



If Socrates Sold Lab Services

Part 2

By Peter T. Francis

Revision: February 2022

In Part 1 of this series, we observed John, an inexperienced lab sales rep, ramble through a presentation to an office manager named Betty at Dr. Johnson's office. The doctor had no hospital ownership ties. Betty agreed to see John because she wanted to stay abreast of other lab services in case issues arose with their current vendor.

Following John's bland and inept discussion, several weeks later Betty agreed to see another lab representative called Socrates. This rep took a far different approach. He demonstrated knowledge about his lab and of the competition. Socrates was inquisitive, knowing that asking appropriate questions equates to a strong, balanced approach within the sales process. Before leaving the office, he asked Betty if he could stop by again to review some pertinent information that she and the doctor might appreciate. The following conversation ensues.

Socrates: "Thanks for seeing me again, Betty. I appreciate your time."

Betty: "I have a few minutes. Nothing has changed with our lab since the last time we met. What have you got this time?"

Socrates: "We previously talked about a couple of differences between your ABC Lab and my Acme Lab. In summary, it was that we take a very personalized approach to customer service. Another difference is our minimal—if at all—hold times for Client Services. You agreed these attributes seemed to be an improvement over your current lab service."

Betty: "Yes, I did. Both are a little different than what we're used to, but we're not looking to change labs solely based on those things. ABC is doing a good job for us right now."

Socrates: “I certainly understand, and I’m not expecting you to make any changes in labs right now. I’m still in the get-to-know-you stage. I need to uncover some additional points about your practice. For example, how many times a day does ABC pick up your specimens?”

Betty: “Our lab guy stops in the early afternoon — I think it’s around 1:00 PM or so, and then he returns just as we’re closing.”

Socrates: “Does the courier drop off specimens at his lab after your first pick-up?”

Betty: “I honestly don’t know. Our rep or driver never told me what happens. We initially asked for a twice-a-day courier because that’s what we had with our previous lab. ABC Lab accommodated our request.”

Socrates: “From what I have been told by other clients in the area, the courier doesn’t return to the lab because it’s located so far away. The cost of gasoline and the extra time it takes doesn’t make it feasible. You can check with your driver, but I would be surprised if he made a special trip to the lab between your pick-ups. Assuming he doesn’t return, it begs the question: why bother having a pick-up at an earlier hour if your specimens ride around in the courier’s car for the rest of the afternoon?”

Betty: “Huh.....You’re right. It doesn’t make much sense. I’ll check with our driver to see what happens to our specimens.”

Socrates: “This is another basic difference I’d like to point out. When I meet with prospective clients, I tell them up front when they should expect their specimens to arrive at the lab. It so happens we also offer an early pick-up for our local clients. But the distinction is that our courier returns to the lab around 2:00 PM. And the specimens get processed into our lab system immediately. In turn, this means that—for routine chemistries like Pro-times and CMPs—we analyze them and generate results the same afternoon. And this translates to our clients receiving their morning specimen results through their EMR or our portal by the end of business the same day. If there is an abnormal result—especially a Pro-time—Dr. Johnson could act immediately by adjusting the right dosage of warfarin.... and you know how clinically important *that* is. It’s like having a lab as a physical extension of your office. From my analysis in this area, no other lab has this same rapid testing capability. I’d like to store this operational basic difference in the benefit bucket I mentioned the last time. Do you think Dr. Johnson would like to get his Pro-time results the same day?”

Betty: “While I can’t speak specifically for him in this respect, I would imagine that would be something he would like to know about. I’ve never thought about getting results any sooner than the next day, because that’s the way it’s always been—with *any* lab.

Socrates: “This is why we are highly regarded in the community as a strategic partner. Our motto is, A Quality Partner in Patient Care.” We don’t want to be known as a simple transactional lab. Unlike other lab reps, I explain to my clients these kinds of details about why and how we are different from our competitors.

Betty: “That’s certainly a good motto for any healthcare company. Your lab’s philosophy of being a strategic partner is appealing.

