be.

Remember follow-through = table stakes

There's a telling activity that I run in my training programs. It goes like this:

> *Close your eyes and bring to mind your own trusted advisor—someone you can talk to about a wide range of issues, professional as well as personal, including those sensitive in nature. Then jot down the first words that come to mind to describe that person.*

When I chart everyone's words on the board for all to see, one trend is always true: instances of words like "dependable," "consistent," and "predictable" are noticeably lower than instances of words like, "caring," "good listener," "objective," "has my best interests at heart," and "willing to say what I don't want to hear."

This is partly due to the way the question is asked, true, since the question ties directly to the definition I use of a trusted advisor (safe haven for tough issues). That said, I'll assert that it's mostly due to the fact that traits like dependability, consistency, and predictability are assumed. They're table stakes.

The variable that's getting short-shrift here, according to the trust equation, is reliability. Reliability refers mostly to the extent to which others can count on you to do what you say you will do, as well as the extent to which they can count on you to get in communication about it when you don't or won't.

Reliability is essential for trustworthiness—in fact, all four variables are equally important. The best salespeople take their promises very seriously, including the littlest promises, because they know that trustworthy people can be counted on for tasks of all sizes. That said, reliability isn't the be-all-end-all when it comes to building trust. And because it seems relatively easy to fix or address (compared to finding the courage to deliver a controversial message), it often gets undeserved attention.

Does it seem like you have a good thing going with a client, only she never puts herself at risk of having to rely on you for much? Get your reliability house in order. Then train your sites on the other three variables.

DON'T TRUST ME; TAKE IT FOR A TEST DRIVE

Don't take my word for the value of the trust equation; try it out. One way to do that is to take a good, hard look at a relationship that isn't as prosperous as you'd like it to be.
Reflect on how your own scores on credibility, reliability, intimacy, and (low) self-orientation might inform your next move on the path to sales excellence.

I'll bet you your next commission check that if you put the four variables to good use they'll give you an edge you can count on for the duration of your career.

That's Not a CSF - That's Just a KPI

By Charles H. Green
This article was first published on raintoday.com

I had a conversation with BigCo., Inc. They want their B2B salespeople to become trusted advisors.

They felt (correctly) that greater trust levels with their customers would result in greater intra-customer market share, and greater profitability. And they're right.

But then they described their implementation plan. It consisted of breaking down the objectives into finer and finer components, matching them up with accountable org units. Pretty standard practice.

As we dug deeper, a pattern emerged. The higher penetration levels, for example, were broken into more sales calls, more proactive ideas, and greater time spent up front. On the face of it, that sounds perfectly reasonable: if penetration were to increase, you'd probably see these changes in activities.

CONFUSING CAUSE AND EFFECT

The problem is – simply increasing the number of sales calls won't do a thing; they have to be good calls. Simply offering more ideas won't do a thing; they have to be decent ideas. Simply spending more time up front won't do a thing; the time has to be well-spent. And simply assuming good calls, decent ideas, and well-spent time does not make it so.

I know, it sounds perfectly obvious in the telling. But I've found that BigCo's story (actually a composite of several clients) is very common. It may even be the norm.

BigCo has managed to confuse KPIs (key performance indicators) with CSFs (critical success factors). They have confused correlation with causation. They have confused measurements with the things being measured. And since we live in a management world that uncritically worships metrics ("if you can't measure it you can't manage it"), this confusion has critical and strategic implications.

Especially when you're trying to implement a values-driven strategy – like becoming trusted advisors.

MEASUREMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Just because something looks obvious in the rear view mirror doesn't mean it was obvious when you first came up on it. Case in point: BigCo's flawed logic in their approach to trust-based selling.

Increasing penetration requires more sales calls, they thought; and they're probably right. Their mistake lay in thinking that "more sales calls" was a cause. It's not – it's an effect.

"More sales calls" may be a KPI, but it's not a CSF. It may be an outcome, but it's not a driver. "More sales calls" is a metric – it is not the thing that "more sales calls" is intended to measure. That "thing" is something like "more high quality interactions driven by mutual curiosity."

This confusion between actions and measurements, causes and effects, KPIs and CSFs, is not only common, it's becoming rampant. It's a real issue not only for old-line businesses, but for new era businesses as well. Let's look at some examples.

