

# Are Salespeople Really Getting Worse?

WHY THE PROFESSIONALISM OF THE  
INDIVIDUAL SALESPERSON IS OFTEN THE  
REASON CUSTOMERS BUY

# Are B2B Salespeople Really Getting Worse?

You've done your research and picked out a supplier with precisely the product or service you think your organization needs. You want to explore how what they do is going to work in your particular business, so you call the supplier and they send in their salesperson. The expert. The person who can really help you understand how their product or service is going to help your business.

Except it turns out they don't know any more than you do about the product and they know a lot less about your industry than you expected. Result? You don't trust them, their product or their organization. No sale.

**45%**  
**Dissatisfied  
with Sales  
Professionalism**

This is increasingly how customers feel about the B2B salespeople who turn up at the first meeting.

## **WHO SAYS THINGS ARE GETTING WORSE?**

Customers do. Infoteam, most recently in cooperation with the Harvard Business Manager, carries out recurring international research projects with samples of 300 customer executives who regularly buy products or services for €75K+. In 2004 only around 1 in 5 (18%) were unhappy with the professional performance of the B2B salespeople who came to see them. In 2014 nearly half (45%) were dissatisfied.

That's a big shift in a short time. If you run a B2B sales team you should be very concerned. But you're probably confused as well.

Chances are your organization has invested heavily in sales training in the last 10 years and you may well have made big investments in high quality presentation aids and technology to support sales.



### **SO WHAT HAS CHANGED?**

In a word, customers. In the last 10 years customers have become more professional, better informed. The procurement process in most organizations has become more sophisticated and customers have usually researched your organization, your offer and your competitor's offer before your sales people walk through the door. They are also busier than ever so they have high expectations of sales professionals and the value of initial meetings.

What this all adds up to is that the first face to face meeting between customer and salesperson is more crucial than ever.

### **TRUST – THE DECISIVE FACTOR IN FIRST MEETINGS**

The first meeting is the point at which the customer (or non-customer if you get it wrong) decides if he or she wants to proceed to a next stage with a potential supplier. And that decision will be based on trust. The salesperson who earns the trust of the customer will get a chance of advancing the sale and winning the business. Trust is earned by salespeople who demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the customer's business and industry. That's what the customers we surveyed said overwhelmingly.

## HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF FIRST MEETINGS



Attributes of good first meetings and % of customers who think this is very important		% of customers who see need for improvement	
Customer business and industry understanding	71	63	
Good questions and attentive listening	66	56	
Subject matter expertise	63	49	
Customer-specific information only	61	67	
Comprehensive meeting summary and next steps	56	48	
Feeling well understood	55	51	
Potential benefits discussed and quantified	53	52	
Relevant references with results achieved	51	47	
Presentation of vendor company	49	48	

= >50%
  = 20-50%
  = <20% of customers dissatisfied

When a salesperson goes into a meeting and asks intelligent well informed questions, listens to the answers and delivers further questions that show clear understanding of the answers and the business the customer is in – that’s when trust is built.

But that’s not all the customer wants, according to our research. They value subject matter expertise and information relevant to their business. They want to know they are understood and to be shown relevant case studies and they like benefits to be quantified. As one customer said when interviewed “The quantification of benefits really helps me position the value of the project internally.”

Customers didn’t hold back when we asked them what they don’t like “I really get angry when vendors come to meetings without proper preparation”. On the subject of vendor presentations one commented “Salespeople should focus more on the specific issues I am facing, not just bringing standard presentations that have no connection to my business” (our research puts presentations as the 9<sup>th</sup> most important thing customers are looking for). And on the subject of industry

knowledge one exasperated customer complained “I am sick and tired of educating salespeople about our business and industry”.



### **WE DON'T HAVE TIME!**

Most Sales Managers, if asked whether these things are important for improving sales professionalism, would heartily say “yes”. So, why are they not doing them? What’s getting in the way of doing what they know they should do? One VP Sales recently expressed his frustration as follows:

“I’ve read all the literature and I know customers want our salespeople to know more about their industry and business... in fact we have invested a lot of money to get the best information sources available. Our biggest issue is time... With all the daily fire-fighting we have to do to win deals and make our numbers this quarter, we just don't have the time to prepare first meetings well, let alone writing a good follow-up e-mail that helps the customer remember us.”

Another Sales Manager went on to say, “My team was really enthusiastic after the training session, and agreed that the tools and concepts were a perfect fit for our business... but after the workshop, I think we used them only once. With the daily rush of activities, we just don't find the time to sit and prepare together.”

A Key Account Manager in one of our workshops lamented “Every hour spent meeting a customer seems to require 1 hour in front of the computer putting information into the CRM system. But if I don't put all the information in, I don't get my commissions on the deals I close”.

**Build  
Trust**

So, it's not just customers who think salespeople are wasting their time – salespeople think management is wasting their time. And they are right. The lack of time – or perhaps more correctly, getting priorities wrong – is what prevents sales people doing the things they know they should be doing. If the trend in customer expectations continues upwards, the level of dissatisfaction with salespeople in first meetings will follow. The only way to reverse the trend is to change the way salespeople spend their time so they focus on what is important for customers and build their trust.

### **THIS APPROACH WORKS**



One of the world's leading business insurance providers undertook a sales transformation program based on what brokers (their customers) said they wanted. Following a recent win the broker was interviewed and said the team "outperformed all competitors" and promised they would be involved in more future bids.

An international provider of online credit card payment transaction services incorporated customer feedback about the sales person's professionalism into all of their sales opportunities. Following a recent win, the customer said the main reason they chose the company was that their professionalism was "head and shoulders" above the competition.

A leading provider of mobile telecommunication services invested in a "Way of Selling" program focused on the professional preparation and execution of first meetings, the clarity and focus of proposals and presentations, and continued engagement following contract signature. The result is that one region has already experienced an increase in win rate of 20%.



## CONCLUSION

Differentiating on product or price alone, is increasingly difficult today, so the professionalism of the individual salesperson is often the reason customers buy. Our research shows that there has been little progress in vendor performance measured against customer expectations in the past 10 years, with significant decline in many areas. This creates a very interesting window of opportunity for those organizations willing to examine their own practices, listen carefully to customers, and integrate the learnings into how they sell. The B2B organizations that will sell more are the ones that listen to what customers say.

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