

Covering Ground



Closing is not the end of the sale, but rather a series of small steps along the entire process of building profitable business relationships. By Rick Davis



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If you have ever felt that closing is an accidental process that is mysteriously out of your control, you are not alone; a surprising number of salespeople candidly admit to me that they feel the same way. Unfortunately, salespeople are taught gimmicks and manipulative tactics for closing that usually never work in the competitive—and often combative—world of construction supply, leading many reps to feel they are not in control. However, the good news is that you may already be employing effective closing techniques and not even realize it.

In reality, closing a sale is not an event, but rather a process, a series of little victories. Despite what most salespeople are taught, closing is *not* an all-or-nothing moment of tense confrontation in which you “ask for the order.” In fact, good salespeople rarely, if ever, utter those words. The actual moment of the close is merely a casual and sequential process with ebb and flow that culminates in a casual agreement to conduct business with little conflict at the final moment when the deal is made. Keeping this ebb and flow moving means maintaining a momentum of meetings and appointments, each with a purpose and a goal of understanding clients’ needs.

Follow the Leader

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the actual method of closing a sale is to follow a hypothetical salesperson

through an ideal new sales process. Our Sales Leader starts by picking up the phone and prospecting, an activity that will require many phone calls to secure one scheduled appointment. At that moment, the Sales Leader can take great pride in his success and celebrates this small close. Specifically, the “close” here is the agreement to meet, and it is the first step toward opening a new account.

While an average sales performer uses an initial meeting to promote products and push for an instant sale, a Sales Leader approaches the first appointment with the singular purpose of understanding the prospect’s challenges, thus creating credibility and demonstrating a sincere interest in that company’s business objectives. The Sales Leader then concludes the meeting by scheduling a follow-up appointment, which will give him time to digest the information gleaned from the prospective client and plan a presentation that will focus on the company’s needs.

During the second meeting, the Sales Leader begins by verifying information obtained during the initial appointment. This serves to provide a foundation for discussion and also allows the Leader to probe for more details before making a presentation about the capabilities offered by his company. At the conclusion of the meeting, which may last only a brief time, the prospect builder or contractor, impressed with the Leader’s

professional conduct, will suggest that the salesperson might be a suitable supplier for an upcoming project.

At this moment, the Leader takes advantage of sales momentum by suggesting another meeting two weeks later to discuss the project. If the prospect says that plans won't be ready and wants to delay the meeting, the Leader strategically validates a need for the meeting even though plans are not available and suggests that a specific product specification should be discussed as soon as it is convenient. Moreover, the Leader recommends that all parties involved in the construction process—e.g., superintendents, installers, etc.—attend the next appointment. At the succeeding meeting, the product specifications are discussed in detail so that everyone involved feels confident in the sizing, delivery coordination, and use of the product. The Sales Leader concludes this meeting by suggesting that the next discussion take place after construction documents are available for bid.

After a thank-you note has been sent to the prospective account, the Sales Leader makes follow-up phone calls to find out when the plans will be available. When they are complete, the Leader schedules a conference to review the documents (the average salesman simply picks up the plans and quotes the project without a final consultation on the project details). Next, the Sales Leader ensures that the project quote is completed accurately and priced at a level that is competitive (although by no means necessarily the lowest price in the market). Now comes time to meet face-to-face with the prospect and

present the bid (the average performer may merely drop the pricing quote at the contractor's office).

You may think that the end of the story is that the Leader makes a stellar presentation, and a sale—the “close”—is made. However, the prospect has probably already made a decision to grant the Leader the business, but a succeeding discussion will be required after the details of the quote are reviewed.

Even with this much due diligence, the Sales Leader does not win them all. This exact scenario could be played out a number of times and result in only periodic victories. In this hypothetical case, the Leader does in fact make the sale and, when the next meeting occurs, receives a signed purchase order for the materials.

The question here is, when was the “close” of the sale? Was it the signing of the purchase order, as most of us would think? Or was it actually the initial meeting? Was the close the fortunate timing of the phone call that earned the initial meeting? Was the close the quality conference during which the entire team was available to discuss the upcoming project? Was it the clarifying presentation of the bid or perhaps even the competitiveness of the price quote? The answer: all of the above. The close is not one moment of ultimate confrontation. It is a series of small successes that lead to the ultimate sale.

Time for Business

So if closing really is a series of meetings and events, how do you secure time with prospective clients on a long-term basis? The best way is to

conclude meetings by scheduling the next appointment.

The following systematic approach can help you improve your chances for scoring the next meeting.

1. Listen carefully to understand a potential client's challenges and reasons so that a follow-up meeting might be appropriate. Identify any opportunity to justify a mutually beneficial meeting with a prospect such as a business idea, a new industry regulation, a product idea, or a method of scheduling production more effectively.

2. State a reason for a future meeting. Rather than ask the poorly phrased (and ubiquitous) question “What else can I do for you?” specifically state a reason for the next meeting. You can't expect a potential customer to do your job for you. Use the phrase “We ought to meet because I have something that would truly be beneficial for you.” Then state what the purpose of a follow-up meeting would be.

3. Schedule the meeting. After you have clearly stated the reason for a meeting, leave with a set time and date, which the prospect will be less likely to cancel than casual plans.

The reality of the “close” is that it has less to do with manipulation and tricks and more to do with sincere intention to help prospects and clients grow. When you keep that purpose in your heart, you'll discover it is easier to schedule meetings and create an ongoing series of miniature closes that lead to greater confidence and systematic sales success. ■

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