

SHARKS AND MINNOWS :: The Seller-Buyer Game
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Did your mother raise you to be a salesperson? Mine neither. But, I am one. And, like you, I am a customer, too. This gives me a unique perspective on the sales game, the game I call "Sharks and Minnows."

My early image of a salesman was someone who tricks people into buying something they don't need with money they don't have. My first exposure to sales as a career wasn't very flattering, either. I was working my way through college trying to sell Great Books of the Western World. For a week I knocked on strangers' doors before I gave up trying to peddle literary culture to the masses in the frigid winter night air of Boulder, Colorado.

Eight years, a college degree, and numerous flight hours later I stood before a group of executives in a conference room on Mahogany Row at Beech Aircraft Corporation. I was being interviewed to become their newest Zone Manager. The lead interrogator asked me, "What sales experience do you have?" I really wanted the job so my response had to be good.

I said that everyday as a flight instructor I had to sell my students on the benefits of flying, the solidity of our company, the quality of our aircraft and the scope of my personal competence. I got the job with Beech and what has followed has been a career in the best of all worlds, business aviation.

Interestingly enough, no matter what my role within our industry, selling has played two major roles. First, I have never quit selling. Neither should you. And second, like you, I am a customer of many members of the business aviation community. It is extremely important to your success, and that of your department, that you master the art and science of being a buyer. Otherwise, you may be a minnow among sharks.

"Dealing" with Salesmen

For ease of reading, throughout this article I will use "salesman" as non-gender specific reference. On the whole, salesmen are hired because they are ambitious and aggressive. They get to keep their jobs if they get the order. From your perspective, working with an ambitious and aggressive salesman need not be a threat. In fact, you want your sales representative to be motivated and quick in responding to your needs and expectations.



I have found that salesmen often approach flight department managers in one of four different ways. Only one of these approaches works to your benefit.

They are:

1. The Adversary,
2. The What's-In-It-For-Me,
3. The Order Taker, and
4. The Professional.

The Adversary's approach is indicative of a salesman who does not understand the buying process. This person sees you as a barrier rather than a customer. An Adversary will do whatever it takes to go around you or discount your involvement in the deal. They see the person who signs the check as their customer... and no one else. These salesmen are generally more of a hazard to you than an asset.

As defined in Miller & Heiman's excellent book Strategic Selling, the vast majority of flight department purchases are categorized as complex sales. A complex sale is one in which there are typically three buyers rather than only one:

1. The Economic Buyer - the person who approves the monies for the purchase. The economic buyer may be the Chairman/CEO, the Executive Committee, a Vice President, or the Flight Department Manager who has budget authority.
2. The User Buyer - the person who will gain the use and benefit of the end product or service. This may be your passengers or the executives who authorize the use of your flight department's services.
3. The Technical Buyer - the person who is responsible for making the product or service perform to the benefit of the company, its members, and its customers. This could be any and every member of your service delivery team from the Scheduler, Technicians, Crewmembers, to the flight department leaders.

The What's-In-It-For-Me salesman is only focused on his need to sell. What you want from his product and services is of secondary importance as long as he gets the order. I was once fired from a sales job because they wanted me to "kiss and run." They did not want me to take the time to develop a relationship with the client or to hang around after the sale to provide post-delivery support.

Young salesmen who are trying to master the art of selling often slip into What's-In-It-For-Me because they are so focused on short term results. The good news is that a mature sales manager, or a patient buyer, may be able to train this kind of salesman. The What's-In-It-For-Me salesman may be manageable but he will require substantial guidance and oversight.

When times are really good, as they have been for the past few years, The Order Taker is in his element. This is the salesman who specializes in easy sales - plucking low hanging fruit. Anything that looks like work is a distraction for these people.



There are two conditions that typically cause a salesman to become an Order Taker. The first occurs when a salesman has a territory so rich in ready customers for his product that he has no need to do anything but answer the phone. The second happens when a salesman is well established in his market and repeat or walk-in customers stuff his wallet. It's hard to get these salesmen to do much more than the minimum to earn your sale.

A Professional salesman is first and foremost concerned about the needs and success of your company and you. He has learned that if you are a happy customer you will be his biggest source of continuing business both as a repeat customer and also as a source of referrals.

