

3.1: The Power of First Impressions

The Approach: The Power of Connecting

Learning Objectives

- Understand the role of first impressions and the importance of a strong approach.

When Paul McCartney returned to New York in July 2009 to play a concert at Citi Field, the new stadium built in the place of Shea Stadium where The Beatles first invaded the American music scene in 1965, the atmosphere was electrifying. He started the concert by saying, “Welcome to the new Citi Field Stadium. It’s been a long time since I’ve been here.... I have a feeling we’re going to have a little bit of fun tonight.” “Paul McCartney’s first concert at City Field,” video, July 22, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdHC6OJPShQ> (accessed May 2022, 2024). Then he played The Beatles’ classic “Drive My Car,” and the crowd went wild.

Paul McCartney didn’t need to *talk* to the audience. In fact, people didn’t come to hear him speak at all; they came to hear him sing. But Paul McCartney clearly understands the power of a strong approach. His brief welcome, tip to the past, and promise for a great show were all part of his short but effective **sales approach**. While you might not think of Paul McCartney as a salesperson, his concerts, just like those of other rock stars and recording artists, are actually sales presentations for his new songs and albums.

In all types of selling, the approach precedes the sales presentation. In the case of the concert, you probably already know Paul McCartney and what to expect from him. But when you are meeting someone for the first time in sales, your approach won’t be successful unless you how you make a good first impression.

First Things First

“You only get one chance to make a first impression.” This is a saying you’ve probably heard many times before. First impressions are quickly formed, difficult to change, and can have a lasting effect. Think of a first date, your first day of high school or college, or any job interview you have gone into. You were probably nervous because you knew the importance of making a good first impression. Similarly, the sales approach is the most intimidating point of the sales process for many salespeople because they know that the decision to buy or not to buy can often start with this initial contact. The approach is your first phone call to your prospect, the moment on the sales floor where you walk over to a new customer and say, “That’s our newest model, and it has one terabyte of capacity. Do you record a lot of videos or music?” or your first visit to a target business when you ask to set up a meeting with your prospect. You’ve done your research, your planning, and your preparation, but the approach is where the rubber meets the road.

The Six Cs of the Sales Approach

While prospecting and the pre-approach are entirely under your control, the approach is the first part of the sales process where you actually come in contact with your prospect and you’re not quite sure what she will say; this can be a little nerve wracking. However, if you’ve researched your prospect, and if you go into the sales call prepared, you can have confidence that you will be able to adapt your sales approach to your individual customer. Keep in mind that you aren’t selling a product during your approach; you are actually introducing yourself and opening up the way for the opportunity to make your sales presentation later. Consider these six Cs, or things to keep in mind before and during your sales approach. These six points will help you anticipate your customers’ responses, adapt, and execute your approach with success.

The Six Cs of Selling

- Confidence
- Credibility
- Contact
- Communication
- Customization
- Collaboration

Confidence

If you know your product inside and out, and you've set your objectives and prepared a general benefit statement, you will be well equipped going into your call, so have confidence. (On the other hand, confidence without preparation is a sure recipe for disappointment, so make sure you actually *have* done your homework first.) Not only will a confident attitude set the tone for the meeting and help you build credibility with your customer, but it will also help you perform your job better. As psychologist William James said, "Attitude at the beginning of a difficult task...more than anything else, will affect its successful outcome."

Of course, feeling and appearing confident in a stressful situation is more easily said than done, but there are some simple psychological tricks that can help. For in-person sales approaches, sales coaches suggest giving yourself an affirmation before heading into the meeting. For instance, tell yourself "I am confident in my ability to make the sale." or "I am an excellent problem solver." Lestraundra Alfred, "*15 Positive Sales Affirmations Every Rep Needs*", HubSpot, (accessed May 22, 2024). If you believe you will succeed, it is more likely that you *will* succeed. In addition, dressing well for your sales call will help you feel more confident and professional.

For sales calls that happen over the phone, prepare for your call by organizing your workspace first. Clear off your desk and make sure you have everything you will need within easy reach—calendar, note pad and pen, fact sheets, precall planning worksheet, and anything else that might be helpful during the call. You should also try standing up (because people feel more powerful when they are standing) and smiling while you talk (it will relax you and will help you to use a positive, energized tone of voice).

Credibility

Building credibility is one of the most important challenges you will face early on in the sales call; you want to convince your customer that you are competent, that you offer valuable solutions, and that you are trustworthy. Open the conversation by introducing yourself and your company; if you are meeting your customer in person, make eye contact and offer a firm handshake. Next, briefly explain the purpose of your call (without making your sales presentation). Your customers are busy people, and will appreciate it if you are direct. In addition, an up-front manner like this conveys trustworthiness.

