

Magic of Selling

You Can't Smell Your Own Breath

by
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EMILY LOOKED troubled as she timidly approached me. I had just delivered the keynote presentation at an international iSeries technology conference in which I had discussed the essential practices of successfully selling technology. She held back as

others stepped forward to shake hands, ask a specific question, thank me for the information, or have me sign one of my books for them. Experience has taught me to read the body language of people in my audience, and I could tell from the way she waited for the others to finish that she had something serious to discuss — something she didn't want everyone else listening to. She stayed within view and made intermittent eye contact so that I would know she wanted to talk to me, but she waited for the buoyant, glad-handing crowd to dissipate.

"What you said bothers me," she said as she cautiously stepped forward and looked up at me.

Fearful that I had inadvertently offended her, I asked what I said that bothered her.

"What you say is true; I can see that," she replied. "But, I'm not sure what to do differently to get the results you're talking about."

Letting out a quiet sigh of relief knowing that I hadn't insulted her, I asked her to elaborate.

Emily took another step closer. "We are starting to try many of the things you've been recommending. But it seems like we should have more results to show for it.

The trouble is, I'm not sure whether what we're doing is really getting through to our prospects."

"What do your prospects say? Do you follow up with them if you don't make the sale to find out what would have made them choose your product?"

"They tell us things like, 'Your product is good, and we had a hard time deciding, but we decided to go another direction.' Or, 'We felt your price was a little high.' But those responses seem like mush and don't really help me figure out how to close more sales," she asserted.

I responded, "You can't smell your own breath."

"What?" she asked, reaching for a mint.

I could tell this conversation was going to take a while, so I asked her to join me for coffee after I packed away my presentation materials. I needed to clear off the stage, and besides — I was way behind on the usual eight cups of coffee I drink before noon.

Sitting Down to Talk

Over a steaming cup of Starbucks I found out a little more about Emily Lucas. She was the vp of sales and marketing for a well-known iSeries software company. She had experienced people in her sales and marketing departments, but she was not content with the results she was getting. Then I figured I better get back to my comment about smelling your own breath that had taken her aback.

"Have you ever tried to figure out what your breath smells like?" As she grabbed her purse to dig for

another mint, I chuckled and stopped her. "Relax, Emily. I don't mean right now. I mean have you ever been in a situation where you were about to meet someone and you were afraid your breath wasn't fresh?" She nodded yes. "So, what did you do?" I asked.

She showed me. "I cupped my hands over my mouth and nose, breathed out, and sniffed in."

"Did you smell your breath, just now?" I asked.

"Actually, I smelled the soap on my hands."

"Amazing, isn't it? Your breath could be toothpaste fresh or reek with garlic and you couldn't smell it. You could smell only your hands. We've all tried the cupped-hands-breath-sniffing technique, but it doesn't work. Your nose is so acclimated to your breath that it is completely dulled to the scent. You could only smell something new — like your hands. You can't smell your own breath."

"Can we get back to my problem?" she asked, a bit impatient with my sensory tangent.

"But that IS your problem!" I proclaimed. "You can't really tell what your prospects think of you and your products any more than you can tell what your breath smells like. You and your staff are so acclimated to your product and your sales/ marketing process that you are dulled to the real reaction of others. Try as you might, you can't accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of what you are doing."

"So, what do you recommend?" the executive asked.

"Think back to that time years ago when you tried to smell your own breath. When you realized you couldn't do it, what did you do?"

"Well, I was in college at the time, so I asked my roommate if my breath was okay."

"And then?"

"And then I brushed my teeth because she said I really needed to."

"Your roommate, an outside person, was able to give you an accurate assessment about you that you couldn't give yourself. And, as unwelcome as her appraisal was, she revealed your real situation, and you took the corrective action she suggested to fix the problem. That, Emily, is what I recommend."

"Ask my roommate?"

"Figuratively, yes. Ask a person outside of your company, whom you can trust, to tell you the truth about your organization."

