



The Fabian Strategy and Other Sales Notes

By

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Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosis was known simply as Fabius Maximus, and he lived between 280 BC and 203 BC. He eventually rose to the status of Roman consul and dictator. In 217 BC, Fabius had to defend Rome against Hannibal's vastly superior Carthaginian forces in the Second Punic War. Instead of directly confronting Hannibal's army on a large battle field (rendering a probable loss for Fabius), he decided on a different strategy. Fabius kept his troops in the hills above the invading troops and ordered to attack only small groups that were bringing in supplies and those who ventured out scavaging for food. With this guerrilla-type tactic, Fabius' men were victorious. These small skirmishes triggered consistent losses in Hannibal's manpower and supplies. In the end, the whole Carthaginian invasion collapsed. Fabius employed a military "delay" scheme by avoiding one massive battle and, instead, attacked much smaller forces. It became known as the Fabian Strategy.

Relating This to Sales

Supplying lunch for a prospective client stands as a surefire method of meeting and speaking to the support staff, office manager and healthcare provider(s) in one visit. For purposes of illustration, let's assume a first encounter—and you don't know much (or any) client/lab background. The natural reaction is to introduce yourself to whomever's there and "fire away" about your lab's services.

As we take a step back, The Fabian Strategy becomes evident within this scenario. One of the biggest predicaments less productive salespeople become mired in concerns "firing away" without first uncovering valuable client contextual information. Top reps ask questions to gain a sense of (a) facts concerning the incumbent lab(s) and (b) various people's feelings about the lab(s). Both factors are critical. Obviously, the office manager's and the doctor's judgement concerning the incumbent lab's services stand as the *sine qua non* within your strategy.

When You Are Blocked

But, what happens when the office policy disallows vendor luncheons? Or, an edict exists to exclude lab-hosted luncheons. Gr-r-r-r.....that's not fair! What's a rep to do? You employ another part of the Fabian Strategy: single interactions (i.e., guerrilla tactics). You introduce yourself to specific individuals. In turn, these one-on-one exchanges may accomplish a number of things: (1) uncover key background data, (2) understand individual attitudes about the

current lab (and, possibly, your lab), (3) build rapport, (4) differentiate your lab, and (5) potentially foster a relationship that advances into an internal coach.

My experience has shown that an education-based marketing approach helps dissolve barriers and, conversely, build rapport. Most people are eager to keep current and expand their knowledge. A communication piece may be created internally by your laboratory, or produced by a vendor that supplies products and services to your lab, or through the Internet (CDC, FDA, OIG, USPSTF, clinical abstracts, etc.). Relevant topics outside of lab testing express a thoughtful, unselfish attitude—augmenting your credibility. Additionally, and equally significant, it associates itself with the current lab industry philosophy of providing *value* and advancing from Lab 1.0 to Lab 2.0. Frequently, your target person is busy, so you are told, *“Just leave the information, and I’ll make sure it gets to...”*. In this case, there is a two-fold appropriate action: (1) ask if you can make an appointment and (2) write a one sentence note at the top of the page (e.g., Susan, I saw this and thought you might be interested), sign your name and attach your business card.

There are different schools of thought about leaving your lab’s four-color capability pamphlet with the front desk person. Personally, I’m against this tactic in most situations. Your brochure’s effectiveness sparkles a bit more when you can discuss its contents with, for example, the office manager or provider. As opposed to a glitzy marketing piece, a one-page informative handout is useful for intensifying your lab’s visibility. A page from the CDC, USPSTF or a clinical abstract automatically validates the material—and may receive more attention (compared to a commercial flyer). The recipient knows where it came from because you attached your business card. Your gesture of writing a note bestows personalization (in essence, he/she sees your name twice). But, here’s the point: don’t think providing objective insights just once has any great effect. Irrespective if you service a current customer or market to a prospect, it needs to be an on-going effort (at respectful intervals). You will gain the status of a sincere, interest-in-our-practice “information specialist.” In fact, you might say something along these lines to a practice manager or clinician: *“Unlike other lab reps, I won’t waste your time unless I have something relevant to share. My job is to collaborate with and create value for my clients.”* When a person makes this sort of assured statement, it reveals an antithetical thought; it punctures the customary opinion of a mainstream (“sell-sell-sell”) salesperson. It also raises this question: Whom do you think your contact person will more likely see again: a rep that expends time with the same clichéd question, *“Are you having any problems with your lab?”*.....or someone who has educative material that has the client’s interests in mind?

Final Comments

We can still benefit from those who lived thousands of years ago and apply it to today’s circumstances. Such is the case with Fabius Maximus. His military delay strategy reminds us we should suspend babbling about our lab until we have reaped sufficient factual and personal opinion information (which will channel to an appropriate strategy).

Fabius’ strategy also involved assaulting supply chain couriers and small enemy factions distant from the main camp. Along this same tangent, sales people typically ask at the front desk if they can meet the office manager. But, there remain other employees with whom to foster

relationships—and garner valuable intel: an available medical assistant, someone who prepares lab specimens, a billing person or a physician assistant. This strategy diverges from the myopia of attempting to see the same individual on each call who always seems to be conveniently “not available.” My sales philosophy has been to use informative pieces as the primary focal point—the valid reason for seeing someone. These interactions design themselves around building value, trust and credibility—the bedrock of the sales profession.

Following a brief interaction, leave with the parting thought such as, *“I know you’re busy, Mary, so I won’t take up any more of your time. I hope you find my handout interesting. If it’s OK with you, I’ll stop back at a future time with other relevant information.”* There’s a very (very) high probability you’ll hear a “sure” response. The suggested “goodbye” statement above raises several important points: (1) you’re not going to waste their time (brownie points for sure!), (2) you’re saying between the lines “this is about you” and (3) they have told you they’ll see you again (people don’t like to renege on their word). More than forty years ago, I eventually realized the best strategy is to stifle my spontaneous desire to sell-sell-sell when getting to know people in a business setting. I learned this important maxim: my discussion should be about *them*—not me. “Me” will come into focus at a later (appropriate) time.

As is frequently the circumstance, the front desk person explains, *“He/she’s busy right now.”* Your personal note and attached business card will “grease the skids” to broaden your visibility and integrity. With this consistent leave-behind scenario, your strategy may likely engage your contact’s reciprocity emotion. Reciprocity can be a compelling influential weapon that has the ability to release a natural “indebting force.” The customer may, in due course, feel grateful and *want* to meet you because of your thoughtful prior actions.

Stay away from launching with the archaic, uninspired question, *“So, how are things going with your lab service?”* Just as Fabius knew the probable outcome of battling Hannibal in a massive contest, you can place a strong bet on the answer to the “How are things going” question! Be different. Don’t ask. Be proactive and creative. Foster trust by demonstrating value and credibility. You’ll place yourself in a different category apart from other lab reps. And, when *that* happens.....

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