



Not Looking vs. Looking

Peeking Behind the Curtain

By Peter Francis
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It's pretty simple: we humans possess a binary behavior when it comes to purchasing. We're either "not looking" to buy a specific item or service—or we're "looking." But, within the context of "not looking", there sit two subcategories: we can be unaware that (1) a problem exists and/or (2) there stands an opportunity to improve a situation. This "not looking" faction is where most laboratory sales reps find prospective customers. It's dog-gone frustrating being told most of the time, *"I can't talk to you right now. And, besides, we're not looking for a new lab."* (if you're lucky enough to even speak to someone!). But, I want to get more granular on this subject because.... well, because it may be helpful to illuminate human tendencies that we may not ordinarily give much thought to.

Unrecognized Problem (and an Unanticipated Solution)

Let's investigate that first subgroup—unaware of a problem. This equates to any difficulty that needs to be resolved but remains unknown to the customer. Ah-hem. Guess whose job exists to help the client expose an unrecognized problem and provide an unanticipated solution? World-class salespeople have always, from time immemorial, looked for problems that lurk beneath the surface—something not immediately apparent to the customer. As a result, the rep exposes a problem (or two) by asking the client questions, thereby invoking an ah-Hah moment (a very potent sales technique).

Here's a true example. I was working with a representative one day in a town where our lab had just opened a patient service center about a mile from the local hospital. It offered easy access—all you had to do was park your car in front of the sidewalk and walk straight into our blood drawing center. Easy-peezy.

We were fortunate to have a conversation with a doctor whose office was across the street from the hospital. During our discussion, she explained her patients simply drive to the hospital for blood draws because it's "just across the street" (gesturing out her window). Indeed, it *appeared* simple for patients to go there. However, there was a large parking lot in front of the hospital that was filled with cars. I off-handedly mentioned this and asked if she agreed that her patients would be forced to park some distance from the entrance (I naturally threw in a comment about possible inclement/cold weather conditions). She also concurred that patients would have to visit the information desk to get an ID sticker. Then, they needed to take the stairs or elevator down to the basement and follow the corridor to the blood drawing room. I asked the doctor (although I knew the answer) about the required registration procedure (i.e., time consuming). The typical wait for phlebotomy—*after* the registration process—was about a half hour. So, we're talking, on average, close to an hour to and from the car to have a blood draw. (Note: on a different occasion, I had done my competitive homework by visiting the phlebotomy room and taking special notice of the registration procedure and the volume of waiting patients—thus reinforcing my maxim: *know thy competition!*).

I asked the doctor what she thought would be a more convenient method for her patients. She thought for a moment, smiled and said, "*I guess if they could go through a drive-through like a fast food restaurant—that would make it easier and faster.*" I explained we couldn't offer that, but our lab had a patient draw center about a mile away. All the patient would need to do is park their car in front of our door and walk across the sidewalk into our well-marked entrance. They could be out the door in less than 15 minutes. I re-emphasized there were no long walks to and from the car, no stairs or elevator to take, no walking through twist-and-turns of a basement labyrinth and no time-wasting hassles of registering and waiting. In other words, we offered convenience and timeliness—180 degrees from what the hospital offered.

The culmination of this doctor's conversation resulted in activating a new account! I illuminated an unrecognized problem and offered an unanticipated solution. There are a number of take-away points about this true story:

- (1) It was intuitive for the doctor to rationalize it was easy for patients to visit the "convenient" hospital for phlebotomy.
- (2) I knew my competition well.
- (3) I *visualized* for the doctor (i.e., connected-the-dots) the step-by-step process of a patient's time-consuming excursion.
- (4) I asked her what a solution might look like.
- (5) I produced an unanticipated solution (an ah-Hah moment).

(Obviously, my description of an unrecognized problem acts solely as an example. For those readers that market a hospital lab outreach program, please—no offense intended!)

Improving an Existing Situation

Let's look at the second example of "not-looking." This is where I hear a person mention something off-the-cuff, I see an ad on TV/in a magazine or I happen to notice a product in a store. I say to myself, "Hmm-m-m-m", now *that's something I could use.*" I wasn't specifically thinking of buying that item, but I feel it could improve my life in some way (or use as a gift).

Here's an example. I've been employing a house cleaning service for several years. Occasionally I notice a competitor's flyer hanging on my front door knob, but I toss it away, because I'm satisfied with my twice-a-month service.

While attending a neighbor's dinner party, I was introduced to someone—I'll call her Marcia—who just moved into the neighborhood. During our chit-chat, Marcia told me she ran a prosperous house cleaning business in another state for a number of years. I was inquisitive about this, so I asked to what she accredited her success. Before giving me a straightforward answer, she inquired how went about choosing my current cleaning service. I said it had been referred to me by a neighbor, so I did the natural thing: I called about their pricing policy. Their fee seemed reasonable, so I subsequently scheduled service every other week. The lady I spoke to said they have many satisfied local customers (my mindset was, it's just a cleaning service—I don't need a lot of specifics). In other words, she didn't have to "sell" me. I simply took it for granted. Hmm-m-m.... does my "it's *just* a cleaning service" mentality have some resemblance to the way in which many clients regard their lab?

During my conversation with Marcia, she explained her business protocol and how it was distinctive from other cleaning services. For one thing, she is fastidious about her employee hiring process. Candidates must have at least a high school diploma (in fact, two people were currently in the process of earning an associate college degree). During the interview process, she asks various questions about their philosophy of house cleaning (i.e., looking for clues of going above-and-beyond). Punctuality, honesty and integrity are other areas she investigates. She mentioned her interviews are the antithesis of "quick-and-dirty" (unlike, as she has been told, her competition)! She prides herself not only in her hiring standards, but also her training program for new hires.

