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Guest Column

## Five Key Questions In Sales Prospecting

"Know thyself"...is an ancient Greek aphorism. This pithy thought is the basis for giving high achievers in sales prospecting a big advantage over their peers.

For context "we" is our company and our products. The party known as "they" is the customer "we" want to engage.

Understanding these five key sales prospecting questions

Who are we?  
Who are they?  
Who do they think we are?  
How do we find them?  
How do we convince them...they need us?

The notion that "we" as a corporation send salespeople out into the business world without a deep understanding of what it is we are looking for can easily be described as lost productivity and wasted energy. Equally important is understanding what "we" (our brand) stands for.

Who are we?

When a salesperson engages a potential new customer the customer wants to know what our company name represents and what promises it makes and what promises it has kept with the products it sells. Customers also want to know how long, how consistently and how successfully our company has kept its brand promises.

A deep understanding of the above "we" information allows salespeople that represent our company capably and persuasively describe who "we" are. If you cannot describe who "we" are, how are you going to know you are doing the best job selling your company's products?

One of the easiest ways for a customer to know if a salesperson understands their company and its products is to ask them to describe what they do in a sentence of two. If this short "elevator speech" is not compelling it is unlikely the salesperson's proposal will be either!

Who are they?

"They" are all that really matters. "They" are the customers for the products "we" sell. When we sell to a customer successfully over and over again it is a form of confirmation that the customer needs or thinks they need our product and that "we" are doing a pretty good job communicating how our products will improve the customer's life, make them feel happy and secure about the products they have purchased from us.

Who do they think we are?

Who "they" think "we" are, is absolutely key! If customers identify with our company branding and promises we make, they will be more inclined to make our products part of their lives. If customers identify with the lifestyle our products represent they will have no difficulty describing this to their friends and peers. If the customer identifies with the salesperson who sells our product because this salesperson exemplifies the lifestyle our products represent, there is a good chance this salesperson will sell more. This circular identification and empathy the customer has with our brand means we are doing a good job of living our brand. If this circular "they to we" identification builds so does the brand and so does the brand's chance of hitting a cultural tipping point.

How do we find (they) them?

Once we are able to clearly articulate our company's promises we really only need to rank on a scale of one to five who our ideal customer is most likely to be. This exercise is the same if the customer target is B2B or B2C. Finding them begins with us and the more evangelical we are about this approach the more successful we will become as prospectors and salespeople.

Years ago when I worked in the flyer category in the newspaper business I had a

conversation with a colleague of mine Paul Brown. Paul is the advertising director at the Sarnia Observer newspaper. He said "Pat... we only drink coffee where our customers are!" On Friday's in Sarnia, Paul would leave the office with a mapped plan to go make calls to all of the Sarnia Observer flyer customers he could with his sales team.

So evangelical was this weekly sales practice that when out on the road coffee breaks were only taken in customer cafeteria's or snack counters. This truly exemplifies knowing your product so well that you actually want to go out and chase customers down to make yourself and your brand so top of mind that when problems or opportunities arise you are the first on the scene. This is living the brand and is this approach ever successful! Paul identified with his customers so well he knew them on a first name basis and Sarnia Observer customers knew Paul went out of his way to try to keep his company's promises. Paul and his Sarnia Observer sales team took majority market share in a few short years from its flyer competitor. They ranked the customers they wanted and then began flagging them down with their disciplined approach to the Sarnia Observer brand.

How do we convince them...they need us?

Since we started with five key questions, we will end with five more.

We convince customers they need us by embracing our brand and observing five points that create and maintain relevance in the customers mind.

Does the customer have a need or perceived need we can fill?  
Does our product represent real or perceived value to the customer?  
Have our brands, products and the promises they represent been positively and consistently delivered to the market place?  
Do we follow up with our customers to ask them if they are happy?  
Are we constantly trying to anticipate our customer's needs?

"We are what we do repeatedly. Excellence then, is not an act but a habit!"  
-Aristotle

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