



The Real Selling Starts After you Get the Business!

by Julie Neider

You finally realized the results of your hard work, completed the sale and are already considering what to spend your next commission check on. Stop. This thinking is exactly what gets many companies in trouble today. By focusing only on the initial sale, many companies are letting potential long-term customers fall through the cracks and lost customers means lost revenue.

What should happen before, during and after the sale? Welcome to customer Service 101 of today and of the future. The companies of today need to focus on not only on reeling in new customers, but on keeping existing customers as well. However, most organizations lack the skills and tools needed to do so. The most successful sales representative understand their customer needs. In Eric Baron's book, *Selling Is a Team Sport*, he shows you how to turn your entire company into a customer-centric organization. Anyone and everyone in your organization must be able to fulfill the needs of the customer. The bottom line in every aspect of customer service is understanding the client's needs.

Here is an excerpt from Baron's book. Be sure and complete the exercise. I am sure you will be surprised a some of your answers. I was.

SO WHAT EXACTLY IS THE PROBLEM HERE?

An agitated customer walked into a hardware store on a Saturday morning at 9:00 A.M. When the owner of the store arrived, the customer started rambling on about how he just bought a house the previous week and now, on his second day living in the house, he had awakened to a funny noise in the basement. Upon investigation, he found the basement was under six inches of water. "The floor is starting to buckle, the paint is peeling off the walls, and the furnace looks like it's about to short out." He screamed.

He went on to say that this was his first house, and he knew nothing about home repair. He had tried to reach the realtor who sold him the joint, “but she’s probable showing other awful houses to unsuspecting victims.” He lamented how he has spent “every nickel he had to get into this disaster” and didn’t know how he could pay for any materials needed.

The house was over 100 years old, and he had convinced his wife to make the move in spite of her reservations. “So on top of all this water stuff, my wife thinks I’m an idiot!”

Now think about the needs expressed by this exasperated customer. Take a minute two write down as many needs expressed in his please as you can. Feel free to re-read the story as many times as you like. Do it now – I promise you’ll learn something. Approach this as a “needs analysis” exercise to see how good you really are at determining needs. No cheating. Just do as I ask. You will see why.

I’ve conducted this exercise in perhaps thousands of training programs, workshop, and speaking engagements. When I ask a group to list this hyperventilating homeowners needs, the answers are always things like:

- A sump pump
- A WetVac
- New flooring
- Paint and brushes
- A cup of coffee
- Tools
- Do-t-yourself books
- A friend
- A lawyer
- An insurance adjuster
- A Plumber
- A marriage counselor
- A pistol

One participant in a session I conducted for a pharmaceutical company earned a big laugh from the group by shouting out, “That guy could use Prozac!”

Unfortunately, in today’s competitive environment, responses like this one, and all the others on the preceding list, are just not going to cut the mustard. Why? Because every one of these answers represents a *solution*, not a *need*.

Can you remember talking about a personal or work problem in some social situation, and having some clown blurt out a solution or two before you even finished explaining the problem? If so, you were probably annoyed or frustrated. The impression the other person gave is that he or she could quickly solve a problem that you had been agonizing about. In other words, that person was smarter or more creative than you. Possibly the preferred solution was a good one – but that doesn’t mean you were ready to hear it.

That’s the same effect sales people have on clients when they respond too quickly with ideas and solutions before taking an adequate inventory of the customer’s needs.

NEWSFLASH!

There is a big – no, make that a huge – difference between a need and a solution.

NEEDS VERSUS SOLUTIONS

To illustrate the difference between needs and solutions, let’s return to our panicked homeowner. If your list of needs included some kind of pump to fix his problem, you reacted the way most people do, and the way I did the first time I participated in this exercise. The idea-generating machine in your head kicked in and started churning out solutions before pausing to determine the poor fellow’s needs.

Let’s try again. One of the constraints highlighted by the homeowner was that he didn’t have a lot of available cash since he had sunk all his money into the house, which as far as he could tell, was sinking itself. Since he had just moved in, he didn’t know much about the inner workings out of the house, or its history. What he knew at this point was that he had a very wet basement.