"You mean, like a consultant?" she asked, pulling back and lowering her eyebrows in disbelief and dread.

Recognizing the immediate resistance, I replied bluntly, "I don't mean like a consultant; I mean an actual consultant."

Emily immediately went into a lengthy dissertation about why she had no intention of ever hiring a consultant. Although she missed a few, she brought up most of reasons people in her position cite for not hiring a consultant to help them with their sales and marketing. Here is a fairly complete list of the arguments against bringing in a consultant to help you sell your iSeries technology:

1. We already have good, competent people within the organization.
2. It could offend my regular employees.
3. It would be like admitting I can't do my job.
4. Consultants are too expensive.
5. It's not in the budget.
6. We're doing okay; what's the urgency?
7. They don't understand our situation as well as we do.

Look at each of these objections more closely.

1. We already have good, competent people within the organization. Our staff includes marketing majors and sales people with many years of practical experience. If it can be done, we should be able to do it with the talent we have on our staff.

As I explained to Emily, this confident reaction may not be in your best interest. Your staff is tied up with a load of important daily tasks. Even if they had the expertise of the

consultant, who would do their current jobs while

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they did the consultant's? Your own people have to be generalists — like a family doctor who is a general practitioner (GP) who can address all of the health needs of the whole family. But sometimes a GP calls in a specialist for consultation. The specialists may not be as broadly skilled, but they are true experts in their field of specialty. The GP doesn't do quadruple bypass open-heart surgery; he brings in the expert heart surgeon for that. You and your staff can't know it all.

Your staff also has strong loyalties. They want to be positive team players, so they are naturally reluctant to candidly point out deficiencies. Working with a consultant is like shopping with a good friend who will tell you honestly when an outfit makes you look fat.

2. *It could offend my regular employees.* What would our staff think if we bring in somebody from the outside? They'll think we don't trust them. It will undermine morale.

If sales aren't what they should be, your staff is already feeling the company's disappointment as well as their own frustration and anxiety. Bring in an expert to help them pinpoint their problems or give them the tools for success. That will show them that you don't want to replace them; you want to help them succeed. An expert can recognize the issues your staff can't see, provide them with the wisdom and insights they can't have, and then back off to let them succeed. Success will boost morale.

3. *It would be like admitting I can't do my job.* If I hire a consultant, it amounts to an admission that I need help and that I don't have the skills I'm being paid for. My job could be in jeopardy.

If sales increase, you'll be praised for recognizing the need for a consultant, taking the initiative to bring in the right person, and executing the plan that boosted the bottom line of the company. Which would you consider the better doctor: one who plods along insisting on doing everything himself, or one who consults with a specialist? A healthy patient is more important than fierce independence. The same is true for the health of your company.

4. *Consultants are too expensive.* It's exorbitant what consultants get paid. Our own technical people act as consultants with our customers — helping them to install the iSeries and convert their applications. Sales consultants shouldn't cost more per day than our own consultants do.

There are two problems with this way of thinking. First, your people don't have the perspective or expertise to do what the consultant will do for you. If they did, they would have done it already and we wouldn't be having this conversation.

The second problem is that you shouldn't be paying a consultant by the hour or day. That's the way you pay a plumber. You should pay consultants based on the value they bring to you.

For example, a woman once spotted Pablo Picasso at an outside café. She asked him if he'd be kind enough to draw something for her, and he responded by sketching something on a napkin for her. Admiring the drawing, she asked what it was worth. He replied it was worth \$15,000. She exclaimed, "Fifteen thousand dollars? It only took you five minutes to do that!" Picasso replied, "Actually, it took me 50 years and five minutes to be able to do that." Like Picasso, a consultant is paid for the lifetime of expertise, skill, and value he brings to you, not the time he puts in. If your sales go up, that's what counts.

5. *It's not in the budget.* Our budget is done annually, and we've just started the fiscal year. It will be a year before we could find the funding for something like this.