Socrates: “I’m sensitive to your time, Betty, so I’ll leave you with this final bit of information. The last time I was here I gave you a promotional piece about a unique cardiac profile we offer. In that same vein, I recently came across a journal abstract that describes a test called apolipoprotein B. The study involved almost 400,000 patients, and it found this test was very good at predicting cardiac risk over and above the routine tests found in a regular cardiac profile. My lab includes this special test in our cardiac panel, further offering another distinctive difference of Acme Lab. I’m going to put this into the benefit bucket. Will you please share this abstract with Dr. Johnson?”

Betty: “Yes, I will. Thank you.”

Socrates: “Out of curiosity, does your ABC Lab rep provide you with this kind of supplemental educational information?”

Betty: “Not directly to me. Our rep simply stops in to check on service levels. There’s not much dialogue that occurs unless we have an issue.”

Socrates: “As I mentioned in our previous meeting, Acme Lab wants to keep our clients current with healthcare related topics—this is part of my job. I have some other clinical things I’d like to ask Dr. Johnson as to what Acme Lab does. Can you help me get an appointment to speak with him briefly?”

Betty: “Let me see what I can do. He normally doesn’t see representatives during patient hours. But I’ll talk to him and let him know about our conversations; I’ll see if he can set aside a few minutes to chat with you at a future time.”

Socrates: “Thanks Betty. Should I give you a call in a couple of days or do you want to call me?”

Betty: “I’ll send you a text after I speak with him.”

Socrates: “Thanks. Nice to see you again. I’ll look forward to hearing from you.”

Commentary

Socrates interacted with Betty twelve times — and seven of them involved a question. He mentioned her name three times, providing an affable ambiance.

He began his re-introduction by summarizing the benefits from his previous call and mentioned that Betty recognized they were an improvement over her current lab service. This is important, because it put a positive note at the beginning of the conversation. Even though Betty reiterated her satisfaction with ABC Lab, Socrates continued to lower the sales defensive shield by explaining he wanted to better understand the office situation.

Socrates' strategy was to highlight his lab's location and how that could benefit Dr. Johnson and his patients (important emotional aspects). He began by inquiring about the courier pick-up (although he already knew the answer from his competitive analysis). He wanted Betty to think about—and agree—it didn't make much sense for an earlier pick-up if specimens simply traveled around in a car throughout the day. His intention was to cast aspersions on the competition without making obvious demeaning or negative comments.

Our intrepid sales representative boosted Betty's self-esteem by discussing a clinically important subject: Pro-time results and managing patients on warfarin. He was confident Dr. Johnson would like to get these values ASAP. Astutely, he needed Betty to agree to that benefit (another positive step).

Socrates reinforced the fact that his Acme Lab is highly regarded by other practices. This pulls in the strategy of the herd theory. People are motivated by what others are thinking and doing. He also brought up the term "strategic partner", which further strengthened his lab's position. Socrates said he didn't want to take up much of her time (music to her ears), so he concluded the meeting by giving her a journal abstract about an esoteric test that his lab performed. He advanced the sale in two ways. To get Betty to (1) give the abstract to Dr. Johnson and (2) ask the doctor if he would give Socrates a few moments. Socrates knows the optimum way to create a joint-venture approach is to get the client to perform a task (or two) that moves the sale forward.

An important rule Socrates followed relates to uncovering a dormant or unrecognized problem. It stands as a state or source of difficulty the customer is not fully aware. In essence, our shrewd salesperson aimed to show Betty there *are* differences between labs beyond specimen pick-up and result reporting. He explained the alternatives compared to what the office currently receives. But—and here's the overall important point—Socrates didn't jam information into Betty's head (as John did in Part 1). He

provided *insight* through questioning skills. Socrates has a wide range of experience with many customers and prospects, and he understands the problems that typically plague them (but not necessarily always understood by the client). He feels Dr. Johnson's office has become complacent about their lab; they don't know any better, because, as Betty said, "that's the way it's always been." Socrates attempted to create the ah-Hah moment through differentiation.

Because Socrates deposited more advantages into the benefit bucket, Betty was amenable to get him in front of Dr. Johnson.

Let's turn to Part 3 of this series.

*Peter Francis is president of **Clinical Laboratory Sales Training, LLC**. His company provides sales training and coaching for the reference laboratory industry. He has published over 45 articles on selling laboratory services and has been a guest speaker at numerous industry meetings, as well as national webinars. For more information, visit www.clinlabsales.com.*