

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Closing a Sale

It's the holy grail of sales training: closing. How many times have you heard, "That guy's a closer — the big kahuna," "If we could just increase closing, all our problems would go away," "She's a natural closer," or "Just close the damn thing!"

I've been hearing this stuff my whole life. It seems like half the books in Barnes & Noble's sales section have "closing" in the title. Google has 25 million references on "closing a sale." It only has 11 million entries on "picking up girls." Could it be that greed has surpassed lust as the fundamental human motivation of the new millennium? Or, is it a symptom of an aging demographic?

I recently visited the library, perused the business aisles at my favorite book stores and skimmed through my personal collection of sales books. If you haven't read a sales book since the Great Depression, don't worry. Precious little is new, and what is new isn't very good. The chapters on closing are similar and usually start at about page 185. Read objectively — they're almost surreal.

Collectively, these books suggest a win-lose scenario where the customer must lose for the salesperson to win. The salesperson's strength, power and attitude reign supreme. Sports analogies are rampant. Closing a sale represents a personal victory. The authors presume our clients really don't want to buy and are not very smart. Some even encourage readers to memorize prescribed closes to manipulate, intimidate or even trick a client into signing on the bottom line. These "magic" closes have fancy names like the assumption close, the Ben Franklin close, the alternative-advance close, the reduction-to-ridicules close, the sharp-angle close and so on.

Most of these so-called sales gurus sound like adolescent boys trying to figure out how to score when what they really need to figure out is how to be great

boyfriends. Satisfying our clients' fundamental needs and desires is never mentioned. Simple honesty, sincerity and good manners are disregarded.

Old-school writers suggest the way to close a sale is simply to ask for the order. Duh! Of course you have to ask the customer to make a decision, but a premature, crude question isn't the way to do it. The classic example from the auto trade is the cliché, "What do I have to do to get you to buy this car today?" It would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic. Those foolish enough to use this tactic might as well tattoo "salesman" on their foreheads.

Maybe our clients *want* to acquire the instruments they came all this way to see. Maybe they are good, intelligent people who just need a little help as they get close to making a decision. Maybe a great closer is just

+ CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

A calm/assertive sales associate who gently turns prospects into customers.

someone who can guide them through the process.

WHY SALESPEOPLE GIVE UP

In the late 1980s, I carefully tracked closing averages and other sales statistics at stores I owned in Milwaukee. Here's what I discovered. The best salespeople closed a little more than half of their prospects. Good salespeople closed about a third. Average salespeople closed about a fourth, and a chimpanzee with a red bow tie could close 16 percent. That's right. Some buyers are so motivated they will make a purchase no matter what. Even the worst clerk can close one out of seven.

The essential difference between closers and non-closers is persistence. "Magic" closes do encourage multiple closing attempts. Once you've gone through the trouble of memorizing them, you're motivated to try them out. If you keep trying, you will send more clients home as happy owners even if you're using lame, prescribed closes. Why then do so many of us give up so easily?

Fear of rejection, laziness and arrogance are the principal



Make closing a mere formality in the sales process

reasons. Salespeople fear their prospects will stop liking them if they persist, and they think it's more important to be friends than it is to close the deal. Ironically, customers really like the salespeople they buy from. It's the quitters they reject. Fear causes salespeople to crumble when they confront an objection or two. Lazy salespeople are just as happy to have a prospect to follow up as they are to have an order. Still, others are arrogant. They can't imagine the customer isn't smart enough to agree with them. Quitters must ask themselves, "Am I afraid, lazy or arrogant?"

The customer whisperer knows it's in everyone's best interest to remain calm and use his assertive leadership to move the process forward, guiding his clients on to happy ownership. He confidently processes objections and does not give up. He's not interested in manipulation, intimidation, deception or one-night stands. He takes a sincere interest in his clients and gently guides them to a successful conclusion. For a customer whisperer, closing is a mere formality. It's the ribbon on a gift, the cup of coffee after a great meal, the handshake as the diploma gets passed. It's the final step over the threshold at the end of a long journey.

Most closing problems have their roots in poor qualification or an inadequate presentation. Either you haven't established a relationship, defined yourself as a helpful expert or found the right product. If a client cannot afford or does not want a musical instrument, you should have determined that long before you started your presentation. And if they don't like the product you're offering, you need to find one they do like and present it properly. Trying to close a sale for the wrong

product to a disinterested prospect by asking an ill-timed question is humiliating and unprofessional. Insincere, lazy salespeople who cut corners, have a lot of closing problems.

GIVE A REASON TO BUY NOW

Closing is simply helping someone make a decision. There are many ways to do it. Some customers want to negotiate. There's nothing wrong with negotiation, as long as it's done sitting down. Often letting them know the price is firm will settle the matter, and even the smallest concession or premium can let a customer save face and facilitate a win-win situation. Sheer force of will can close deals, and the bullies who rely on intimidation and pressure often have significant short-term successes. But bullies burn out quickly and move from job to job, usually leaving messes in their wake.

Many customers get nervous as they get close to making decisions. These are the people who raise objections. The customer whisperer recognizes objections for what they are: buying signs. They are not a problem, they are an opportunity. Properly processing objections usually leads to a happy customer.

Always give clients a reason to buy now. Maybe the product is the last one or the first one or the only one. Maybe it's a rental return, a teaching model or a demonstrator. There may be a price increase coming or a feature change in the wind. A special finance offer may be about to end. There might be a scratch or a slight flaw, or it might be perfect right out of the box. Clients make decisions based on emotions and rationalize their decisions with logic. Make sure to give them logical reasons to rationalize their decisions.