Depending on the type of sales situation you are in, you may be approaching your prospect, or they may be approaching you. In B2B sales, you are generally approaching your prospect, so you have researched them first. While qualifications like a proven track record, satisfied customers, or number of years in sales might help establish your credibility, according to Jeff Thull, CEO of Prime Resource Group, these qualifications are expected, and listing them isn't an effective way to lead off your sales call. Thull says *exceptional* credibility comes when you can demonstrate that you have done your homework. In other words, it's not what you know about your company and your product that will impress your customer; it's what you know about your customer and his situation. 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) Later in this chapter, you will learn about specific ways to do that.

Contact

By now you might be wondering how you should approach your prospect. Do you want to make your first contact in person, on the phone, or over e-mail? The way you make contact will depend on the specific selling situation. Consider whether you are in a situation in which you will initiate the approach, whether your customers will initiate the approach, or whether your selling will include a mixture of both. For instance, maybe you work for a company that specializes in corporate training and personal development services, and your customers include referrals (in which case the prospect is approaching you) as well as prospects you have identified through research (in which case you are contacting them). Even retail selling can include a mixture of both. If you are selling cars or fine jewelry for instance, your customer might come into the showroom or store and ask you for help directly, or he might just start looking around, in which case you would approach him. Of course, because of the environment, in most retail situations the approach happens in person.

While there's not one set way to make an approach, the constant is to make every approach personal. Every situation is different—some approaches may be made at a trade show, while others may be made in an office, or even on the phone—but it's always a good idea to show appreciation. "In every conversation, include at least one appreciative remark," according to Rosalie Maggio, best-selling author of *How to Say It* and *The Art of Talking to Anyone*. Praise the other person's business acumen, charity work, or even her taste in shoes. As long as the appreciation is brief, sincere, and specific, the feeling will be remembered long after the words are forgotten." Robert Jones, "How to Make a Powerful First Impression," *Entrepreneur*, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/startingabusiness/selfassessment/article198622.html> (accessed May 22, 2024).

On the other hand, in situations where *you* are generally approaching the customer first, it's important to think strategically about the way you want to contact your prospects. E-mail is one of the most efficient and least expensive ways to get in touch with a large number of prospects, but e-mail—like direct mail—is impersonal and can have a low response rate. (Just think of all the “junk” e-mails you delete or send through your spam filters on daily basis). E-mail can work as an extension of the qualifying process because only the prospects with genuine interest will be motivated enough to respond. This makes e-mail a useful approach for smaller, less complicated sales that require the seller to deal with a large number of prospects. On the other hand, e-mail is not the most effective way to reach your best prospects, especially not in complicated B2B sales—after all, in relationship selling you want your approach to be as personal as possible.

Face-to-face interaction is definitely the most personal approach you can make, but it is also the most difficult. In large B2B sales, since your contacts are decision makers with high levels of responsibility, they are busy people. You wouldn't just show up at their businesses without an appointment. In these cases, it's best to call first and ask your contact if you can schedule a time to meet with her in person. Of course, you might get sent right to voice mail, especially when you are trying to contact a busy manager. If you've tried a number of times and can't get through, you can leave a message, but make sure you follow up by calling back later in the day or the next day. Be persistent and call back until you can speak to someone. Also keep in mind that there are always exceptions to the rule. You might have the opportunity to make a face-to-face first contact (and secure an appointment for a sales presentation) if you know your B2B prospect will be present at a trade show or industry event you plan to attend.

Communication

Whether you approach your prospect in person or over the phone, you want to build good rapport. After all, wouldn't *you* rather do business with someone you like? Your customer will too. “Most decision makers base their purchasing decisions on who they are buying from, not what they are buying,” says Ray Silverstein, sales columnist for *Entrepreneur* online. Ray Silverstein, “How Do I Build Customer Rapport?”, <http://www.entrepreneur.com/management/leadership/leadershipcolumnistsilverstein/article182144.html> (accessed May 22, 2024). Rapport building happens at every step of the sales process, but it begins with your first interaction.

For in-person sales approaches, keep in mind the powerful elements of nonverbal communication, such as when people communicate face-to-face, only about 20 to 30 percent of that communication is verbal. Katherine Toland Frith and Barbara Mueller, *Advertising and Societies* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 34. This means that it is important to focus not only on what you are communicating but also on *how* you communicate it. You can make an instant positive connection simply by remembering to smile. This is critical: people are naturally wired to smile in response to others' smiles, so by smiling you will put your prospect at ease and help create a positive atmosphere. Responding to your prospect's body language and posture with a similar body language and posture, or mirroring, helps to establish rapport. Learn about the power of nonverbal communication and mirroring during a sales approach in this short video.

And don't forget to bring some business cards with you. You'll want to exchange business cards with the person with whom you are meeting.

