Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC

Action Commitment

(aka Client Commitment Objective)

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A portion of my sales training curriculum discusses a very basic strategic and tactical question. Before walking into a prospective client's office, ask yourself, "What am I doing here?" The answer may be a single response or multi-faceted. Here are some common objectives:

- Book a lunch (or provide lunch)
- Client request
- Probe for client background data
- The client said "Yes", but has not activated; you want to "grease the wheel"
- Discuss a piece of marketing literature/clinical abstract/recent announcement from a gov't agency or medical society
- Get the client to commit to doing something that helps advance the sale
- Close the account

Given these examples, every call to prospective customers does not equate to a definition of a sales presentation—at least not directly or immediately—because the initial objective may not be aimed at securing an account. Frequently, your objective is a general one of developing credibility and sustaining a relationship. You can meet that goal by providing useful and interesting information the client would appreciate, which can lead to enhancing your integrity and subsequently garnering helpful client/lab background information. Unless the customer requests you to pay a visit to discuss your lab's services (due to frustration with their incumbent lab), the sales process is typically a series of incremental steps.

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What Do I Want the Customer to Do?
The second question to ask yourself is, "What can I get the client to do that will move the sales process along?" The term "Action Commitment" is a concise term professional salespeople use.

In my neophyte selling career, it was common for me to conclude a sales visit with a pledge to get back to my contact with some information he/she requested. While this is an important task, I didn't recognize that flipping that commitment exercise around would have provided significant strength to advancing the sale. I'm referring to a *client commitment objective*—something (some more substantial than others) the client does for me to help gain movement in the sale. What are some examples?

- Help gain an appointment with the next higher level
- Set a luncheon date
- Gain verbal or marketing competitive information
- (If geographically appropriate) Establish a date for a lab tour
- Have the client respond later with the rep's requested information
- Have the client demonstrate their lab's portal (requisition/supply forms, lab result retrieval, etc.)
- Set a date to try the lab

Situation dependent, there may be other client to-dos you can formulate during a specific interaction, but the global concept is clear: Having your customers do something for *you* is a propitious factor in the sales progression. I find it remarkable how seldom sales reps put "client commitment objective" into their sales agenda.

I once had a phone consult with a lab rep by the name of Helen, and we talked about a recent sales call she made. Here's how the conversation went:

HELEN: I had a meeting with Mary Stauffer who was the office manager of a busy general practice account. But after leaving, I realized I failed to get any client movement. So, I judged that call as both partly successful *and* unsuccessful.

PETER: Client movement?

HELEN: Yes. I think if a sales call is worth making, it's got to end with the customer doing something that shows the sale is moving forward.

PETER: What would you have done differently?

HELEN: Replaying the call in my head, I know I got some valuable background intel, but I should have asked if she could show me any examples of promotional or educational literature her current lab rep has left for her.

PETER: Why do you think that is important?

HELEN: It would show me several things: One is that the representative keeps the office manager informed of what is going on in their lab. The other side of that scenario would translate to (a) the rep doesn't think about it, or (b) the lab doesn't provide client information and/or (c) the rep relies on "howdie calls" with no substance to his/her visits. These things demonstrate a great deal about my competitor and the client/rep relationship. This gives me strategic fodder.

A second thing is, it would demonstrate to me if she thought enough of their lab—and their lab rep—to keep a laboratory file. If she didn't have one, her representative should have suggested it. Again, this points to the rapport she has with the rep—or lack thereof.

And, finally, I would understand what the competitor distributes to their clients. It's extraordinarily important to know what my rivals are doing—and seeing any literature they circulate fits into that knowledge.

But I dropped the ball at a certain point, because I failed to ask a simple question. Using that one probe would have yielded consequential data on different levels.

Summary

Notice how Helen thinks about getting client *action* to advance the sale, and she judges success—or not—in that way. The other side of "Advance" is "Continuation." Continuation simply means the sales progression will endure, but there has been no specific agreement by the customer to nudge it forward. So, we have a dichotomic situation: (1) no sale advance, and (2) the client hasn't said, "Don't ever come back." Things are in limbo. Marketing calls will keep going and going. Just like the Energizer Bunny. Appreciating the difference between a Continuation and an Advance is paramount in recognizing the intricacies within the sales continuum.

Avoid doing what I was guilty of in the beginning of my career. Before walking into a prospect's office, ask yourself a binary set of questions that will homogenize strategy and tactics: "What am I doing here?" and "What action commitment can I get from the client?"

*Peter Francis is president of **Clinical Laboratory Sales Training**, LLC, a unique training and development company dedicated to helping laboratories increase their revenues and reputation through prepared, professional and productive representatives. He has published more than 45 articles and regularly speaks at national industry conferences. Visit www.clinlabsales.com for more information.*