Since he probably didn't want to spend much money, a pump might not be the best solution. Maybe the house already has a pump that needs to be repaired or perhaps simply turned on, or maybe he could rent one. In light of the circumstances, a mop and a few buckets might be the best solution, or perhaps some kind of economical siphon.

Or maybe there was a clogged drain in the basement. A low-cost solution could be to call the fire department to pump the water out of the basement. Or maybe he could get the help of the neighbors.

Whoops. Once again, all of these ideas are *solutions*, not *needs*. See how easy it is to get off track? The trouble is that solutions aren't what this man needs to hear, nor what a needs-driven salesperson should be offering at this early point in the relationship. A truly "needs-driven" salesperson would be thinking only in terms of understanding the customer's needs, and would then express them verbally.

Just what are the homeowners needs? Here are some, you can probably come up with more.

- To get the water out of the basement.
- To repair the floor
- To restore the walls
- To protect the furnace from shorting out
- To know where the water is coming from
- To know how to prevent this mess from happening again.
- To learn about being a homeowner
- To learn where to go for help
- To figure out how to regain esteem in his wife's eyes
- To learn how to feel better about buying an old house

Remember, the house has been standing for a hundred years. Chances are that a wet basement at this moment won't cause the structure to collapse or go floating down Main Street. Therefore, our unhappy homeowner has a few additional needs:

- To calm down
- To get a grip on the situation
- To understand that the problem is manageable
- To feel good about himself

So there are many expressed needs on the table, as well as needs that aren't expressed directly but are certainly there. The challenge is to understand what those needs are and convey that understanding to the customer before worrying about how to address them. Approaching problems in this way requires discipline, but it's likely to lead to solutions that are a better fit for the customer's real needs and to better relationships as well.

Here's the point. As human beings, customers aren't looking for solutions from salespeople very early in the relationship. Like a new love interest, they need to be courted first. They're looking for sales professionals who understand their needs and as a result can offer understanding now, and thoughtful solutions later – even if it's a subsequent call.

In addition, presenting solutions prematurely can be misinterpreted as caring more about *your* company, *its* products, and *your* needs than the customer's needs. Fairly or not, it can be interpreted as showboating or some perverse variation of one-upmanship. Not a good relationship building technique. Even when a customer seems to be impatient for a quick solution, salespeople will be more successful if they first verbalize the relevant needs as they have come to understand them.

NEWSFLASH!

What the majority of customers want most is to see that you understand what they are talking about.

To connect the inherent tendency to think of solutions first, when you realize that you've just thought of a *solution*, ask yourself, "What is the *need* that triggered this solution?" If Prozac is the solution for someone in an agitated state, then the need might be to be in a better mood, or at least to calm down. Short of prescription drugs, a better mood might be achievable by assuring the customer that the problem is fixable, or explaining that after a thunderstorm many houses in the area have wet basements and the basements always dry out, or telling him there are ways to prevent this from happening again (remember, at this juncture, he's in the soup over buying the house in the first place).

Still another way to improve his mood would be to explain how problems like this are usually simple and not terribly expensive to resolve.

Notice, by the way, how solutions tend to be *nouns*, while needs are usually *verbs*. Look at the two lists I've presented: "sump pump" is a noun; "to get the water out of the basement" starts with a verb. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, but it holds most of the time.

NEWSFLASH!

If you express what you think is a need as a noun, it is probably a solution.

Understanding the difference between needs and solutions is an important first step in understanding the needs-driven philosophy. In a sales-driven customer-focused organization, everybody must be thinking all the time about the needs of customers and how to address them. The first point of contact, however, is the salesperson. We employ salespeople to create and build relationships with our targeted customer base, and to find out their needs. One of the serious issues management must learn to resolve is the ironic fact that most salespeople think they understand their customer's needs when in reality they don't. The result is lots of missed opportunities – everyday.