Lab Sales Reps: The Importance of Situational Fluency

By
Peter T. Francis
January 2025

Occasionally I get asked a very simple question: Why do some sales reps in the lab industry win new customers more frequently than others? My answer is there are three broad factors:

- The lab's competitive capabilities
- Initial sales training, regular review, and role-playing
- The rep's innate abilities and aspirations to improve

This paper examines the specifics of what field reps should concentrate on to stand above the average rep milieu. Succinctly put—to embrace situational fluency.

<u>Situational Fluency – The Difference</u>

The term *situational fluency* aptly describes what top-producing sales reps strive for in their day-to-day client interactions. It refers to fundamental competencies that constitute a professional salesperson's ideals and aura.

1. *Credibility/Rapport*

It is certainly no secret good salespeople must establish credibility and rapport with their customers and prospects. This *sounds* fundamental, but my postmortem client discussions following a switch to a different lab has sometimes yielded a different story (notwithstanding outside ownership or personal friendship). I found the decision-maker and/or highly influential staff member(s) had no (or minimal) interaction with the field rep. Because there was no connection, a competitor wedged in, and over time, demonstrated an effective "I care about you more than your current lab" attitude. They simply outsold the competitor. On the other side of the spectrum, influencers and decision-makers who think favorably of their field rep (routine visibility, professionalism, and helpfulness) typically maintain their laboratory relationship, irrespective of occasional service miscues or other labs trying to gain access.

Most people define credibility as integrity—i.e., someone that demonstrates honesty. But integrity exists only as the root of the tree. Adding to integrity stands *intent*, *competence* and *results*. While integrity is below the ground and static, these additional above-the-ground concepts equate to situational circumstances. For example, if a prospect perceives your intent as being too aggressive, your credibility will take a nosedive. If you come across poorly prepared or unknowledgeable about your lab's capabilities (i.e., competence), this also impacts your credibility. And the same holds true if you promise something and subsequently don't deliver on it (i.e., results). Again, these three constituents—intent, competence and results—are situational. But integrity is not. It is foundational and binary. You either have it or you don't.

I have noticed excellent sales reps concentrate on elevating their credibility by doing these things:

- Asking insightful questions
- Educating clients (using informative hand-outs)
- Doing a deep dive into learning their own lab's operations *and* the competition's
- Focusing on expanding their industry knowledge (e.g., test names, disease states)
- Following through quickly and competently with customer issues

2. *Knowledge*
Master class representatives yearn to understand the client's situation and any testing they perform in-house. Adding to this, they also must have capability awareness of their own lab. This includes in-house tests and the many facets of lab operations: courier routes/protocols, specimen processing/reporting, transport supplies, certain test methodologies, test turnaround times, connectivity, common referral tests, and billing. It's a broad undertaking, but successful marketers take all these capacities and attempt to compare them to each competitor. I've noticed average salespeople speak in glittering generalities about their lab's services (e.g., "we offer 24-hour turnaround time and offer great customer service"). Sales winners, however, dive deep into their lab's weeds (i.e., lab operations), because basic differences germinate from within those weeds. People become bored when reps talk in generalizations. Prospective clients might well say, "Tell me something about your lab I'm not getting now that will benefit me and/or my patients." Upon hearing that, an unsophisticated rep may stand there like a deer in the headlights. "Uh…. We're not that much different. We provide the same basic services your lab does."

It's the rep's situational knowledge that must shine on each client interaction. This is an important differentiator that can easily affect a decision to use a certain lab.

3. *People Skills*
Another obvious point about situational fluency is communication in a friendly and professional manner. When training reps, one technique I have always promulgated is to use the person's name during a conversation. As humans, we like it when someone mentions our name within a discussion (it's the sweetest thing we hear). Saying it once is usually enough. If overused, it sounds fake. If nothing else, it's compulsory to say the person's name in your introduction and your goodbye.

Some of the typical characteristics I have noticed with reps that possess good people skills are:

- They show empathy
- They work at managing relationships (e.g., being helpful and sharing information) and building networks to maximize rapport.
- They create an environment of trust
- They concentrate more on emotional aspects vs. relying solely on logic (emotion trumps logic)
- They smile

People have written books on the subject of interacting with individuals. A good example is Dale Carnegie's 1936 book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Even though it was published close to nine decades ago, many people consider it a bible within the sales discipline.

4. *Selling Skills*
Selling skills are taught and learned. People aren't born with this attribute, which negates the phrase, "He's a natural-born salesman." Everyone knows high-producing sellers are friendly, outgoing, and likable. But these qualities, by themselves, do not always make a top-ranked seller.

Selling skills include devising a strategy and employing appropriate tactical efforts. Winners aim to hone their questioning abilities by asking strategic questions, taking notes, and listening carefully. They know initially babbling about their lab's wonderful qualities constitutes an ineffective sales technique.

