



Take a Heuristic Approach to Marketing a Lab

By
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The word *heuristic* (hyoo-ris-tik) is typically used as an adjective, but it can also be a noun. Regardless of the part of speech, it should be in the lexicon of those who label themselves as a serious salesperson. The Oxford American Dictionary defines it as “*enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves.*”

There once lived an Athenian (about 400 B.C.) whose name was Socrates. He was initially a soldier but later developed into a famous philosopher and teacher. Socrates preferred not to lecture; instead, he would ask a series of easily answered questions that inevitably steered to a logical conclusion. In essence, Socrates used a heuristic approach (some people also refer to it as the “Socratic method”). This concept describes how a field representative should manage his/her sales conversations with clients/prospects.

The 20th century American poet, author and playwright, E.E. Cummings, elegantly stated, “Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.” For the marketer, deft questioning skills—asked at the appropriate time—have been the best “friend” he/she could ask for in a sales situation. The unsophisticated sales rep that begins by pitching his lab’s “terrific services” to an otherwise happy-with-their-lab client will undoubtedly find himself unsuccessful in today’s market.

It’s important to first review some human psychology.

Confirmation Bias

Behavioral psychologists have conducted significant research into human cognitive biases. A sub-section of that is a behavior called “confirmation bias.” There are two important aspects of confirmation bias:

- (1) People bias themselves toward what *they* say and their *own* conclusions.
- (2) People value what *they* ask for more than what is freely offered.

These two statements become very important when promoting laboratory services. It stands to reason that someone appreciates the conclusions he/she draws on his own accord—*with the help of guiding questions* (just like Socrates considered). This contrasts with facts that are disgorged by a slick, fast-talking sales rep. Additionally, when someone requests information, it demonstrates their curiosity and interest. Consider this: people often ignore an individual that attempts to hand out a flyer to strangers walking by. The reason for this passerby apathy is due to the fact they didn't ask for it—a shining example of confirmation bias!

Value Creation

How can a field rep create value and interest to a prospect? Besides developing heuristic questioning skills, there sits a category in which reps must be proficient in order to become world-class: *industry knowledge*. Top field people actively pursue learning a substantial range of information not only about their own laboratory, but, equally, the competition. This takes time, training and self-motivation to collect facts about both sides. Based on this knowledge, the rep can more effectively differentiate beyond the simple aspects of specimen pick-up and result delivery.

Industry knowledge begets another powerful sales tool: allowing the customer to realize an unrecognized problem they never considered. Best-in-class salespeople know they can create significant value for their customers by revealing trouble spots (or areas of interest) via careful questioning. Sure, the prospect claims they're happy with result turnaround time, EMR connectivity, logistics and the other basics. The representative, however, needs to uncover the little "whirlpool" that conceals itself beneath the otherwise placid river.

Example of Unrecognized Problem

A number of years ago, a laboratory catering to nursing homes developed a cumulative report for PT/INR testing. The report indicated not only the current result, but also the four previous values for the doctor's easy comparison. The field rep understood her competitor well and knew they didn't offer this kind of convenience. When she had a meeting with the Director of Nursing with a prospective client, the rep was careful not to start the conversation about her lab's uniqueness. Instead, she wanted to navigate to her lab's report by asking heuristic questions.

Rep: *What does your staff do when they receive PT/INR results from your current laboratory?*

Client: *The nurse looks in the patient's chart and searches for the previous one. She writes down the value on the new report so the doctor can make a clinical judgement and, if necessary, make the warfarin dose change.*

Rep: *What's your thought about the time it takes to search through the patient's chart to find the previous report?*

Client: *Well, I guess it takes a little time.*

Rep: *Is there a chance the doctor could misinterpret the handwritten result or the nurse could absentmindedly write down an incorrect value?*

Client: *I suppose Murphy's Law could step in and that could happen.*

Rep: *Is there a way you could think of that would speed up the process and ensure the handwriting is not misinterpreted or erroneously documented?*

Client: *I've never really thought about it. This is just the way we've always done it.*

Rep: *"My laboratory has considered these potential issues, and we've found a solution."*

Client: *"Oh? You've got my attention. What's your remedy?"*

A key sales point is this: back *into* a strength (competitor dependent, of course) using heuristic questions as opposed to leading *with* a differentiator. The field person's talent to (a) have the client *think differently about their business* and (b) subsequently have them draw their own ah-Hah deductions form a very potent sales strategy.

Summary

About 2,400 years ago, Socrates developed an effective teaching technique by posing heuristic questions to his students. Teaching and selling are congeneric. Thus, in today's marketing approach, heuristic questions transform into a sales methodology's *pièce de résistance*. To get there, a rep needs to (a) have a broad and deep capability understanding of his/her own lab *and* each competitor and (b) use this knowledge to practice probing skills (preferably by role-playing with someone). These are the basic groundwork stratagems required for developing a heuristic—and winning—sales approach.

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