

3.3: Choosing the Best Approach

Learning Objectives

- Describe the different types of sales approaches.

There's more than one way to start a sales approach. The method you use will depend on the specific selling situation, the specific customer, and on *you*. If you want the approach to feel natural, the best way to do this is to be yourself. The following examples offer some approach options, but of course the specific approach you use will be a reflection of your style and may include a combination of these approaches.

The Question Approach

When you are making small talk with an acquaintance and you want to show him that you are interested in getting to know him, what do you do? You ask questions, right? A **question approach** is also an effective way to open a sales call because it shows the prospect that you are interested in listening to him, it begins a dialogue, and it helps you get the information you need to move the sale along. Charles D. Brennan, *Sales Questions That Close the Sale* (New York: AMACOM, 1994), 49. As sales consultant Michel Neray points out, asking questions that reveal something of what you know about the target company can also help establish your credibility. Ask questions that lead, questions that confirm, and questions that will allow you to test your hypothesis about the challenges your customer might be facing. Then, listen to what your customer has to say. Michel Neray, "How to Establish Credibility," MarketingProfs, <http://www.marketingprofs.com/5/neray3.asp?part=2> (accessed May 22, 2024).

Here's an example.

You:	Hi, my name is James Dotson, and I'm with Infinity Document Reproduction Services. I noticed that your office is currently using the 2004 model of company Techmax copy and fax machines, and I wanted to ask you a few questions about your satisfaction with the machines' performance. Would that be all right?
Customer:	We don't really have any problems with our current equipment right now, but we're always looking for something better, so sure.

Notice that the first question simply asks for permission. This is a question you should ask no matter what sales approach you are using. Once you establish permission, you could ask a closed question (one with a yes or no answer) like "Are you happy with your current copy machines?" but then you risk ending the conversation quickly if your prospect says "yes." You could ask an open-ended question like "How well do your copiers work?" but this is broad question, and there's a good chance that you will get a vague answer. Instead, it's better to ask a leading question that demonstrates you know something about the problems your customer might be facing with her current products.

You:	On average, how many paper jams would you say you have to deal with each week?
Customer:	Paper jams, now there's an area we could definitely use some help with. It seems like we have paper jams quite frequently—about two or three a week.
You:	So your copiers are jamming about every other day?
Customer:	At least.
You:	And how long does it take you to get a machine back on line once it jams?

Customer:	It depends on who is at the copy machine. If it's someone like me, I have to call someone to help. But it's usually only a few minutes for someone with experience. Sometimes, if a new employee has tried fixing the machine it can take longer, or we have to wait until the end of the day when we're less busy.
You:	Paper jams are usually a problem, and they cause downtime, not to mention frustration. That's why Infinity just developed a new model called Jam-Free. It's guaranteed to experience fewer paper jams than any other copiers on the market today, and it has been designed with simple interiors that allow you to get them back on line easily in the unlikely event that they <i>do</i> jam, so your new employees should have no trouble using them. Do you think this is something that would help your office run more efficiently?

A line of questioning like this builds credibility because it demonstrates that you (a) have done your research and understand your customer's problems, (b) are interested in finding a solution specific to your customer's situation, and (c) are competent and won't waste your customer's time. Jeff Thull, "How to Establish Sales Credibility: It's Not the Stories You Tell, It's the Questions You Ask," MarketingProfs, <http://www.marketingprofs.com/7/thull15.asp> (accessed May 22, 2024).

This line of questioning works well when you have done your research, but what about sales situations where the customer approaches you? In these instances, you won't have specific research to go on, but you can still start the conversation by asking some directed, diagnostic questions to help build credibility. Freese, *Secrets of Question Based Selling* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 122 For example, say you work in a store that sells high-end speakers and sound systems.

You:	Welcome to Alpha Audio. Have you been into our store before?
Customer:	Yes, I was here a couple of months ago but I haven't been back in a while.
You:	Well, we've just recently redesigned our store to make room for some new product lines. It might take a little while to find your way around and see all the new portable and home audio products. Would you like me to give you a quick overview of the new layout?
Customer:	Yes, that would be great.

By asking questions, you are establishing trust by showing your customer that that you are not just some pushy salesperson—and by asking *directed* questions, you are securing permission to follow up and dig more deeply into what your customer is looking for.

You:	All right. First of all, are you looking for speakers that will work in a large space, or will you be using your speakers in a smaller area, like your living room?
Customer:	I'll be using them in my family room, which is a small area.
You:	OK. We have a few models that have an excellent sound quality in smaller spaces. I can show you where those are located. Can I ask you another question?
Customer:	Sure
You:	What type of amplifier will you be using with your speakers?

