Supercharging Your Sales Effectiveness

By
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Selling commercial laboratory services and hospital outreach (to non-hospital practice physicians) usually embodies a long sales cycle—and it's not what most sales reps would define as a walk-in-the-park. Sales success equates to a number of factors: (1) periodic training of lab operation updates, competitor analysis, strategy, tactics, compliance review, (2) the rep's innate abilities, good organizational habits and applying taught concepts, (3) professional persistence and, (4) if possible, management coaching during co-rides.

Lessons Learned
One significant path in any branch of sales associates with building trust and credibility. Typically, this takes time and rapport-building efforts. However, I have observed some lab salespeople immediately expatiate on their services portfolio without gaining any background data. Assuming the client remains content with their lab, this approach results in a turn-off and a tune-out, not to mention a disappointed representative. You must first gain credibility by asking questions, listening and developing "moments of trust"—those little things you say and do over time that demonstrate interest in your client's success.

When I first began selling laboratory services, a doctor once told me before I started to speak, "Look—don't give me the same old pitch about free collection supplies, next-day turnaround time, high-quality test results and excellent customer service. I expect those things. Tell me what makes your lab *different* from the one I use." That brusque declaration was like a bucket of cold water tossed on my face. Being new to my job, I didn't think my lab had any major differences—we offered the same basic elements the doctor explained. I sheepishly discussed our "vanilla" service. It certainly didn't get me very far for that visit, but that brief meeting changed how I approached my job—for which I am forever grateful.

The following strategies are just a few that salespeople should develop to become more professional, better position themselves, and augment their effectiveness in their day-to-day customer calls.

1. Develop a Reason for Every Call
While it may seem apparent, it is key for a sales representative to develop—prior to making a call—a legitimate reason the *customer* would appreciate. Too often, reps (and I include myself as a neophyte) visit a prospective customer with the primary agenda of "checking on how things are going with the lab." Then, hopefully, there will be an opportunity to make a sales presentation. While it may sound like a logical method, it's not ideal. The rep hopes there stands a small chance the current laboratory service has degraded or changed in some fashion, the client's frustration has intensified, and interest has risen to hear about a different lab. But, alas, "hope" has never been a strategy. A far more effective style relates to having a *customer*-centric rationale for wanting to speak with someone (typically the practice administrator or physician). Perhaps it will be information about a unique test/profile, substantial turnaround time improvement, an informative monthly statistical report, an announcement of a new patient service center, an updated testing algorithm, a relevant medical abstract, or a USPSTF, FDA or CMS announcement. Salespeople should remember that the time they want to spend with someone disrupts the customer from paying attention to their office operations and *their* clients. Initially, the visit should center itself on a topic the customer would find relevant. In a sales call, especially, this methodology lowers the "defensive shield" that clients predictably hide behind; it allows for a natural and subsequent transition to ask a few questions about the incumbent lab.

Statistics have shown that clients place about 50 percent of their selection criteria based on the sales experience (notwithstanding ownership or politics). When a rep demonstrates ways for the client to perform their job better, save them time, reduce errors, enhance patient care, save healthcare dollars, etc., they are taking a key step toward creating *value* (versus a simple pick-up and delivery service).

2. Take Advantage of Comprehensive Relationships
Assuming the marketing person builds a good relationship with one person within an account (current or prospective), he/she needs to expand this situation with others. Throughout my management career, I frequently heard stories such as this: "I have a *great* relationship with our client, Dr. Johnson's office. Susie, the office manager, is very nice to me. If I stay in contact with her, we'll always keep his account. We get along great."

My response: "That's terrific. But, let me ask: who ultimately makes the lab decision? Susie? If, on the other hand, it's Dr. Johnson, what do you think he would tell a friend about you and our lab? And, critically, what would happen to the account relationship if Susie left her job?"

With current accounts, salespeople sometime admit they rarely interact with the provider—they usually "check in" with only one or two employees. Additionally, in the case of taking over a territory, the rep may be unsure who makes the final decision about selecting labs. The assumption corresponds to the doctor, but "assuming" travels into dangerous territory. Understanding office politics and policies relating to labs remains essential when coordinating a robust strategy. That wonderful bond between the sales rep and his/her primary contact can create a false sense of security. A competitor can establish a firm rapport with the decision-maker and eventually win the business. There may be no barn-burning concerns with the incumbent lab, but the marauding rep may do an adroit job of simply "out-selling" his/her competitor. Take it from one who knows. Being a *de novo* field rep many years ago, I inherited a territory from another rep—and, soon thereafter, I lost an account because of this scenario. I had not built a strong relationship with the decision-maker. I learned my lesson well.

3. Your Lab's Basic Differences

In the introduction, I broached the subject of knowing your lab's basic differences against other competitors. This stands as a crucial point, and it's worth repeating. Most clients feel labs are pretty much the same: specimen goes out, report returns. Easy-peezy. Sales reps may tell prospects their lab offers a "superior service"—but that equates to a glittering generality. Looking for unique strengths and basic differences within your lab involves a comprehensive knowledge of your lab's complete operation—and mashing that information up against each competitor. Your laboratory's uniqueness may mean different things to different people. You must ask relevant questions that lead *to* your lab's differences (as opposed to leading *with* differences). An important point to remember is people value their own conclusions more than they value what somebody else tells them. Approximately 2400 years ago, the Greek philosopher, Socrates, understood this humanistic trait. Instead of lecturing, he asked people a series of easily answered questions that would allow them to form their own conclusions. This methodology has remained a reliable sales technique ever since.

For example, a laboratory I once worked for had a board-certified hematopathologist on staff who, earlier in his career, was an oncologist with his own practice. This seemingly inconsequential piece of information turned out to be very helpful in a sales call with an oncology practice. When I initially asked the office manager her opinion about this experience component, it didn't register with her. Later, I spoke to the lead physician of the group, and I asked him, "If you had a choice to work your cases with a board-certified hematopathologist versus one that, earlier in his career, was a clinician like you, who would you prefer? The doctor said, "the one with the clinical experience." I explained our hematopathologist's history, and I also I showed him a copy of our pathologist's *curriculum vitae*. I closed the account.

The point of this example demonstrates that a field representative's job entails more than simply knowing the basics of testing specimens and delivering results. Sales reps may not have any notion that certain aspects of their lab hold any significance for a client until the marketer employs deft probing skills that relate to subjects corresponding to the lab's differences.

One other essential point: In past circumstances in which a client was going to switch labs—and my lab was competing with another hopeful lab to win the business (and price was not a factor)—I have heard this type of remark from my salesperson: "I'm sorry to report the client decided to use XYZ Lab instead of us." My response: "No—a 'client' doesn't select a lab service. *One* person said Yes for whatever reason(s). Other influencers probably gave their opinion, but only one individual had the ultimate authority to move forward with a decision. Your competitor undoubtedly touched on one or more primary areas: (1) how it can specifically help the decision-maker, (2) how it can help the office staff, (3) what it will do for their patients, and (4) how much trust and credibility the marketer demonstrated." My rep learned a valuable lesson. Together, we re-worked his tactical approach.

Conclusion
The topics mentioned in this paper may appear to be obvious, but my experience has shown that, unfortunately, not all salespeople routinely use them. These strategies can bestow trust and credibility with both current and potential clients. They can supercharge your sales effectiveness.

If the reader has any questions or comments about the content of this paper, please e-mail Peter at: peter@clinlabsales.com

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