

Maverick Selling

To Build a Better Client Base, Try Counterintuitive Sales Techniques

By Ken Lizotte and Patricia Coate

Back in the early days of building our business, we earnestly followed every effective selling technique taught by the sales gurus at the time. A few of their requisite rules included: Always return a prospect's inquiry as quickly as possible; always attempt to get a meeting with a prospect right away (lest it go stale); use proven techniques during a sales meeting to "close" the sale; and, when making a formal proposal, be sure to be thorough and comprehensive, especially in the section that contains your fees.

But, our results were often frustrating. In fact, whenever these techniques actually worked, the new client often exhibited an ongoing skepticism about whether or not he/she did the right thing by signing on. Even after we delivered what we had promised, the client didn't always appreciate it or believe that it was worth the investment.

What's more, we found the traditional sales techniques cultivated few long-term relationships. Many clients too often seemed to resent that they had been "sold," and thus a SECOND sale, to develop an ongoing client relationship, was either tough to obtain or out of the question.

Then there were times when a sale was reversed the next day. Call it “buyer’s remorse.”

Before long, we realized that many of our early sales failures were being *caused* by these traditional sales techniques and the reason was simple; we were following tips that were designed to sell commodity products, not consultative, strategic business services.

Assume for a moment that you are in the market for a new refrigerator or a new car. You may not like the sales reps you meet during the process but most likely you are willing to endure manipulative selling techniques if you *know* that the product is truly what you want. We do this because, at the end of the excruciating experience, we know we won’t be taking the sales rep home with us; we’ll be taking home the new fridge or car, and we’ll never need to see that sales rep again.

In purchasing consulting services, however, a prospect is buying a relationship *as well as* the service or expertise needed to solve a problem. In our experience, we have learned that if we fail to engender trust in our first few connections, a prospect often feels that “this is not a person I want to work with.” If we manipulate that person into signing on with us, by using some carefully

constructed closing techniques as taught by the gurus, the feeling of partnership and its concomitant commitment rarely materializes.

Our success rate improved when we began listening more closely to our prospects, customizing our explanation of benefits to fit their needs and showing genuine concern for them and their challenges—not just landing the business. We developed a consultative selling approach that allowed our prospects to get to know us as genuine, ethical and trustworthy consultants. As a result, they began to evaluate us AND our services in a more effective way.

But we weren't convinced that these more consultative sales techniques were enough. Would they always lead to long-term relationships with our clients and continuing business? Would our clients begin to see us *more* as their business partners rather than a vendor? Would we become such a trusted business advisor that our clients would never ever consider running off to someone else for help? Would we be viewed as consultants who always delivered what their clients paid for -- and MORE?

We finally concluded that we needed to go *beyond* these consultative selling techniques to have a better success rate for turning clients into long-term relationships. Therefore, we created a totally unique, counterintuitive, selling system – one that isn't really selling at all. And it's working.

Today, using nontraditional marketing and sales, we successfully cultivate *affinity* relationships and then build on them to form long-term business partnerships. With our system, potential clients seek *us* out. We no longer are in a position where we “sell, sell, sell.” We don’t measure “closing rates” with prospects or the numbers of clients we have captured over the years; instead, we measure the quality and longevity of our client list.

And our success has skyrocketed. Our clients now stay with us not month after month, but year after year. Most of our prospects are highly qualified, thus the pickings are always fat, not slim. And most importantly, no more boom-then-bust: at any one time we have a dozen or so good prospects in our pipeline, sometimes so many it’s hard for us to keep up!

To attain such success, your own “maverick selling” approach will require that you always keep your eye on the ball that you WANT to hit, and no longer worry about every ball (or prospect) that gets thrown your way, at whatever angle. Once you get the process rolling, you’ll be able to and indeed be required to pick and choose.

What, then, are the “techniques” of this approach? How does the Maverick Sales methodology create a stable, ongoing family of great clients?

