

Qualify your prospects: Are they ready to buy?

Take a look at your company's sales pipeline. Of the prospects categorized as "high-probability opportunities," how many are qualified as "ready to buy?" What evidence exists to support their readiness?

Too often, sales people label a prospect who has demonstrated some level of interest as a high probability opportunity. This is often a result of attention being confused for intention.

Buyers feel no remorse for accepting a request to meet again to discuss XXX (fill in the blank). They are happy to ask more questions and receive more free consulting.

But dialogue without clear intention creates confusion. Small "yeses" are mistaken for the right "yeses" and salespeople become victims of their own lack of competency.

Recognize that the purchase decision begins as a journey to discover overt or latent needs that leads to clear qualification ...

- » "What is the buyer's real need? (Do they have a need?)"
- » "Does the buyer own the problem?"
- » "Is the buyer's dissatisfaction with their current supplier strong enough to justify replacing them?"
- » "Does the buyer believe that they are missing potential business improvement opportunities by remaining with their current supplier?"
- » "Does the buyer know what it is costing their company to do nothing?"
- » "Does the buyer trust you?"
- » "What business results will improve if action is taken?"
- » "Does the buyer believe that your solution is the RIGHT and best solution?"

...once the qualifying criteria for "read-

iness" has been met, the conversation can then advance to the purchase decision...

- » "Who must be involved in the decision-making process?"
- » "Whose approval is vital?"
- » "Do we have an adequate budget for this investment?"
- » "What is the best timing to make this decision?"

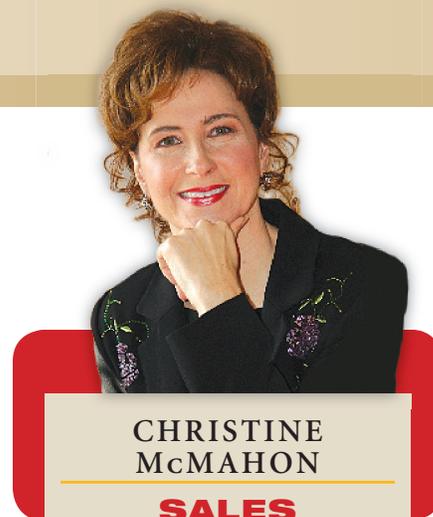
Sadly, a high percentage of salespeople fail to qualify their prospects. If you think that I'm kidding, ask your sales team to tell you what criteria they use to qualify prospects and the series of questions that they ask. (This might be a good topic for a

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future sales team meeting.)

Unfortunately, too many companies, by default, have taught salespeople that selling is about presenting. During the onboarding process, new hires are provided with a company capabilities presentation, accompanying script, and then trained how to present it. Salespeople are not instructed how the presentation should be used or when. They also aren't given the strategic questions to ask at the first meeting nor trained how to listen for the meaning beyond the words. As a result, sales people learned to tell, not sell.

Buyers are coconspirators in this dance.



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How often do salespeople walk into a meeting and the buyer leads off with, "Tell me what you do." Unsuspecting salespeople don't realize that this is a test. They wrongly interpret this statement to mean that the buyer has given them permission to tell their story. Thirty minutes later, after reviewing the company history and providing the prospect with a generic overview of their products and services, the sales person seems shocked when the prospect pulls out their calendar, thanks them for their time, and leaves stating that they have an-

other appointment. The salesperson is left wondering, "What just happened?"

In contrast, when top performers hear the words, "Tell me what you do," they interpret that to mean, "You're now in charge, the meeting is yours." Proactively, they respond by saying, "I will be happy to tell you what we do. May I ask you a few questions first?"

This shifts the focus from telling to learning. They then ask a series of well-scripted questions that guides the buyer through distinct "readiness-to-buy" steps. From needs awareness to solution assessment, and then

onto resolution of concerns and the purchase decision, the sales person becomes the facilitator of the buying process.

Top sales professionals know that they can differentiate themselves by the way they sell. They lead with reflective questions, and journey together with the prospect in discovering overt and latent needs and wants. Once this happens, the door is opened for the sales person to discuss capabilities and solutions.

Clear strategy is at the heart of this approach. By gathering detailed information early in the process, the salesperson gains the strategic insight needed to

frame their product and service offerings to the customer's specific requirements. Presentations begin with "Here's what you told us is important to you" (rather than, "Let me tell you about our company history and offerings.") Every slide is designed with the customer in mind and offers so much value that the customer takes the lead to advance the discussion to next steps.

Sound wonderful? It is!

More times than not, prospects aren't ready. This results in a process filled with stops and starts and too often, dashed desires. While not all of this can be avoided,

when the sales person understands the value of asking the right questions and listening for the meaning behind the words, they are able to qualify early. This prevents them from wasting valuable time pursuing low-probability opportunities. Instead, they create a laser-like focus driven to pursue and close high-potential opportunities, and establish themselves among the elite of sales professionals. ■

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