

Beware the Oversell

By Colleen Francis

One day, while in my former job with Open Text, I saw a deal quickly turn sour thanks to a common yet risky sales tactic. My over-enthusiastic salesperson, on the brink of closing, tells the client, “This product is exciting because not only will it give you A, B and C – which you want – but also D, E and F, which you’ll really love!” Immediately the client begins to backpedal. *Maybe we’re paying too much with D, E and F added in? Maybe this product is too complicated? Do we even need D, E and F?*

Overselling: The act of telling the customer they’re getting more than they need when they don’t require it, didn’t specify it and may never use it.

This is a dangerous sales approach for two reasons. First, your client will always be tempted to ask if they’re paying too much for a product that contains more than they need. Second, and even worse, you’ve raised expectations that you’ll always deliver more than the client requested.

To bypass this tricky situation, it’s important to be careful, be honest and be specific to the client’s needs. Overselling could mean no sales at all.

Here are tips to avoid the oversell trap and to close that deal:

Identify the client’s criteria for success

Find out what’s important to your client. Be sure your definition of success is consistent with theirs. NEVER assume you already know what a client wants. Great salespeople excel at helping people gain clarity. Why? Because to successfully sell or deliver good service you need to be clear about a client’s needs and wants.

Start off by asking leading, questions to clarify your assumptions such as:

- You mentioned that A, B and C are important to you. Which is the most important?
- When you say you don’t want to spend too much, what exactly do you mean?
- What are your most important criteria for success?

Dive deep with additional questions

If your client is being vague with their answers, it could mean they haven’t thought the situation through. Or, they don’t want to speak the truth and be held accountable for their answers. Or, they’re simply afraid to take action.

When things are unclear, it helps to ask the client further open-ended discovery questions. Be sure to show empathy when presenting them. Explain that your questions are intended to help you better understand the client’s needs, prevent misunderstandings and deliver what they’re looking for.

Ask questions like the following:

- What are your top three priorities for defining the success of this project?
- Specifically, what is most important to you?

- What needs to be in place for you to feel this project has been a complete success?
- What does a successful project look like?

Then, continue with as many of these clarification questions as you need to ensure you are clear on the client's definition of success:

- How will you know when you have reached that level of success?
- Can you give me some more background on that?
- Can you provide me with an example?
- When you say _____, what do you mean by that?
- Is that critical?
- How important is that compared with _____ (insert some other criteria as a point of comparison)?

Specify through example

If your client is still unclear, introduce some common challenges they might identify with. It's always easier for clients to discuss problems (especially with salespeople) when they hear that others are having the same issues, too. In this case, it works to ask closed-ended (yes/no) questions to help them determine what is or isn't working.

You might start the conversation like this:

"John, many executives tell me that although they're happy with their business results, they have ongoing concerns with _____ (name a problem your product addresses). Is that what you meant when we were chatting about how you _____?"

The key is to pick one or two serious yet everyday problems your product can solve. That way, it's almost guaranteed your client will recognize the issues and say, "Hey, those are problems for me, too!"

Follow up with clarifying questions such as:

- How is that affecting you?
- How long have you had the problem?
- What have you done to try and resolve it?

Confirm and close the deal

Once you and your client are on the same page, it's time to land that sale. Conversations that are question-based and focused on the client's needs will ensure you have the criteria to close the deal. By demonstrating you want to deliver precisely what's asked for, you'll create a win-win situation for you and your client that can ultimately lead to ongoing sales and service – as well as referrals. Honest and thorough communication, not overselling, is the only way to uncover the real criteria for success and to give the customer exactly what they need – NOT more.