

When your customer knows more about your product than you do!

What's the difference between a customer and a salesperson? The former knows little and the salesperson knows a lot. Wrong!

The internet has become the great equalizer. By deftly manipulating the search engines a potential customer can virtually earn a Ph.D. in your product. The days of salespeople as sole possessors of product knowledge have gone the way of the cathode ray tube.

How does that affect you as the salesperson? Big time! The goal has not changed. We still want to help the customer make the best decision for his buying objectives. It's the strategy that needs to shift.

Here's a personal example. I know that at some point in the not too distant future, I will be in the market for a flat screen humongous TV. Right now our family room is sporting a 50-inch, ten year old RPTV monster. It covers the whole bay window and takes up enough space to seat 4 adults. We're eyeing the wall above the fireplace as the future home for its replacement. But the last time I did TV hunting, the retail world was full of tubes. In preparation for the blessed event, we're beginning to do our homework. Google "flat screen TV" and you will find 34.9 million entries. (Incidentally, this is up from 29.4 million entries a couple of days ago when I started this article!) The first source to crop up was a primer entitled "how to buy a flat-screen TV". In a few minutes I read the difference between LCD and plasma, the significance of pixel and other specs, and advice on picking the panel right for me. Just let me at that salesperson now!

But a little bit of information can be a dangerous thing. I found that out when I challenged my surgeon last year on his intended method of surgery. After my query as to why he wasn't going to perform microsurgery, he immediately raised his eyebrow and said, "did you get your new medical degree on the internet this week?" He then educated me about what I didn't know....and I didn't know that I didn't know

it. He assured me that his surgical procedure was appropriate for my situation, and threatened to limit my internet hours before my next visit. Although properly chagrined for that moment, it didn't stop my Googleholism.

Let's move these examples back into the retail world. Customers will continue to exercise their search engines. Salespeople need to add some qualifying questions to their repertoire when first greeting a potential customer. When the customer says, "I want to see the flat screen TV's", remember to ask"That's an important purchase. What research have you done so far?"

If the response is "none" or "little", that will set you off in the direction of learning about your customer's needs, informing him of information and options, and advocating a solution. If the response is "tons", don't jump to assumptions about how vast and true his information is. Find out more about your customer's level of knowledge. Questions could include:

- What are the most significant things you've learned?
- How did you do your research?
- What were some of the things you read that surprised you?
- What did you find that was confusing or contradictory?

Why do you need to spend time on this conversation when you could be "selling"? It's easy, you don't want to find yourself wasting time presenting information that is already known, fighting over "he said/she said", or be in the adversarial position of recommending something that your customer has been taught to disagree with.

A key principle of selling is to never begin advocating until you understand the customer's starting point. That includes their needs and wants and subject expertise. In asking your qualifying questions about the research done, you might discover that the customer has either read mis-information or has reached mis-assumptions. In other words, he's "mis"sed the truth. Beware of the

bear trap in your path: do not tell the customer, "you are wrong". The hot-button "W" word has cemented many a divorce, so the nimble salesperson learns to say, "That's an interesting point of view. There's additional information that might be helpful to round out your investigation. Are you interested in hearing about it?" In this way, you acknowledge his efforts and continue to be a consultant and guide. Present information neutrally, building on what he already knows.

Another possibility is that you determine that the customer is a legitimate expert in the area, and even knows more than you know. Don't lose confidence or try to one-up-him to prove yourself. If this is the case, then questions continue to be your useful strategy. They will help him shift from a muddle of facts and figures into a place of analysis and committed action. Let's go back to our flat-screen TV customer, now recognized as a guru. Your questions would look like:

- With all that you've studied, and considering what you and your family feel to be important, what are the options you think are worth pursuing?
- If you went with option A, what do you see as the upsides and the downsides for your situation?
- Why is it important to you to act on this now?
- What can we do to help you make this the best workable solution?

The moral of the story? People are more likely to be influenced by what they have to say than by anything you have to say. I've done a better job of selling myself most products, than the salespeople who received the commissions. Don't be afraid of the customer's knowledge or lack of knowledge. The enemy is not knowledge. It's your inability to cope with that knowledge. You always have a role to play as consultant. Sometimes it's educator, and other times it's converting a customer's knowledge into insight, decision and action. And, as a bonus, if you listen generously, you'll learn something new yourself.