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ACCELERATE SALES:

Don't just ask—earn the right to close

Closing rates improve when sales associates ask for the sale. So, why do sales associates fail to do this so often and what can you do about it?

MARTIN C. SHANKER



It's been shown that for higher-price items, close ratios increase when sales associates ask for the sale. The most common reason for not asking is fear of being turned down.

That fear comes from not successfully executing the first five steps of the sales process: greeting effectively, asking good questions, listening carefully, making a persuasive presentation that an item meets the customer's needs or dreams, and handling objections. Those steps establish the salesperson as a trusted advisor who has earned the right to ask for the sale.

After successfully carrying out the first five steps, follow these tips for closing:

Move to close the sale once buying signs appear. Timing is everything. Ask for an order too early, and trust can be broken; wait too long and a client's patience expires. People give various signs that they're ready to buy. Sometimes, it's a verbal cue like, "That's perfect! My wife will love it!" Other times, it's body language—a smile, a gesture, repeatedly returning to handle an item. Be alert and move quickly to secure the sale once buying signs appear. Don't draw out the process by showing more items or listing additional benefits. You risk confusing the client and losing a sale that has already been made.

Prove—to yourself and the client—that it's time to buy. Don't just ask the client to purchase. Remind him or her of the buying signs you have observed. For example, you might say, "You said your wife will love this one. Let me gift wrap it." Or "You keep coming back to this one. Your smile tells me you really like it. Let me wrap it up." Stating why you're asking for the sale makes it clear to both you and the client why now is an appropriate time to do so, which eliminates awkwardness.

Adjust to the person and the situation. There are different ways to ask for the sale. One of the most powerful is the "assumptive close," where the salesperson simply acts as if the sale is complete. "You said your wife would love this one. I'll gift box it for you." Beware, however, that if trust is low—or buying signs have been misinterpreted—the client can be offended by your presumption. An alternative is the "invitational close," best for situations where there is uncertainty. Simply invite the client to purchase and enjoy the product: "You said this scarf is perfect. Would you like to purchase it along with the matching gloves?" Adjust your closing statement to the situation, but always begin with an affirmation to prove the client's interest in making the purchase.

Use the power of the pause. Once you've asked for the order, maintain comfortable eye contact with the client and wait for a

response. Sales associates often speak too quickly after asking for the sale, which can make them sound nervous. Clients will appreciate your silence so they can consider their decisions.

Reinforce a decision to purchase. It's common for people to experience "buyer's remorse"—immediate doubts about whether a decision to buy was correct. Counteract that by saying something like, "I know you wanted a unique present for this anniversary. The evening dress you selected is a brand new and original design. You're right that your wife should be pleased."

Remember, a majority of clients will not purchase without prompting. Asking for the order is the natural final step to a persuasive presentation.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

martin.shanker@shankerinc.com • (866) SHANKER • www.shankerinc.com