As you begin to ask diagnostic questions, you are building credibility and trust by demonstrating that you are genuinely interested in learning what your customer needs and that you can be a valuable resource in the sale; you are finding out the information you

need to know to establish a collaborative selling relationship; and you are opening a dialogue on which to build the relationship. Freese, *Secrets of Question Based Selling* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003), 124–25.

The Product Approach

When John Koss, founder of Koss Corp., approached prospects at the Consumer Electronics Show, he had his product booth, complete with visual displays and over forty headphone models, to catch their attention. Koss took advantage of the noisy, chaotic showroom floor to showcase his noise cancellation headphones: a large banner over his booth announced, “Welcome to the Quiet Zone,” and he invited buyers to sit down, try the headphones on, and experience the instant silence. Susan Greco, “Marketing: Selling the Superstores,” *Inc.*, July, 1995, <https://www.inc.com/magazine/19950701/2331.html>, (accessed May 27, 2024). Opening the sales call with a product demonstration can be an effective method of capturing a customer’s attention. For instance, a textiles vendor might bring fabric samples to a sales call. After introducing herself and the purpose of her call, she might hand a sample to the buyer and say, “I think you might like this new fabric. It’s especially popular for women’s scarves this season. Can you tell whether or not it’s silk?” Barton A. Weitz, Stephen Byron Castleberry, and John F. Tanner, *Selling: Building Partnerships*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 245. The **product approach** is especially appealing to people who are visual or hands-on learners because it allows them to look and touch.

The Referral Approach

You already know that establishing trust is a critical part of relationship selling. What’s one way to instantly earn a new customer’s trust? Mention someone your prospect already knows with whom you have an existing customer relationship: trust already exists between you and your referral source and between your referral source and your prospect, so the referral allows you to use that mutual relationship as a bridge to build trust with your prospect. Tapping into strong, existing relationships accelerates your ability to build new customer relationships. A **referral approach** might go something like this:

You:	My firm recently finished a project for Calloway Industries, and Ms. Calloway suggested that I contact you. She thought your company might be interested in learning about our consulting services. Maybe she already mentioned us to you?
Customer:	Yes, as a matter of fact, I just spoke with Elaine Calloway. She speaks very highly of you and your company, and she’s hard to impress. Based on that, I’d like to hear what you think about what you can bring to my business.

When using the referral approach, just be sure that you *ask* your referral source before mentioning her name to your prospect. Also, it’s always a good idea to thank your customer when she gives you a good referral. Send her a personal note to let her know how much you appreciate her support.

The Customer Benefit Approach

If you are in a sales situation where you have carefully researched your prospect and you already have a good sense of his needs before your first meeting, you might open your sales call with a **customer benefit approach**. The benefit approach goes beyond the general benefit statement to focus on a specific product benefit. This opening is only effective if the benefit you describe is of real interest to your prospect: Barton A. Weitz, Stephen Byron Castleberry, and John F. Tanner, *Selling: Building Partnerships*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 245.

You:	Mr. Ling, our awnings can cut your energy costs by at least 20 percent. The savings are often even higher for businesses like yours that get a lot of direct sunlight because of a south-facing storefront.
Mr. Ling:	Yes, sunlight is a problem for us as it fades the merchandise we display in our front window. Do you have something that can really reduce the impact of the sun on our front windows?

By quickly identifying the benefits of your product, you are letting your customer know what he has to gain from doing business with you. This will not only capture his interest, but it will also establish credibility because it shows that you have taken the trouble to prepare and learn about his specific concerns.

The Survey Approach

The **survey approach** is one that works best in sales that require a complex solution or in sales where the solution is often specifically tailored to customer needs, and the approach ranges in levels of formality depending on the selling situation. For instance, if you go to an upscale spa to have a facial, you might be given a brief, informal survey about your specific skin-care needs before you discuss service packages with the aesthetician. Or if you are in the market for a new home, the real estate agent will most likely ask you questions about your preferences and lifestyle before she even begins to show you listings: “How many bedrooms are you looking for?” “Which neighborhood do you want to live in?” “Is outdoor space important to you?” “How many cars do you have?”

On the other hand, in B2B situations or in otherwise more complex B2C sales, the survey process might be more formalized. If you want to purchase an insurance plan, the agent may guide you through a detailed, computer-based survey to find out about your medical or driving history, your family members, your vehicles, or other details that are very specific to you as an individual customer. In another B2B situation (e.g., your firm needs to purchase an integrated software suite with diverse capabilities like timekeeping, payroll, and benefits), the salesperson might give you a detailed questionnaire that will identify your specific needs and ask you to complete it before scheduling a sales presentation.

The survey approach has the advantage of being a nonthreatening way to establish your initial contact with the prospect, as you are only asking for information and not discussing services or costs. It allows you to gather information and create a sales presentation that will address the customer’s specific needs and be prepared with the appropriate information or ask other people in the company to attend the sales call. In addition, the survey helps your customer feel like she is receiving special treatment because you are using the information you gather to tailor-make a solution that matches her needs.