Nobody budgets for a consultant. Nobody bolts upright in the middle of the night and says, "Lets

budget \$97,000 in case a consultant appears with a bright idea I didn't expect." When you realize the need, and can demonstrate the ROI, you'll be able to find the money you need. You're probably spending more for maintenance on your office equipment than you would pay to hire a consultant.

6. *We're doing okay; what's the urgency?* Maybe some day we'll hire a consultant, but I don't see why it should be today.

A person responsible for the sales and marketing of an iSeries software product once actually said to me, "Our sales presentations are no worse than our competition's, so I don't see a need to spend money to improve them." But just one additional sale would have covered the investment in the consultant. Just a 2 percent increase in sales would have paid for the consultant many times over. He couldn't see the wisdom of investing in a consultant to develop a powerful sales presentation and demo that would have paid for itself over and over as he used it for months and years to come.

One definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over but expecting different results. What's the consequence of doing nothing? Insanity!

7. *They don't understand our situation as well as we do.* We have a complex product and a lengthy sales cycle. It would take a consultant a long time to understand it. We can do better ourselves because we really understand our customers and our business.

You may think you understand your situation. But you can't see it from the perspective of the outside person who has extensive experience with similar complex products and lengthy sales cycles. Remember, you can't actually understand your own situation any more than you can smell your own breath.

Warming Up

As our second cup of coffee cooled down, Emily warmed up to the idea of hiring an expert to help her and her organization get a fresh perspective and develop tangible tools to boost their iSeries sales. But she was not yet convinced, so I asked her what it

would mean to her, personally, if bringing in an expert would increase her sales numbers. She raised her eyebrows and admitted it would boost her career if she could increase sales above the plateau they had been at for the last two years.

The Decision

Emily decided to give it a try. But because this was her first time looking for a consultant to provide the expertise she needed, she wanted some advice. I gave her two specific suggestions.

1. Avoid those who prescribe before diagnosing. A good consultant will spend time getting to understand your business and your situation before prescribing a solution. One of my favorite sayings is "Give a boy a hammer and all the world looks like a nail." If a consultant prescribes the same thing for every client, he is acting like a boy with a hammer. He is just whacking you with the only tool he has.

Avoid those who prescribe before diagnosing.

You wouldn't accept a prescription from a doctor before he examined you and diagnosed your condition. Likewise, you shouldn't accept a prescription from a consultant who hasn't diagnosed your business condition.

2. Focus on business outcomes, not on actions taken. You want meaningful business results, so look for someone who understands this and works to give you results. Running a sales training session is an action; improving your sales closure rate is an outcome. Interviewing prospects who bought your product (and those who turned you down) is an action; increasing prospect conversion rates is an outcome. Outcomes are more important than actions.

The Result

True to her word, Emily called me about eight months later to let me know how her efforts to bring in outside expertise were working out.

She started by working with a consultant to smell her breath, she said. He interviewed her prospects —

those who bought and those who declined — to find out why. She was stunned to find that the prospects had not been forthright with her. They usually brushed her off with some ambiguous excuse or told her the price was too high, hoping to drive a bargain. The consultant found that the core problem was the sales demo. Her sales demos were actually just technical education about what the product does. Competitors won the business by showing prospect how their product would be used to improve the prospect's business.

She then knew that she had to provide to her sales force an effective sales presentation and demo, along with training, to show them how to use them effectively. Her consultant, an expert in the field, showed her staff how to demonstrate to their prospects the value and worth of the iSeries platform and their products.

As a result, sales were up and Emily was happy. But then, she was about to blunder. She said the consultant



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was so effective that she wanted to hire him as an employee. I told her "Don't do it!"

"Why not?" she asked, bewildered.

"Because he will lose his value to you if he is an employee. His value is his broad expertise and his outsider's perspective. If he's an employee, he will be part of you, and will lose the very thing that makes him valuable."

She thought about our first conversation and said, "Oh yeah. You can't smell your own breath."

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