I was impressed with Marcia's description and the company's mission, philosophy and training. I set a time for her to visit my home and show me what her cleaning service would do. After she arrived, one of the first things she did was to move my couch from the living room window to inspect the window sill. I was surprised and horrified to see a significant amount of dust and a couple of dead insects on the surface! Marcia explained this demonstrates the kind of "cleaning-you-don't-necessarily-see" approach her crew provides. She uncovered a couple of additional areas in the house where my current service had not done a good job. It took an astute person to ask me several questions and then show me. It took someone who had industry knowledge—someone who understood customer expectations. In a nutshell, Marcia's visit created *value* for me (obviously, this stands as the *sine qua non* of any sales presentation).

She changed my *vision* of what a cleaning service should be by introducing new criteria. There was no true “selling” involved—I was simply guided down the path to where I formulated my own conclusion (an extremely effective non-sales method)! It’s easy to understand that I canceled my cleaning service and immediately hired Marcia’s company!

It Begs the Question: Why Are Clients Happy with the Status Quo?

A common remark from a new lab salesperson is, “*Wow, I’m not accustomed to such rejection. Everybody claims they’re satisfied with their lab service.*” What you need to do is put yourself in the client’s position—*why* they are “not looking”. There are multifarious answers: convenience (e.g., comprehensive insurance contracts, patient access, EMR connectivity/e-requisitions, one-stop-shop lab), political, contractual and/or emotional ties, reputation, ignorance of other labs’ offerings, client/lab legacy, report format, unique test/methodology offerings, and—a big one—“*They do the job. If it ain’t broke, why fix it?*”

Consequently, whenever possible, it’s helpful for a representative to uncover the perceived reasons (the customer may only think of a few general reasons, anyway). This will help you know (from a strategic standpoint) how your lab *positions* itself against the competitor: weak, strong or evenly competitive. It needs to be said that the comments you receive from one person are opinions you hear from *one* person. A common mistake for field reps equates to interpreting one view as unanimous for the entire office (triangulating thoughts from different people during other visits serves as a good strategy). Clearly, gaining feedback from a highly influential member and/or decision-maker about their “likes” stands as the ideal situation (it’s best one-on-one vs. in a group). One important psychological point: there is an optimistic connotation when you quiz someone what they *like* about something. People may be surprised by your question, and will probably find it refreshing.

Latent and Admitted States

In the “not looking” category, psychologists name a part of that as the *latent state*: unaware of a problem or the existence of an improved opportunity. But, interestingly, over the years I’ve witnessed what psychologists term the *admitted state*. This occurs when the client knows about issues, but *still* prefers to remain with the status quo. Depending on the problem’s severity and longevity, a decision-maker may want to stay-the-course and maintain stability as opposed to venturing down a different, unknown path. People may—or may not—confess their thoughts to an unknown sales rep about lab shortcomings on the first or second encounter. It takes time to build rapport and trust before a client may concede their frustrations. That’s one of the reasons why relationship-building remains critically important (translating to regular rotational visits to discuss/hand out pertinent educational information—or drop off food treats).

It’s not surprising there can easily exist *both* latent and admitted states within a doctor’s office. A medical assistant or a receptionist may be in an “admitted state.” Thus, the perturbed employee may be very interested in talking to a lab rep. However, other staff members and,

perhaps, the decision-maker, may be in a latent state. Sage advice: make it a point to introduce yourself (over different visits) to everyone that deals with the lab—i.e., cover your bases instead of relying on seeing just one employee.

Looking

Turning to the “looking” category, this sits as the *pièce de résistance* for a sales rep! It doesn’t occur very often, but it’s a symphony of harmonic sound to a salesperson when a client declares they are not pleased with their lab, and they’re investigating different options. It doesn’t necessarily mean *you* will land the business, but, at least, it places you where you want to be: in front of a disgruntled client where “solution” selling reigns supreme.

Beside this circumstance, “looking” could also mean the customer is basically content, but thinks they would like to have something more, faster, better, etc. We can define this as a “growth stage”. Therefore, there stands a discrepancy between the results they want versus the present-day experience. And, because that difference exists, the probability of a customer taking action remains high.

The client may already have a pre-formed idea of what he/she wants in addition to their “just OK” lab service (creating a good chance they will ask a pointed question to a competitor rep). However, in those cases where this is not so, you should ask questions that “backtrack” (i.e., tie-back) into some of your lab’s unique benefits. *You*, then, transform into the instigator of the “growth mode”, rotating the client from “not looking” into the “looking” category. The main point: avoid blabbering about your lab’s wonderful distinctive such-and-such. It’s far more effective to *ask* your way down the path to the feature and benefit you want to make.

Summary

When a customer summarily brushes off a lab sales rep, it’s clear they are in the “not-looking” classification. The rep’s natural response is to walk out and hope for a better outcome on a different day (P.S. hope is *not* a strategy!). However, keep in mind three key points:

1. Inquire what he/she likes about their lab (i.e., you’re conducting a survey, which is valuable for building competitive information). This question helps to lower the “defensive shield” between client and sales rep, and it supports an understanding of how your lab positions itself against the competition (weak, even or strong).
2. Look for unrecognized, latent needs. Ask questions to expose desires that coax the client down the lane for him/her to draw their *own* conclusion. Important sales detail: people typically value more what *they* say and their *own* conclusions more than they value what somebody else tells them.
3. Know your lab and the competition inside-out and upside-down (a tall task, but fundamentally indispensable). This relative intelligence will provide an opportunity to probe and explain how your laboratory can potentially improve an existing situation.

A Hungarian psychologist once said: *Since the purpose of business is to satisfy existing desires or stimulate new ones, if everyone were genuinely happy, there would be no need for business any longer. Amen, brother!*

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