The Agenda Approach

You already know the goals of your sales call and the points you will address before going into a meeting, so why not share this information with your customer? The **agenda approach**, in which you lead off the sales call by giving your customer an overview of your meeting agenda, is particularly appealing to busy executives because it gets straight down to business and lets your customer know you won’t be wasting her time. Here is an example of something you might say:

You:	I usually cover three things in my first meeting with a customer. First, I like to find out about the specific event you are planning and what you are looking for in a catering service, next I bring out several products for customers to sample, and finally, if you decide you are interested in our services, I schedule a follow-up meeting where we will go over your customized menu and discuss the service contract. This first meeting should only take fifteen minutes of your time.
Customer:	Great. Let’s get started.

The agenda approach outlines your meeting objectives and lets the customer know how long the meeting will last. If you know your customer is someone who likes to get right down to business, leading off with an agenda approach is often a good idea.

The Premium Approach

Free is always appealing. The **premium approach**, in which you offer your prospects free product samples or other giveaway items, helps build enthusiasm about your brand or products, attracting customers who might not otherwise express interest. Once you’ve gotten your prospect’s attention with the giveaway, he will be more inclined to listen to a sales presentation or at least give you a moment of his time. The premium approach is common in retail situations such as cosmetics, wine retail, or specialty food stores where sampling a product can often influence a customer’s decision to buy. In other cases, like trade shows, sales representatives might give out inexpensive promotional items or samples as a way to initiate contact with prospects.

For instance, if you were working at a booksellers' convention, your publishing house might be giving away bookmarks or even free copies of a new best-selling novel. You could use the premium as a way to talk to someone who comes to your booth using the following approach:

You:	Our house publishes some of the best-selling mystery authors on the market. You might be interested in taking this copy of the number one best seller, <i>One Moment in Time</i> by Jacque Rolique.
Customer:	I would really like a copy of the book. I've been meaning to read it. Thank you.
You:	I'm Sasha Conti from New World Publishing. What's your name?
Customer:	My name is Ramsey Jackson from Books and Nooks. We have fifty-five stores in the Northeast along with an e-commerce Web site.
You:	It's a pleasure to meet you, Ramsey. Thank you for stopping by our booth. I'm familiar with Books and Nooks, and it's a really special store. Would you also like to see a booklist featuring our newest releases? We have so many new titles that haven't even hit the shelves yet. With this list, you can see what's new and bring the hottest titles to your customers sooner. What kinds of titles are important to your customers?

The premium approach gives you the opportunity to engage your prospect, learn about her business, and find out how you can help her meet her customers' needs.

The Combination Approach

Effective relationship selling is adaptive. Even if you prepare a script beforehand, you won't follow it word for word; instead, you will modify it based on the feedback you get from the customer during your interaction. Real-world, adaptive selling rarely fits neatly into textbook models. Often, an experienced salesperson will shift fluidly from one type of sales approach to another. For instance, he might start off by offering a product demonstration and mentioning a customer benefit almost simultaneously:

Salesperson:	Here. Try lifting this ultralight graphite bicycle frame. How much would you guess it weighs?
Customer:	Wow! That's amazing. Really light. I'd guess it only weighs about four pounds?
Salesperson:	Close. It's actually even less than that: only 2.9 pounds. Technocycle specializes in engineering cutting-edge bicycle components like that frame you're holding. Our products fit the needs of the serious cyclists like your customers because using Technocycles's components ensures that you will always be offering the best, most competitive technology on the market.

So what approach should you use in your selling situation? Plan one that best showcases your company or product, that fits your style, and that matches what you know about your prospect. But when you make that first contact with the prospect, let flexibility be your guide. Be prepared to start with a referral and move straight into a question or customer benefit or to scrap your prepared approach altogether in favor of something else.

Key Takeaways

- The **question approach** involves leading off with questions to learn about your prospect and engage him in dialogue.
- In a **product approach**, the salesperson opens the call with a product demonstration or display.

- The **referral approach** is an effective way to quickly establish trust with a prospect because it involves starting the call off by mentioning a mutual connection who has referred you to the prospect and who is willing to vouch for you.
- The **customer benefit approach** requires research beforehand so that you can open your call by mentioning an important, customer-specific benefit of your products or services.
- Sales that involve very specific solutions to customer problems sometimes begin with a **survey approach**.
- The **agenda approach** is a straightforward approach that gets right down to business. It appeals to highly organized people because it involves outlining the meeting agenda at the start of the sales call.
- A **premium approach** is one in which the salesperson offers product samples or giveaway items to attract a prospect and establish goodwill.

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