A Professional salesman knows that two of the most effective ways to satisfy your needs and help you succeed are to (1) act as your advocate during the sales process and (2) be a resource during the purchase and delivery processes. Unfortunately, Professional salesmen are often promoted in the hopes they will infect the rest of the sales force with their expertise.

A Professional salesman is a wonderful asset because he can bring a lot of value to the buying project as well as the long-term relationship. A great salesman has an interesting list of attributes and voids.

A Professional salesman's attributes include:

- Advocacy - he accepts the role of helping you and your company succeed,
- Honesty and integrity - his word is his bond... and he is discrete,
- Resourcefulness - he brings to the table knowledge and suggestions you need,
- Superior listening skills - every chance he gets, he shuts up and listens,
- Responsiveness - given a request, he satisfies it,
- Aggressiveness - he is willing to push you and his organization to get the results you need,
- Selflessness - he focuses on what is good for you and your company, and
- Fair negotiator - you both leave the table satisfied.

What is missing in a Professional salesperson?

- Deception,
- Greed,
- Disrespect, and
- Other characteristics often held by charlatans and quick deal artists.

When you do work on a project with a Professional salesman you know and appreciate it. Unfortunately, I estimate only about 10% of the sales folks out there meet my definition of being Professionals. Is 10% of the population too small of an estimate for Professional salesmen? My personal experience says, "No." How about yours?

An outstanding salesman is invaluable because he can make your job much easier. He has been where you are going many times before. He knows where the shortcuts and the landmines are. He can help you anticipate challenges and opportunities that



will greatly improve the end product or service and the results it can create for you and your company. And interestingly enough, he can even help you get the best deal. The best deal is not just price, it includes all costs (including taxes, etc.) as well as the tangible and intangible side items like training, spares, supplemental support, et al. A true sales professional is anxious that you get a great total deal.

But what do you do when you must deal with someone from the other 90%, a semi-professional or worse? Like dealing with any other vendor's representative, it will be important for you to manage the sales relationship and its outcomes.

How you have dealt with salesmen probably has depended on your personality as well as your personal experiences. In my experiences, you have three potential initial tactics to use in trying to deal with a salesman;

1. Aggressiveness - you can try to either overpower the salesman or at least maintain control of the sales process by being aggressive. This often leads to a competitive buyer-seller relationship that ends in a lose-lose situation.
2. Passiveness - you, explicitly or implicitly, ask to be a passenger throughout buy-sell process. This is a great way to become a victim. It often leads to a win-lose outcome and you know who the loser is supposed to be.
3. Partnership - you know what you want and have the confidence needed to do the deal with the salesman in a mature fashion because you have the ultimate power, you are the Customer.

Manage the Sale

You must take a leading role in managing the sales process. Whatever comes out of the buy-sell process, it must be good for your company, your customers, and your department. After the sale is done, you will be responsible for making the outcome work. Additionally, you can greatly reduce your personal hassle factor during the sales process by taking a few important steps.

Preplan

As much as circumstances permit, have a calendar-based idea of when you want a project/purchase completed and work backward from that to determine when each step must be done. Leave yourself a lot of slop time to allow for contingencies. Predetermine the roles and responsibilities to be exercised throughout the process.

Pre-establish internal communications links

Sales inquiries directed to the executive offices should be re-directed to you. After all, isn't that the way it's done for other key functions within your company? This step will substantially reduce the chances for confusion or you being excluded from the purchase process. There is one catch; you must earn the right, as a businessperson, to participate in the budget and purchase processes.

Manage the process

Set appropriate expectations for your relationships with salesmen. Tell them what your needs and expectations are for their roles and responsibilities. Describe to them the technical purchase process you intend to use (i.e., information gathering, potential



vendor/product/service identification, development of Request For Proposal, RFP process, proposal response evaluation, final negotiation and decision, delivery and start-up, post purchase support, etc.).

You should manage the internal purchasing process, too. If the financial buyer and the user buyer are not included throughout the project you are apt to be surprised by their reactions when you have done all your work and think the deal is done. These folks have a major stake in the success of your business and should be involved from the beginning. Otherwise, you are faced with the greatest marketing challenger there is, selling "up hill".

Manage the salesman

Early in the relationship, it is important for you to assess your salesman. If the salesman is capable and you are satisfied with his approach, fine, do business. As you do business, you may find it necessary to counsel him on the process and the steps you expect him to take.

