The Engineer and The Salesperson:
How to Improve Their Team-Selling Skills

By Eric R. Baron - The Baron Group, Inc.

A corporation plans to upgrade its computer equipment and software. The client has questions and concerns about how the old and new equipment will work together. To make the sale, the salesperson will need the help of a systems or applications engineer and other technical resources who will problem solve with the client. The salesperson has an explanation for virtually every reservation the client has. The engineer, on the other hand, is cautious and, in some cases, is not enthusiastic about what the software or hardware can do. They leave with no sale. The two gave the impression that they were at cross-purposes throughout the meeting.

This anecdote is replayed frequently as the high technology industry grapples with the problem of how to get technical people and salespeople to sell effectively as a team.

The technical people don't sell exclusively. They're usually hard at work on system or software design. Yet, increasingly, companies ask their engineers to accompany salespeople on sales calls. Untrained in selling, the engineer does what he or she does best, which is to talk about the application or system. Too often, the technical person isn't working in tandem with the salesperson. It appears to the customer that this team doesn't have its act together.

On the positive side, when salespeople and technical people work together effectively, the sales call is much more powerful and convincing.

Few high technology companies have learned how to make team-selling work as effectively as they would like. Most share the

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limited view that team-selling simply involves adding more people to the process both before and during the sales call. Team-selling is a multi-disciplined effort requiring new approaches and skills. Companies who are successful with team-selling stand to dramatically improve their sales because the team of engineer and salesperson is far more powerful than either individual. But teaching these two professionals to work together effectively eludes many companies, resulting in lost opportunities.

Why do these selling failures occur and what can high technology companies do to improve their success rate? In a nutshell, team-selling fails for three reasons: (1) engineers haven't been trained to sell, either alone or as part of a team; (2) both the engineer and the salesperson either don't sell consultatively or need to improve their skills as problem solvers and advisors to the client; and (3) salespeople and engineers don't understand the value of joint sales calls and lack the skills required to sell in tandem with each other.

The Salesperson and Engineer as Consultants

Consultative selling isn't a new concept. It has been around for 25 years. It suggests that a salesperson must clearly analyze a customer's situation before presenting services or products. When a high tech sale goes wrong, often there is a failure to develop a consultative relationship with the client and a failure to ask the right questions. But once the client's issues and concerns are voiced, care must be taken to ensure that the engineer doesn't wipe out the sale by being too negative and pessimistic about whether the problems posed by the equipment or applications can be successfully resolved. Of course, it is important for the technical resource to identify potential issues, but those concerns should not be used to stop a decision from going forward. Instead, the engineer needs to demonstrate problem-solving skills by providing options that address the issues.

The complexity and cost of choosing and installing new computers and ancillary equipment demand a consultative approach to the sales process. Today, it isn't unusual for the director of information technology to bring in an independent, outside consultant to help him or her in the selection of new vendors or equipment. IT executives understand that vendors have their own agenda: to sell their goods and services. As a result, they are often skeptical or even mistrustful of salespeople. It is actually to the benefit of the vendor to bring the engineer along on calls because they can be more objective about the client's needs and the company's ability to address them.

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The IT executive is usually a knowledgeable and sophisticated buyer, demanding much expertise from the salesperson, and, naturally, the salesperson doesn't have the background to provide all the answers, certainly not as well as the engineer.

The primary point person must think of him- or herself as a consultant first, and a salesperson second. Salespeople do not typically spend enough of their time asking questions that uncover client needs. A successful consultant is always analyzing needs, exploring options, delving into the strategy that motivates a client. Salespeople too often do not probe client motives. They feel they have done their job once they ask a few basic questions and then provide their customers with information. Too many spend their time talking and not listening to their clients.

The high technology sale can be accomplished more effectively if it is done in three phases. In phase one, the salesperson, and the technical expert must listen to customers and their needs. It is important to use the principles of team-selling in this critical phase of the consultative selling process in order to get the most out of the interaction. For example, technical resources can ask the strategic questions salespeople don't think about. Salespeople can ask questions they might not ask because the technical expert is there to assist. Salespeople should control the process and instinctively know when enough questions have been asked.

In phase two, they bring the information they have gleaned back to the home office and. in conference with the technical experts, can come up with a logical scenario that resolves the client's issues. Here is where engineers can put their problem solving skills to work. If they know how to conduct effective problem solving meetings, they can do great work together. When the sales and technical people return to the client in phase three, they have a coherent, innovative solution to the problem.

High technology companies need to provide training for engineers and systems people on how to team-sell as a unit. The two need to work together before they go on a sales call in planning what questions to ask, what issues to highlight, and how to resolve potential objections. The two need to make time to rehearse their respective roles in a sales call. They need to think through the agenda and decide how to position the meeting. Planning is a key component in effective team selling. The engineer needs to present what might be perceived as pessimism and negativity in a more positive light, so as not to frighten off the client immediately, and doesn't need to answer every qualification immediately. He or she can feel comfortable saying: "Let me research this; let me look into this with my partners at the office and come back to you."

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The salesperson and the engineer need to learn tolerance for each other's style and learn to accommodate each other. A good salesperson is a cock-eyed optimist. Many technical people, knowing how badly things can go in the design and building of systems, tend to be the opposite. Training the two to act as partners is a critical challenge facing high technology companies.

Conclusion

The ability to team-sell in the high technology industry is an art, not a science. Failures occur too often because the team's sales skills are unrefined. The information technology customer is extremely sophisticated. If he or she lacks knowledge to make a decision, an outside consultant will be brought in. The cost of computer upgrading is so monumental that customers must take this path, as due diligence.

The mistrust of vendors can be so intense that the team-selling skills of the salesperson and the engineer must be in tip-top condition. The two need to understand that consultative selling is now the norm in this industry. Salespeople who approach customers without probing for the hidden needs and unspoken agendas will fail. The engineer or technical expert must be viewed as a key element in the sales process. The salesperson will rarely have the technical know-how that the customer now demands. The technical expert needs to learn how to work in partnership with the salesperson. The two must respect each other. One tends to be optimistic, the other leans towards pessimism. Working together, the two can be a force to be reckoned with. The computer industry must begin to train technical people how to sell first and, second, how to sell as a team. The ultimate objective, stronger sales, can be realized.

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