GAMING THE NUMBERS

We're all familiar with the salesperson who knows how to tweak an imperfect system to maximize his commissions at the expense of, say, the company's gross margins. "Hey, I'm just following the incentives you built in." That salesperson seized on a metric that imperfectly measured the company's intended sales behaviors. (The proper management response would be not to change the metric, but to insist on a higher set of principles that overrule one misguided number).

Next time you get a customer service operator on the line, check to see whether they conclude by saying something like, "May we say that I gave you excellent customer service today?" You are experiencing a system that is driven by metrics to the point where operators shamelessly beg for ratings. The metrics have been pimped out to serve a goal other than the customer service they were meant to measure.

See for yourself. Go to Amazon, and search for books under any significant topic you like (e.g. sales). Make sure you're sorting on relevance. It's amazing how many books are rated over four stars (out of five). The reason is simple: we have been taught to look for ratings. Of course, the emphasis on ratings suborns all kind of perjury, misleading, and even outright falsehoods.

It's not just books. Look at the flood of 'recommendations' on LinkedIn. Look at the massive follow-me-I-follow-you dynamic on Twitter and other media. Or just look at your own behavior; what do you do when a friend asks you to rate a book, to promote a blogpost, or to recommend them. In Dave Eggers' 2013 best-seller The Circle (still #2992 on Amazon as I write this – another metric), there is monstrous grade inflation on all metrics in his Facebook-Google fictional internet firm of the future.

Much of this comes down to our obsession in business with metrics. It goes back to the invention of the spreadsheet and the success of books like Reengineering the Corporation. All numbers all the time are our secular business religion.

THE WAGES OF CONFUSION

The “so what” is big indeed. Assume that any metric, almost by definition, has to be a pale reflection of the “thing” that is to be measured. We accept anniversary gifts as tokens of our love; market share as an indicator of competitive success; and, in the case of BigCo, numbers of sales calls as indicators of trusted advisor relationships. But we all know an anniversary gift does not a marriage make.

The only way to become trusted advisors to your customers is to gain the trust of your customers. You do not cause trust by increasing the number of sales calls; rather, greater trust causes more invitations for you to call on prospects. Doing the dishes doesn’t cause a great marriage; instead, a great marriage results in you doing the dishes willingly.

Confusing KPIs with CSFs causes KPIs to be artificially inflated. We know this intuitively, and so we discount them – while still trying to get higher scores on more of those discounted-value KPI metrics. We all know the game is rigged – but we keep playing it faster and faster.

What’s at stake is nothing less than how we implement things like “better client relationships.” You don’t get there by measuring metrics and deluding yourself that you’re addressing root causes. You get there only by understanding what it takes to interact with your very human customers – and then doing it.

Do that, and the numbers will take care of themselves.

Bonus Article

WHAT TO SAY WHEN THE CLIENT SAYS YOUR PRICE IS TOO HIGH

What to Say When the Client Says Your Price Is Too High

by Charles H. Green
This article was first published in Raintoday.com

If you're like most professionals, you're not too comfortable with selling in the first place.

It's not easy fighting that feeling that hyping yourself feels somehow inappropriate. And it's worse having to deal with objection-handling, doing presentations, and getting rejections. Or waiting for the phone to ring. But little can compete for sheer discombobulation with the plain old, "We think your prices are too high." What do you say to that?

LISTEN TO YOUR GUT

When you hear those words—"your prices are too high"—you probably have one reaction in your mind. "What? How can (s)he possibly think our prices are too high? What are they talking about? We've trimmed them already; I know they're not too high, other firms have got to be that high, and our costs are barely covered here, we're absorbing a lot—how can they say our prices are too high?"

In other words—you really do not understand what they mean. Go with that instinct. Ask your self seriously, objectively, curiously—just what exactly is it that they mean when they say your prices are too high. And stay there for a minute. Do not pass Go, do not jump to "how could they?" Because until you know what they mean, you are simply having an argument with yourself. You are presuming to know what they mean, and are starting to answer the presumed objections you have invented in your own mind. Think there's only one possible meaning? Think again. Let's go through some of those answers you so quickly provided in your own mind, and explore just what questions those answers might be responsive to—and not responsive to.

1. Sticker Shock. Sometimes, a client simply is not up to date on the cost of what you have proposed (which hopefully bears some resemblance to what they had asked for). Maybe they've never bought this service, or not bought it lately. In any case, they may feel embarrassed by their ignorance. Not wanting to appear at fault for not being current, they may react with some aggression, masking their defensiveness. "You're just quite a bit too high," they say, hoping to bluster their way out of the difficult situation.

