

Sales through coaching

Geoff Dodds explores the power of coaching when applied to selling professional services.

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'Selling' is a word that few people like. It can be especially abhorrent to professionals, who have been trained to believe that success depends upon professional excellence, only to find that their success is often judged more by how well they can sell.

Selling does have a poor reputation, caused largely by the fact that it is so often done badly. Poor training, inappropriate measurement and desperation combine to produce a toxic approach to a process that can and should be a pleasure for both parties.

A change of mind-set

The good news is that confidence and competence in selling can be greatly increased by changing the way you think.

The starting point is to think about the buyer. A buyer of professional services will only buy if and when they are satisfied that their needs have been fully understood and that your solutions will meet those needs.

Your role is to help the buyer to buy. It's not to force anything on anyone. It is to act as a facilitator of the buying process. A sales coach.

When I buy something, I am looking for someone to help me through my decision-making, someone who is interested in me and what I need, has all the information required and will give me the time and space to make a decision.

Occasionally, when out of my comfort zone, I welcome someone who says "Trust me, you need one of these". So you need to understand when you are dealing

with a less sophisticated, less informed buyer and be prepared to switch from coach to mentor.

In professional services, buyers are increasingly sophisticated and informed. So the coaching approach is appropriate to most situations.

Some coaching tools

The model most commonly used in coaching is GROW – Goals, Reality, Options, Will. It can apply equally to the selling process.

Start with their Goals (G)

Coaching is largely about helping others achieve their goals, reach their full potential. The coach doesn't come to a coaching

session to achieve their own personal goals. Their role is to support the coachee in achieving their goals.

In selling, you need to demonstrate a real interest in what the client is trying to achieve. Be more interested in them and their business than in your own sales goals.

Putting others' interests first is fundamental to building trust.

Give up control

For a professional who has been trained to give advice, non-directive coaching is tough. The default behaviour is to jump in with advice or solutions from your experience.

Once again, change your thinking.



Have faith in the client's ability to make decisions. Don't assume that your solution is right for them, in their situation, at this particular time. Give up control of the conversation.

In coaching, the responsibility for choosing a course of action lies entirely with the coachee. Go with it. Suspend your judgment. Let a solution emerge. Or not, as the case may be – that may be the right outcome for the client (and you).

Understand their Reality (R)

When coaching, a thorough investigation of the Reality, the current position, often leads the coachee to realise what they need to do. Many people carry their issues around like baggage, but never spend time properly thinking them through. Simply doing so can produce clarity.

Conversely, if insufficient time is spent on Reality, solutions will be hard to devise or even misguided.

Your role in selling is to help raise the client's awareness of what's really going on. What are the issues? How are they hurting them? What are the barriers preventing performance? What would it be worth to resolve them?

Ask, don't tell

The coach rarely makes statements. Their impact comes from the questions they ask.

In selling, the temptation is to talk. To tell the client about you, your experience, your ideas, your solutions. To deliver a presentation. To retain control.

The opportunity is to turn that on its head. Ask questions. Be interested rather than interesting. Demonstrate your smartness by the intelligence and relevance of your questions, not by trying to sparkle.

Give up control. Give the client the opportunity to think, to speak, to take the conversation in the direction that suits them.

Be prepared to ask challenging questions. The ones that really get to the root of the problem. The ones that encourage the client to express their emotions. That's often when a breakthrough occurs.

Listen properly

Much is said about active listening, but in selling it rarely happens. Most of us are too anxious to listen properly, often preoccupied by what we are going to say next. Or perhaps we are not sufficiently interested in hearing what someone has to say.



It takes confidence to listen properly. The confidence to pause, allow silence, note down what you've heard, think, respond. Those actions in themselves convey your interest in the client.

Few people are really good listeners. Those who are make a deep impression. You can tell by the next question they ask, because it demonstrates that they have heard what you said, thought about it and really want to know more. You can also tell by what they remember when you meet them next.

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Consider Options (O)

Unless the solution is obvious, it can help the buyer to think about options. Most buyers like a choice. And rarely is there only one way of doing something.

Consider these questions:

- What could you do right now to move one step forward?
- If money were no object, what would you do?

- If this were a colleague's issue, what would you advise them to do?
- If there was no-one else involved, what would you do?
- What else could you do?

These aren't typical selling questions, but they can lead to really interesting options that might otherwise have been overlooked. And they will give the client more confidence that they are making the right choice.

Will – Seek commitment (W)

Many people feel uncomfortable asking for the business or seeking client commitment.

The coaching approach is about holding back. Resisting the temptation to jump in too early with a solution.

It's like landing a plane. When you land a plane, you don't point the nose at the tarmac and dive. You approach the runway, then lift the nose and hold off, hold off, hold off... until the plane lands itself.

So it is with the coaching approach to selling. Put the onus on the client to land the plane, with your help.

At the same time, most coaching sessions are designed to finish with a firm commitment from the coachee – the Will (W) of GROW. Walking away from a discussion without clear action will frustrate you and your client.

The aim of your coaching is to get the client to a point where they express a clear statement of what they want. At that stage, it becomes relatively easy and natural to agree the next steps.

This commitment may not be a sale, but it will represent an appropriate next step for your client and for you.

In summary

Coaching isn't a panacea, but it's a powerful way of approaching a selling conversation. It demands a new mind-set – one where you are there purely to further the interests of your client, where you ask the questions and the client provides the answers, where you have the confidence to give up control and go with the client's flow.

One thing is guaranteed. Whether or not you make a sale, you will have given the client great value for their time.



Geoff Dodds is a brand consultant and coach, specialising in helping service organisations compete more effectively. Geoff@geoffdodds.com