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## Problem solving mandatory to achieve B2B sales success

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When David fired his slingshot, he solved a big problem -- Goliath. Today's business-to-business sales forces also must be prepared to solve their customers' big problems.

Salespeople able to uncover and solve customer problems on a continuing basis evolve into trusted advisers. Once in that valued, inner circle of trust, salespeople will find the sales process becomes almost automatic, as long as their problem-solving magic continues.

Business buyers target sharpshooting salespeople who will consistently provide unique solutions to problems, or help them identify or prevent unseen problems.

Sometimes, the real problem will be apparent. More often than not, unearthing the real problems requires some articulate digging because the symptoms may be a mask for other issues. In either case, both are often linked to other, subtler challenges that also need addressing.

One surefire way to fail is to open discussion by asking if the company has problems. The prospect will claim it doesn't. This is similar to when a retail salesperson asks, "Can I help?" The likely response is, "Just looking."

This type of broad, offhanded approach, whether or not you have background on the company, will make it appear you know nothing about the company but its phone number.

That leads nowhere and contributes to a lost sales opportunity.

Rushing in with a solution without inquiring in depth to separate obvious symptoms from root causes of problems would be similar to a doctor prescribing without diagnosing. You could easily wind up providing a patch job, at best, or appearing so presumptuous that you offend the prospect and lose the opportunity.

Here's a problem-solving strategy the wise salesperson can use to begin developing a relationship (and that sales managers can utilize as a training tool). It avoids the extremes of looking unknowledgeable or brash.

- Research the company and the industry before making any contact. Company decision-makers don't have the time, or inclination, to educate you about their business.

This can be as simple as studying its Web site and collateral materials. You also can do a keyword Web search to uncover additional background, including media reports, legal filings and company developments that may not be addressed in their sales materials.

- Armed with this research, identify and formulate initial problem/solution strategies.

Look beyond the words on the page, and see what trends, issues and challenges may be lurking just below the surface for the company or the industry.

Your expertise and objectivity, unclouded by the emotion of being "too close to the fire," will help you see opportunities for product or service improvement the prospect doesn't.

For example, a company selling employee hiring/retention programs to small manufacturers spots a startup prospect that must compete intensely for highly skilled specialists. Veteran competitors may have monetary resources, much like the New York Yankees, to lure away the startup's ace employees. So the savvy salesperson recommends measures the startup may not be aware of to ensure hiring and retaining the right people to counter the lure of the competition's deeper pockets.

- Address these hot issues in your initial approach for an appointment. This can be done in a consultative way, establishing your awareness of potential challenges companies in their situation may face. Tell stories that highlight previous solutions to similar problems. This will help the prospect relate to the issues at hand and demonstrate your expertise in solving current or potential problems.
- Once you've secured the appointment, be prepared with specific questions around the situation(s) you've identified. Make this an open-ended, fact-finding session.

Listen with an open mind. Be flexible to new information and clues that could broaden the scope of discussion or your potential association.

- Strive to create initial trust and a bond that gives the prospect a compelling desire to stay in contact.

Ultimately, this is key to getting answers that will enable formulating a meaningful solution. Without that trust and bond, you will get only superficial or deceptive information.

After all, who wants to share their biggest challenges with someone they don't trust?

- Be candid about where you feel you can contribute substantially; be equally candid about where you feel you can't help, at least at this time. This way, whether or not the opportunity exists for immediate business, you've laid groundwork for follow up and a possible future association.

Once trust and bonding are established, you often will get more answers to questions about bigger problems and the need for subsequent discussion that includes other decision-makers.

It also establishes your willingness to take the time necessary to develop a relationship, not just conclude a transaction. That, in and of itself, solves a giant problem in today's business-to-business selling environment.

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