On the other hand, when you communicate over the phone, you won't be able to use body language to help put your prospect at ease or establish rapport; your voice (including your pitch, tone, enunciation, and word choice) is the only tool you have. Sales coach Wendy Weiss suggests recording your voice as you practice your sales approach and listening to how you sound. Is your tone convincing and confident? Does your voice have warmth and passion in it? Are you speaking clearly enough to be understood? Is your volume appropriate? Listening to your recorded voice will help you hear how you sound to other people. Finally, while you can't mirror your customer's body language over the phone, you can subtly reflect his style of speech. If your prospect speaks quickly, try speeding up your speech as well. If the prospect has a drawl, consciously slow your voice down to match his pacing. Pay attention to the way he speaks and also to his word choice and conversational style and adapt your style to match.

You might be thinking, so now I know how to communicate with my prospect, but I still don't know *what* to communicate. The “what” of your sales approach will depend on the specific selling situation and your pre-call objectives. In some cases, like retail for instance, your approach might be immediately followed by a sales presentation, but in other cases, particularly larger B2B sales, the purpose of the first contact is to set up an appointment for a sales presentation. In the next section of this chapter you will read more about the dos and don'ts of opening lines, or approaches, in different selling environments.

✓ Approach Like the Pros

Learn about sales approaches and other best practices in selling by subscribing to the *Selling Power* newsletters. There are several different versions including one that focuses on the pharmaceutical industry and one for software. All e-mail newsletters are free when you sign up at <http://www.sellingpower.com/content/newsletter/index.php>.

Customization

Tailoring your sales approach to the individual customer is one of the keys to relationship selling. Even in retail situations in which the prospect is approaching you first (so you aren't able to research her beforehand), you would approach different customers differently. Consider the example from the first chapter, for instance: selling a gym membership to a prospect who walks into your fitness club. If a woman with two young children comes in, you would probably spend time showing her the child care center, and you would discuss any family centered activities your club offered. If she expressed an interest in aerobics or Pilates, you would show her the class schedule and the fitness rooms where the classes are held. Adaptive selling—especially in situations in which you haven't been able to prepare—involves observation, listening, and asking directed questions to uncover what your prospect needs and cares about.

John Brennan, president of Interpersonal Development, suggests using intuition to customize your behaviors and the substance of your communications to your customers' buying style. "If [something in the interaction] does not feel right," he says, "pay attention." Tune in to your customer's responses. If you get the sense that he wants simplicity, don't go into too much detail. On the other hand, if he uses detail in his own responses, use a higher level of complexity when you respond back. Ultimately, the trick is to get inside your customer's head. Ask yourself, "What would I care about and want to know if I was this person? What would I respond well to?" Is your customer an individual consumer? Is he a technical expert? Is he someone working to earn the respect of higher-level managers in his company? Putting yourself in your customer's shoes and adapting accordingly will help you earn his trust.

Collaboration

You've learned how relationship selling is about partnering. Of course, all sales have a bottom line (you ultimately want to close the sale), but your customer has something he wants out of the transaction, too. In relationship selling you want to focus on your customer so he gets what he wants; when you do this, your selling becomes a collaborative process. When you practice collaborative selling, both you and your customer get more out of the situation, and you create ideas that would not have been possible for each party working individually.

Dress the Part

When you meet a customer face-to-face, appearance is an important part of the first impression, so make sure to put careful thought into what you wear to your sales call. A good rule of thumb is to dress a little better than you think your customer will dress. It's hard to go wrong dressing more professionally than you need to, but you *can* go wrong by dressing too casually. What you wear is as much of a communication as what you say or how you use body language; so make sure to dress appropriately and professionally.

At the same time, make sure you know something about your customer and his company culture. If you sell agricultural supplies to farmers, or you sell products to maintenance supervisors or people who wear uniforms, for example, dressing too formally will separate you from your customer. However, these cases are the exceptions rather than the rule. When you are selling to managers within a company, dress will be more formal. Find out about the company culture to learn whether dress is business casual or "coat and tie" and dress up a notch.

Key Takeaways

- Remembering the six Cs of the **sales approach**—confidence, credibility, contact, communication, customization, and collaboration—will help you make a good impression when you contact your prospect for the first time.
- Techniques like preparation, research, and dressing the part can help you maintain confidence going into the call.
- It is important to establish credibility early on by communicating to your prospect, both verbally and nonverbally, that you are professional, well intentioned, and trustworthy.
- Decide how you will make the initial contact with your prospect; this varies depending on the selling situation.

- Good communication is essential to rapport building in relationship selling; it involves not only knowing what to say but also knowing how to listen.
- Customization, tailoring your **sales approach** to the individual customer, is also key in relationship selling.
- A good salesperson works not only to achieve his own objective but also to help his customer achieve her objective. Collaborative selling creates ideas that would not be possible for each party working individually.

This page titled [3.1: The Power of First Impressions](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Lisa O'Halloran \(Northeast Wisconsin Technical College\)](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- [9.2: First Impressions Make All the Difference](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/powerful-selling>.