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It's real nice to be liked, but real trust is what wins the sale

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once said, "You can't shake hands with a closed fist." A hearty handshake helps drive much business success, but by itself won't seal the deal.

This becomes glaringly apparent when your prospect greets you with open arms and a broad smile, but your sales volume still ranks a distant second to a major competitor. Even more daunting is being told they like you more than the competitor, and they acknowledge your product gets the same results at the same price as the competitor.

You're left shaking your head in disbelief. How could you lose the sale?

This dilemma crops up with regularity. Blame for failure to close the sale often centers on cost, which studies document to be the real issue only about 17 percent of the time. So, if it's not cost or product efficacy and the salesperson is liked, what is the real problem?

Often, salespeople confuse being liked with credibility. They define a successful relationship as high likeability instead of examining the real essence -- skill sets that develop trust, openness and cut-to-the-chase communication.

Being liked is a great incentive to most salespeople, and is a common longing for those of us in sales. It's a balm for the rejection and a salve for the soul. While it may not help us sell, it provides resiliency to go back into battle.

But how do you build a real sales relationship that enables you to win the battle?

The summary answer is to establish a bond that:

- Encourages direct communication to discover how you can better serve their needs, find new problems and prevent unforeseen problems (versus offering features and benefits ad nauseam).
- Enables dealing with hard, tough and sometimes unpleasant issues.
- Addresses your product's drawbacks as well as advantages to avoid over-promising and to build confidence in dealing with the downside.

It's analogous to building a solid marriage. Problem-solving and the ability to resolve differences strengthen the bond between people. Relationships built on substantial

foundations that can address and fix problems, sort out differences and create win-win outcomes will survive the test of time.

Four core requirements comprise a productive sales relationship:

- **Trust-building.** Don't confuse affability with true trust. Trust is built by learning and knowing the prospect's business so that you can understand their challenges and help prevent problems. Saying what you do and doing what you say seems simple enough, but is hard to do in practice.

It takes time and commitment to gain the confidence of a prospective buyer -- but the time frame can be shortened. The sooner buyers know you understand their business, the sooner you will earn their trust. Identify and recognize communication styles. Providing information in a way the customer prefers also builds trust more quickly.

- **Directness.** Be direct with tact. Sales-people often are tempted to say what prospects want to hear, not what they need to hear. Too often, sellers attempt to overcome obstacles by giving information overload. More features and benefits are emphasized and repeated (as if the customer were deaf) instead of addressing the real issue.

Examples of this include reiterating benefits instead of asking, "How will you deal with your current vendor relationship if you choose to make a change?" "How will you be able to convince the other team members to support your position?" or "If your boss says 'no,' what should we do next?"

- **Honesty and integrity in the trenches.** Saying, "I can't do that," "This product will not solve that problem" or "We cannot make delivery in three days" are examples of being completely honest with no indirect implications. Too many have been burned by false promises and most buyers are seasoned enough to smell them a mile away. A seasoned pro and lifelong friend taught me long ago that including one negative builds more credibility than just giving all positives.
- **Conflict and resolution.** Strong sales relationships are built on the ability to confront difficult issues, then come to a mutually beneficial resolution.

Conflict is not synonymous with hostility. Productive conflict involves conversations that address conflicting ideas, views and experiences, and solutions. By discussing and collaborating adult to adult with real empathy, and without false enthusiasm and unjustified optimism to resolve differences, you communicate that you are real, upfront and trustworthy.

Miles and miles of smiles may provide warm fuzzies and the illusion of a profitable business relationship. But it's the gritting of teeth, rolling up of sleeves and the sincere ability to tackle the tough challenges that ultimately define the long-term success or failure of the sales effort.

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