Here are the top main, counterintuitive points that we now follow as part of our Maverick Sales methodology:

- 1) **Get them to call you.** Too often we think we have to go out and find prospects, by cold-calling or sending out snail-mailings or advertising. Alan Weiss CMC, author of *Million Dollar Consulting*, instead insists it's always far better to get prospects to call us rather than us trying to call (and sell) them. Some of the ways to do this include publishing articles and/or books, speaking to targeted groups, sending out a monthly e-letter and networking in places where your target market communes. What these activities do is to position one as a "thought leader." By doing this, you'll attract far more qualified prospects than if you went out *searching* for prospects. This first point is 90 percent of the Maverick Sales methodology. Get your prospects to call *you!*
- 2) **Respond SLOWLY to prospects.** Sometimes when business consultants respond immediately to a prospect's phone call, they feel self-conscious about their ability to do so. They might even say to the prospect, "I don't want you to think that by my rapid response I don't have anything else going on!" In our experience, our prospects do not resent that our initial response is one or two days later; rather they actually seem to appreciate it! They willingly accept that we might be too busy to get back to them right away. When we do set up our initial call, our prospects often express to us

(between the lines), how lucky they feel to have been able to reach us at all!

3) **RATE your prospects so you know their potential for hiring you.**

Before breathlessly rushing off to set up a sales meeting or send an inquiring prospect a proposal, we step back and gauge how qualified a new prospect is for us. We use a point system that we created as a device to provide some early perspective. Through years of experience speaking to potential clients, we are now able to judge very accurately when prospects have the potential to turn into clients. Here are just a few examples of our point system. When a prospect is referred by a satisfied client, we give the prospect +3 points and when the prospect is the decision-maker (not just one of many), we give the prospect +3 points. And, if the prospect is a new and struggling company, we give him/her -1 point because we know from experience that emerging consulting practices are not in a position to hire us.

Creating a similar rating system is easy to do for any consulting business. Think through your own history of which prospects have tended to become your clients and which have not. Then establish a rating system of your own.

4) **Make it HARD for prospects to hire you.** Don't make it impossible, but just not terribly easy! For example, stretch the process out. Don't do a proposal right away. Instead, ask for materials you can look at. Say you want to survey their Web site. And then send them an article you have written (and hopefully published) about their specific problem. Try to meet with them a second or even third time. It's not that you're trying to waste their time; you're just trying to be thorough about what they need from you and what you can give them.

It's true that during every point of connection, the prospect may bail out. But we have learned that it's far better to have this happen early on than to have it happen after we've "sold" them and popped a champagne bottle. If a prospect does NOT bail out, but keeps at it, then we know we're looking at a motivated, committed prospect who is probably sold on us and highly values the relationship we are offering.

5) **Do NOT try to close your prospect, in person or ever.** Of course, this isn't literally true. At some point you may have to say, "Well, should we do business together" or "I'd love to work with you" or something similar. But usually what happens is far different. *Your* prospect is asking *you*, "What's the next step?" or "How can we work together?" When he/she pops the question, it's just a matter of details.

6) **Leave fees OUT of your proposal (at first).** At the point that you have qualified your prospect and want to do a proposal, you may have already discussed fees. But, if you haven't, any proposal at this stage can benefit from *leaving these numbers out*. By sending off a preliminary proposal, covering everything EXCEPT fees, you can further the relationship-building effort and confirm the conceptual agreement of what your prospect wants from you. We generally say something such as: "I've left the numbers out for now so I can be sure that I'm proposing to you exactly what we discussed." Prospects typically respond, "Yes, this looks right, send me the numbers!" By now, you've got them very interested in your services although they may be nervously hoping they can afford them. Not a bad position for you to be in!

Will our Maverick Sales techniques work for any consultant the way they have successfully worked for us? We cannot say for sure, of course, as most consultants conduct their practices in very personalized ways.

Whatever methods are used, the goal of any selling process is to earn and sustain a loyal and partnership-minded client base that will keep coming back for more, eagerly appreciate what we do and promote us to their own business friends so that they, too, come looking to us for help. Our approach accomplishes this for us and provides us with a profitable and steadily growing business *as well as one that is enjoyable and personally rewarding.*

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