

Selling Professional Services in a Slow Economy

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For those who have been in the selling profession for a relatively short time the recent downturn in the economy must have been a real shock and those of us who have been selling for well over a decade or two have probably forgotten what it's like to sell in a tough economy.

The fact is that despite the current economic conditions 15% of sales people will over achieve; 25% will leave the selling profession and a staggering 60% will struggle. So what is it that causes such devastation to our profession? The answer is a change in buyer behaviour and a lack of knowledge or adaption by sales person to the new selling environment.

Buyer behaviour

Buyer behaviour changes when the economy slows down and the longer the duration of the slow down the more intense the behaviour. Put simply it's because they are under pressure to save money and to maximise the service received for every dollar spent. Unfortunately, this too often means they go for the cheapest option.

Buyers also become risk averse and will prefer to deal with people they know, trust and have had dealings with even if those dealings weren't ideal.

You could experience all or most of the following in buyer behaviour:

- The number of people involved in the decision making process will increase making the sales process more complex and extend the timeline
- The decision to buy your services will be controlled by one or two levels higher than what it used to be. This is particularly true for large organisations that are experiencing particular difficult trading conditions. Decentralisation is replaced with centralisation to economise
- The buyer needs to justify the purchase so they will ask for a return on investment (ROI) and in a reduced time frame. This can be in as little as 12-18 months
- The budget for your services may have been approved some time ago but don't be surprised if the buyer has to reapply for funding
- The buyer will ask for a change in trading terms to extend the payment period
- A good client who would normally call and give you more work now will ask for cost details and get multiple quotations. If this should happen to you don't take it personally. The buyer is probably under a lot of pressure from their senior management

So what is it that the top sales professionals do? To prosper in a down economy the top 15% focus on:

Thinking Positive

By thinking positively they know the client will be uplifted by their confidence. With the amount of negativity present during an economic down turn it's a pleasant experience for buyer to consistently deal with someone who has a positive disposition. For example, it begins with the introduction. When asked how they are, they don't respond with "*fine*" or "*not bad*" but with "*great*" and the right vocal tone to match. Top performers protect themselves from chronic negative people by minimising or even avoiding them. They regularly re-evaluate who you associate with. They understand the law of psychological reciprocity...what you think of most of the time will happen. They develop networks with people who have similar attributes.

Thinking Growth

Top salespeople think growth and increase the volume of sales calls for both clients and prospective clients. Proposals are written creatively and innovatively focusing on selling the solution and saving the buyer money. They don't sell traditional features and benefits but concentrate on selling value, reliability, security and peace of mind. Intangible value can build strong loyal relationships. For example they send articles of interest that are important to the client. These can be of a personal or business nature. Reliability begins with the salesperson's behaviour and builds an emotional sense of ease. Providing a guarantee for their company's service creates feelings of security and peace of mind.

Working Smart

They concentrate most of their selling activities on key clients, the category A top 20%. This is because they know these clients have the potential to produce the greatest revenue. The amount of face to face meetings with category B clients is reduced and other forms of contact are used such as email or phone calls. Category C clients are delegated to customer service personnel. They qualify every sales opportunity thoroughly and so avoid *chasing rainbows*. This also results in their sales pipeline being full of genuine business potential and making their revenue forecasting more accurate.

With many competitors cutting back on service levels to save money top sales people target prospective clients that are not being serviced or poorly serviced. They do their homework and learn about their prospective client's industry, market positioning, the number of employees, other divisions, corporate challenges and study the annual report if it is a public company.

They actively participate in social media such as LinkedIn or Twitter or one of the many other sites.

Strategic focus

Finally, top sales people know the weakest client relationship is one where the client sees them as simply a supplier. Negotiations are based almost solely on price and when a sales enquiry is made the price interest is to check the pricing of a current and favoured supplier. It's their way of ensuring they *keep them honest*. A long term mutually beneficial relationship is not possible under these conditions.

Top sales people have positioned themselves as the trusted adviser for their clients; an expert the client feels comfortable to open up to and share information, information that flows freely both ways. They develop joint strategies. The client knows the sales person won't let them down and confidential information is kept confidential. Under these conditions competitors are locked out and even if they try and buy business through discounting the client won't be moved. This is because other higher order needs of the client have been met.



Kurt's expertise is in sales strategy, sales management development; group structured sales training and infield sales coaching. As a sales person he has successfully sold products and services in 4 major market/product segments: new product sales, consultative sales, relationship sales and retail. During his selling career he created sales records for three companies in two industries and won many other sales awards for outstanding performance.