



Sell Before You Tell

©2009 Joseph Sommerville, Ph.D.

You've probably heard the saying, "give a man a fish and he eats for a day, teach him to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime." However, you'll never be successful teaching him how to, until he understands why he'd "want to." Business development operates the same way. Presenters sometimes jump ahead of that "want to" phase and spend their time simply talking about the best way to implement their service before making the case why it's beneficial. They've made the mistake of telling, before selling prospects on the idea. In their zeal to provide information and share their expertise, they've neglected the fact that prospects must first be persuaded, before they're instructed.

During an international Human Resources forum I attended, I witnessed two software development consultants address their ideal target market—a group of senior HR managers from Multi-National Corporations who had the buying authority to implement their software solution. There was great potential for large contracts and repeat business throughout these organizations. As the presentation began, the consultants described their company, how the software was developed and a list of the features it contained. As the presentation progressed, they went on to describe in minutiae how anyone using the software could input, analyze and report the data. They concluded with an examination of how the software could be scaled to fit different sized organizations. They were clearly experts in their field and demonstrated great command of the information. Why weren't they flooded with business afterwards? They spent the entire presentation explaining how to use the software, but no time convincing anyone to use it. They somehow thought that the facts would "speak for themselves." They were focused on the message instead of the audience.

I once coached a department head who was proposing to senior management a shift in the job responsibilities in her department. Her primary rationale for the shift was that it would free up more of her time. She was focused on herself (the speaker) instead of the audience. I encouraged her instead to stress the increased productivity and more efficient allocation of resources that would result throughout the organization.

The most persuasive presentations keep the audience on center stage. Here are five suggestions that will help you make the sale by directing your energies toward the decision-makers.

- I. Have a clear objective. Know what you want to achieve by the end of the presentation. Are you content to explain the advantages of your service or product or do you want

to convert prospects into clients? Is understanding sufficient or do you want to move them towards action and book the business?

2. Focus on benefits instead of features. Remember the adage “features tell, benefits sell.” What specific benefits are you offering? Will you help prospects save time, reduce costs or maximize the return on their investments? Everyone is tuned into a mental radio station identified as WIIFM—What’s In It For Me. Only by addressing the needs and desires of the prospect can you persuade them to take action.
3. Think about what problem your product or service solves for the audience. Does it eliminate unnecessary effort? Will it reduce anxiety by providing more certainty about the unknown? Can it help manage conflict? In the psychology of persuasion, it is said that people move away from pain and towards pleasure at about equal speed. Don’t neglect the “pain removal” approach.
4. Don’t provide information simply because you can and don’t explain for the sake of explanation. Include information and explanation only if they help you accomplish the objective you’ve identified for the presentation. Your company’s background, years of experience and professional certifications won’t matter if you can’t tie them directly to the needs of the prospect. People care less about who you are and more about what you can do for them.
5. Mentally prepare yourself by completing the following sentence: “The three reasons you should accept my proposal are. . .” This exercise focuses your attention on providing a rationale for action that is audience-focused.

Remember that it’s not about you, and neither is it about your message. It’s about your prospects and what they’ll find persuasive. Be sure to sell before you begin to tell and you’ll enjoy more success in your business development efforts.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.