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# Sneakiness of stealth selling turns off potential customers

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

A recent "60 Minutes" report on stealth selling -- sending salespeople out disguised as everyday product users to entice others into trying the products -- speaks to a growing and troubling sales trend.

Saying too little is every bit as problematic as saying too much. On one end of the continuum are the "prolific presenters" who don't know when to shut up about their product. On the stealth side are salespeople play-acting as though they were everyday consumers.

They may generate sales, but many customers won't return to that company once they learn of the deception.

The "60 Minutes" report bore this out. Some customers weren't bothered, but others expressed disdain at being, in essence, duped.

The best policy always has been, and continues to be, honesty. Don't oversell; don't underplay. Just tell the truth and serve as a trusted adviser.

So how does the smart business-to-business sales force find the sweet spot between too much presentation and too little honest information?

- Investigate, don't pontificate. Ask many questions. After all, while you're listening, you can't overtalk the sales pitch. Listen carefully to answers given, then provide the right amount of information to address issues raised by the prospect.

As part of this process, you can uncover a variety of clues about how to handle the sale. More than just the words spoken, listen for tone of voice, watch body language and determine motives for buying/not buying that go beyond the issue of the sale.

For example, a prospect may need a "home-run purchase price" to re-establish good standing with co-workers or a manager. If you can help the prospect out, you will not only make a sale, but a friend as well.

- Complement negotiation with collaboration. Traditional sales models depict two opposing factions bargaining for the best deal. Often, a collaborative approach can be much more productive, much more quickly.

After the question-and-answer "discovery" process, the smart salesperson can make an offer that meets primary criteria outlined by the prospect. Or he may choose not to sell anything at that time, leaving the door open for later discussion. If a salesperson makes a fair offer, the prospect may feel less compelled to negotiate since a sweet deal is already on the table.

- Be spontaneous, not scripted. Scripting requires a set presentation format and discourages thinking on one's feet. If you go with the flow of the conversation, you may discover ways to establish a productive relationship that never would have surfaced with a scripted approach.

Carry this over into the proposal phase of the sale. So often, proposals are boilerplate. While this is efficient, it also can appear to the prospect as scripted material, thereby being a turnoff.

In addition, boilerplate proposals, just like scripted presentations, don't allow for customized input that might seal the deal. It's OK to use a basic form, but be prepared to personalize it. Make it a habit to customize each proposal in some way.

- Be real instead of clever. We're bombarded with pithy advertising slogans and come-ons that obfuscate instead of educate. Most prospects want solid solutions, not fancy catchphrases.

Slogans are set in stone; a prospect's expectations aren't. Too much canned phraseology also conveys a scripted image. Even if the prospect isn't reacting negatively on a conscious level, there's often that vague feeling that something's not right.

If salespeople are forced to present the company party line catchphrases in some way, they can turn this into a positive with a bit of explanation.

For example, a Qwest salesperson might tell a prospect, "Our slogan says, 'the spirit of service.' What it really means to you is that we will be proactive -- not reactive -- in making sure you get the best deal. We'll let you know about new, beneficial offers instead of you having to contact us." This adds meaning, clarity and benefit to the sales call.

- Don't "overbenefitize" your product or service. Maintain some objective distance. Provide a balanced assessment that includes good and bad attributes.

Prospects respect honest evaluation; being too "rah-rah," even if you genuinely feel that way, can strike the prospect as over-presentation. This can cast you as a play actor instead of an honest salesperson, and lump you in with the stealth selling actors profiled on "60 Minutes."

Stealth selling and overpresentation may generate short-term sales at the expense of long-term relationships. Stealth sellers, once uncovered, become a pariah to the prospect.

Overpresenters wear out their audiences and their welcome. Don't be caught saying too little or too much.

*Garry Duncan is principal of Denver-based Leadership Connections, a sales training company. Reach him at 303-462-1277 or [garry@leadershipconnections.com](mailto:garry@leadershipconnections.com).*

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