But there are times when you will not be able to work with a particular salesman for any one of a number of reasons. You need only to contact the salesman's manager and indicate a desire to work with someone else. You do not need to offer any more explanation than "personal style differences." A wise sales manager will get the message and respond accordingly so you can do the deal with greater ease.

Managing Negative Selling

I grew up in an airline family. As a result, I was well aware of the long-standing tradition among the commercial carriers that they never marketed on the "safety" issue. If an airline had an accident everyone else remained mum. No one took advantage of the unfortunate situation by embarking on a negative sales campaign (i.e., "We're safe - ergo they're not.").

Negative selling is a tactic frowned upon by professional sales and marketing organizations. When I went to work for Beech I was told the fastest way to get into deep trouble was to say anything negative about a competitor or their products. Don't get me wrong. We were encouraged to sell benefits and cost advantages in focused contrast to a competitive product ("sell your strengths over their weaknesses"). But we were never to "put anyone down."

We are currently witnessing an expanding surge of negative sales efforts within the aviation community. I first noticed it following the terrible Value Jet accident. Several major airlines made certain the press focused on the Low Cost airline issue as a causal factor in the accident. The word weasels conveniently ignored the fact that Southwest Airlines has been one of the safest airlines in history and remains a cost leader. The damage to Value Jet was done and the rest, as they say, is history.

Our business aviation community, until recently, has been above such tactics. This is no longer true. I have had numerous clients, both aircraft owners and non-owners, ask us to do studies on the Fractional Owner concept and the major providers. I have not



heard of a fractional salesman targeting negative sales tactics against flight departments. However, I have fielded a number of questions by clients who are puzzled by innuendoes and direct accusations raised against fractional competitors. When I have responded to the client's concerns it has been evident their evaluation of the offender has been lowered.

I talked with senior executives at the two leading fractional share companies about these instances of negative selling. They quickly declared they have policies against the practice and then cited examples of their opponent's offenses. I don't care who started it, I just hope it is curtailed before more future customers have their overall impression of business aviation and its providers damaged.

Lest you think negative selling is a game for commercial operators only, think again. There is on-going negative selling associated with the raging debate over Fraction Ownership versus traditional flight departments and charter operations. The flaunting of the specter of potential safety failures among fractional operators because they are under-regulated is negative selling at its worst. The fractionals' safety record, like Southwest Airlines' is outstanding. Will they continue to have a near-perfect record? Statistically, it is unlikely. But, when you talk to customers about the potential for accidents within one segment of our industry you will reduce their confidence in all flying activities. Don't do it!

The second best answer...

After all the selling is done, and the deal is defined, you will probably have one or more salesmen to tell they have lost the sale. Although few of us enjoy being the bearers of bad news, it will help you to remember that to a salesman the second best answer to a "yes" is a "no." A "no" allows him to refocus his energies on other sales.

Occasionally, you will run across a salesman who does not want to take "no" for an answer. Your first step in dealing with this circumstance is to assure him that the deal is done and will not be reconsidered. If he asks for a post-sale meeting, you must have a clear understanding that this is not an opportunity to make another sales pitch. Second, you may choose to discuss his proposal and performance on a factual basis but you will not discuss the company's decision. Make no apologies. After all, the company has made the best overall decision, has it not? And on rare occasions, third, if he persists in being pushy, tell him you and the company will consider his actions when you return to the marketplace.

In summary, I propose Pete's postulates for partnering with peddlers:

1. Understand and position yourself within your company's buying process.
2. Develop your contacts before you need them.
3. Is your salesman a partner or a rampant rhino? Know how you will deal with each.
4. Selling "uphill" sucks. Make your boss and senior management part of the evaluation and buying processes rather than the final authorities. It is much easier on you and them.



5. Try to keep at least two candidates in the game so you can have an honest alternative and the leading vendor has the incentive to do his best.
6. The second best answer to a "yes" really is a "no." As soon as you are certain someone is not a contender, tell him so he can go on to greener pastures and you will not be taking up his and your time unnecessarily.
7. When the deal is done... celebrate, because the work has just started.

The game of "Sharks and Minnows" is for the uninitiated. For the rest of us, the seller-buyer relationship is an important and necessary partnership. Otherwise, good luck, chum.