2. Budget Busting. Sometimes a client simply hasn't thought through the combined costs, or the timing of costs, and the total picture ends up being out of sync with the reality of the their budget. In this case, they may not be embarrassed so much as disappointed. But it may be heard to tell the difference from their tone.

3. Bazaar Bargaining. Some clients simply prefer to use the approach of a bazaar: to assume that they buying process is one of back and forth negotiation, that they stated price is simply an 'opening gambit' in an exciting game. In such a case, the client is neither embarrassed nor disappointed—rather, somewhat excited by the process. But their stern countenance will suggest anything but that.

4. Sucker-Punched. If you get a particularly aggressive pushback from a client, suggesting strongly (even literally) that a competitor has deeply undercut you, you may have been sucker-punched by a low-balling competitor. It happens. If you're honest, you may admit you've done it once or twice yourself. Therefore their furrowed brows reflect a genuine belief that you're trying something shady.

Here's the key point. If you try to guess which one of these scenarios is operating behind the curtain of your client's eyes, you have maybe one chance in four of getting it right. But far, far worse—if you choose to guess, without confirming your guess with the client, you will lose—even if you guessed right. Therefore the worst thing to do is start defending against the attack you are imagining in your own head. And the best thing to do is exactly what you don't want to do—to ask the client, simply, "Can you help me understand just what you mean by that?"

ASKING THE HELP ME UNDERSTAND QUESTION

You're probably afraid of your mind's version of the client's answer in your head: it probably sounds something like, "What part of 'too high' didn't you understand, you fool! Like, way high. Like costs too much, out of the realm, not going to win, out of line. Too high! What is it you think you need explained?" But the clients in our mind are far worse than clients in the real world. When you say, "help me understand," real clients will react one of two ways. Either they'll begin to explain ("well, we just haven't got that kind of budget," "we think you guys always come in high," etc.), or they'll look a bit confused and ask, "uh, what do you mean?" In either case, all you have to do is explain that "different clients often mean widely varying things when they say the price is too high."

Then read off the list above: "some find it like sticker shock; some have budget problems; some just figure our opening prices are just that, and some have been presented some really different proposals." Go on to say, "I don't know if I can help or not. Some of these situations lend themselves to working out, and some don't. In any case, if you'll share with me a little more about what's behind your concern, then we can see if something can be done or not. If so, great. And if not, then we'll both at least know we tried."

THE INTENT BEHIND THE CONVERSATION

Your words have to work for you; using my words may or may not do the trick. Which means, you need to be very clear about the intent behind this conversation. The intent is to treat price concerns like any other objective piece of information: you explore its meaning and implications with the client until you have a shared understanding. Your time to market is too slow? What do you mean by too slow? Compared to what? What are the implications of being too slow to market? What are the drivers of being slow to market for you? In that same spirit you want to understand the drivers of price concern for the individual in front of you. The fact that the discussion is about price and price is usually an emotional topic is not a problem—it's a great opportunity. Because price is an equally uncomfortable topic for most clients (the Bazaar Bargainer an exception). And if you can be the one that turns a difficult one into a pleasant, curious, customer-focused question, then you are the one that gets credit for transforming the conversation into greater trust. Your intent, as always, is to develop a deeper relationship with the customer, and to do the right thing for that customer. You can never control the outcome of a price conversation; but being curious and honest about it increases the odds, and pays relationship dividends in future.

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 the author of three books on the subject of trust in business, including his latest with co-author Andrea P. Howe, *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook*. Charles has taught in executive education programs for Kellogg Graduate School of Business at Northwestern, and for Columbia University Graduate School of Business, as well as through his own firm. His work centers on improving trust-based relationship and business development skills for businesses with complex service offerings.

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Andrea P. Howe is the co-author, with Charles H. Green, of *The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Leading with Trust*. She is a Principal for Trusted Advisor Associates and the founder of The Get Real Project. A recovering information technology consultant, Andrea has spent more than 20 years managing projects, working with clients, and facilitating groups of all kinds and sizes. Her focus for the last decade has been teaching people in consultative roles how to get better results by getting relationships right. Andrea holds a BBA in Computer Information Systems and an MS in Organization Development. She has lead hundreds of learning programs for Accenture, Blackboard, Deloitte, Great-West Life and Price Waterhouse Coopers, among others.