Contained within strategy is a sub-item called basic differences. Many people hold a commodity attitude about labs, but skilled representatives aim to contradict that concept. They know a successful way to highlight their lab's strongest benefits is to ask questions that back-track into their differences. In other words, they lead *to* their differences, not *with* their differences. A less successful tactical conversation might go this way: "We're a unique lab, and one reason is we offer a test called serum 3-alpha androstandiol glucuronide assay." The client subsequently thinks, "Oh, that's nice. So what?" The more appropriate way is to back-track into the basic difference by leading to it: “Do you see patients presenting with hirsutism?” Assuming the client agrees, the rep continues with, “Our laboratory is one of the few that provides a special test that helps diagnose the idiopathic form of this disease.” Asking questions raises the customer’s awareness of a particular kind of need. If the customer feels it’s not important to their situation, the basic difference is meaningless. Therefore, your lab’s basic differences are situational depending on the client’s need.

I have conducted research over many years by asking office managers, healthcare providers and other support staff what they look for in a lab vendor. Within the hundreds of responses, I uncovered two common denominators:

1. Keep me informed: newly introduced tests, change in methodologies, recent medical abstracts, disease testing algorithms, medical society updates.
2. Make things easy to use your lab for me, the office staff, and my patients.

When sales reps devise responses coalescing with the above two categories, they are on their way to demonstrating a collaborative rapport and adding *value* to the relationship. Using the back-track question approach, a rep can highlight their lab’s differences and reframe the customer’s assumption that all laboratories equate to a commodity. You’re saying, “I understand your world, and I’m not here to waste your time. All labs are not the same.” It shows you’ve done your homework.

I will share a summarization of a conversation I had a few years ago with an office manager. This office had used their primary lab for six years, and it became apparent their sales representative was very strategic in gaining and maintaining this customer. The office manager told me the following about their lab rep:

> “Whenever I meet with Steve, I feel like I learn something. He always brings useful information when he stops in. When he first called on us, he told me his visits would usually include an educational piece that would be of interest to the doctor and the office staff. He made it his job—and he still does—to *add* to our business relationship. Sure, we can get a basic transactional service from other labs where they pick up specimens and transmit reports into our EMR. But that’s just a commodity. Steve sold us not only on his lab’s capabilities, but also on his collaborative, value-driven approach. We liked his professional style. We appreciate his visits, because we know he won’t waste our time.”

Sales winners duplicate this stratagem: demonstrate their value-add during the sales process and maintain it after winning the business. They don’t erode their clients’ time with meaningless, “howdie” visits. Productive reps transmute into “educational specialists.” Following a brief description of a hand-out, the opportunity can springboard into questions about the client’s lab situation and potential needs. In a sales call, it's not a one-sided, "I'm here to tell you about my lab." It's a *quid pro quo* approach—a mutual information exchange. Professionals call this method "insight selling" in which using educational hand-outs provides a measurable difference in gaining new clients.

5. *Collaborative Attitude*
Top ranked salespeople are always willing to work with clients in a spirit of openness and transparency, and they act with the client's best interests in mind. This kind of attitude may represent a different outlook from less savvy reps who say to themselves, "I think I can get this client. There's one thing they're getting from their current lab we don't offer, but I haven't said anything about it. I say 'damn the torpedoes.' I really need to score this sale."

A collaborative seller, however, starts with a disposition in which the client's interests are of paramount importance, even if it means explaining his/her lab cannot meet a specific condition (if, in fact, it *is* a condition to do business; surprisingly, many reps don't ask if the objection is a true condition). In the long run, these are the reps earning trust and loyalty from customers. A collaborative attitude—and explaining it's one of his/her goals—are the keys.

Summary

Situational fluency translates into a combination of:

- Building credibility (integrity, intent, capability, results)
- Gaining knowledge of the client's situation and having a good understanding of his/her own lab departments
- Working to improve people skills
- Being properly trained on strategic and tactical selling approaches
- Exhibiting a professional and collaborative attitude

Laboratories always train new hires by initially providing company orientation. But, with field reps, *irrespective if the person holds industry experience or not*, on-boarding should also comprise a basic overview of how the laboratory expects the representative to strategize and present him/herself in front of customers. And training should be on a periodic basis—once is not enough. Everything should be taught and practiced from (a) the way they open a call, (b) the questions to ask, and (c) the presentation. A steady effort to improve situational fluency traits equals the *pièce de résistance* within the sales profession. With over 50 years of industry experience, my observation of top sales producers validates this fact.

*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 written over forty articles on the subject of laboratory sales. Visit the company's web site at www.clinlabsales.com for a complete listing of services.*