Because the customer whisperer has properly greeted and

qualified his client, made an engaging presentation, offered an irresistible choice, and given a reason to buy now, he rarely encounters closing problems. What he encounters are clients having a little trouble pulling the trigger. Clients who need a little nudge over the line, a little hand holding.

Along the way, the customer whisperer has asked his client effective transition questions. "Do you mind if I ask a few questions?" moved the process from greeting to qualification. "Do you know what to look for?" made the natural transition to the pitch. "I've got something that might be just right for you, would you like to see it?" brought the client to a demonstration. To confirm his client's choice, the customer whisperer asked, "Which one would you prefer?"

He has also asked dozens of conformation questions like, "Are you with me on that?" "Does that make sense?" "Doesn't that sound great?" and "Do you like this one?" By now, his client is comfortable answering his questions. It will be easy for the client to answer the question that leads from presentation to closing with a "yes."

Over the last 30-plus years,

this customer whisperer has used a single closing question to send thousands of piano shoppers home as piano owners. There is nothing magical, manipulative or deceptive about it. It is an appropriate, honest question, and it is easy to ask with genuine sincerity. Are you ready? Here it is. The closing question that has generated \$35 million in piano sales:

Do you feel as though this is the one you'd like to have?

It's that simple. A question easy to ask and easy for a client to say "yes" to. It works not because of magic or deception. It works because of the groundwork and preparation prior to its asking. Lacking that foundation, it wouldn't work. (Presumptive customer whisperers can compose their own honest, sincere questions as long as they lead their clients to make decisions.)

AFTER 'YES'

A "yes" is followed by, "Good, I'll get started on the paperwork. Did you want to take a look at some payment options?" A "no" leads back to presentation (to find the proper choice) or to processing whatever objection may be raised.

Eventually, the customer

+ 12 STEPS TO MAKING CLOSING A PLEASANT FORMALITY

1. Properly greet clients, and begin establishing a rapport.
2. Get permission to qualify, and begin to develop a relationship.
3. Become your clients' helpful expert with a compelling presentation.
4. Use music to raise emotions in an engaging demonstration.
5. Offer an irresistible choice.
6. Ask, "Do you feel as though this is the one you'd like to have?"
7. Process objections with sincerity and humility.
8. Sit down and present options on a single sheet of paper.
9. Give them a reason to buy now.
10. Ask for a decision, and shut up until you get an answer.
11. Don't give up. Go back to presentation if necessary.
12. Get help! (Turn-over)

whisperer will again ask, “Do you feel as though this is the one you’d like to have?” He will ask this question as many times as it takes to get a favorable response. He is now in a delicate dance with his client. He’ll keep going around and around the dance floor until the song is over. Sometimes it happens quickly, sometimes it takes a while. He’s patient, he’s in control of the tempo and he’s leading. Like a ping-pong game, his primary task is to keep the ball in play. (Oops, a sports analogy.)

The one thing he won’t do is give up.

The sooner everyone is sitting down, looking at options on paper, the better. Standing on a salesfloor arguing, debating or negotiating is fatal. Often, the customer whisperer will suggest, “Let me take a moment to get this on paper, so we can see exactly what you’re looking at.” While preparing a page summarizing the transaction and showing a better and lesser option, he’ll carefully observe his client’s body language and position. If his client stays with the product,

touching and admiring it, he’ll proceed. After a few moments, he’ll say, “I’ve got those numbers ready. Please come and take a look.” He never takes the numbers to the client. It’s time to get everyone sitting down.

NEGOTIATE ON PAPER

Once seated, the customer whisperer briefly recaps the information on the page, pointing out everything that’s included and finishing with, “Which one makes the most sense for you?” He will remain silent until his client responds. If he’s going to make a small, symbolic price concession, he does it by writing a round number at the bottom of the page, circling it and remaining silent until his client responds.

When his client has made the right choice, the customer whisperer immediately starts writing an invoice and hands the client a credit application — if necessary. He asks for the correct spelling of the client’s name, along with his or her address, phone numbers and e-mail address. He determines the pre-

ferred delivery date and finalizes other logistical issues. Any diversion could stop the process. He may well end up revisiting objections, and he’s not afraid to get up and go back to presentation if necessary. He’ll keep things moving. He’s getting ready to start selling add-ons.

Even if it takes several attempts, a customer whisperer will not give up. Giving up is customer cruelty. Having had their appetite stimulated and emotions raised, clients should not be sent away disappointed.

LAST RECOURSE

If all else fails and you’re ready to give up, get help. Refer your clients to the store manager or owner before they get out of their chairs. In crass terms, this is called the “turn-over.” Tell your clients that before they leave, there’s someone you’d like them to meet. Call the owner, and ask him in to meet your new friends. Don’t get up from your chair. While you’re waiting, build him up.

Because your owner or manager is both a customer whis-

perer and an employee whisperer, he has been observing and is ready to take the call. When he comes in, introduce him and recap the situation. Quickly tell him about your client’s wants and needs, who’s going to play, where the product’s going to go, what the client liked and didn’t like, and what’s important to the client. Ask your client to confirm each fact as you go along. It is very important to keep the client involved and to get his or her agreement. Don’t restate the client’s objections or make excuses for why he or she isn’t purchasing now. Finish by asking the boss if there’s anything he can do to help. Then shut up! You are not allowed to say another word or even move until he says, “OK, write it up.”

Your boss knows exactly what to do, and ganging up on the client won’t help. Don’t answer any of your boss’ closing questions. He may send you back to presentation, in which case you will go to the product he recommends without hesitation. If you’re wondering if this is the right thing to do, ask yourself, “Of the last 10 customers who didn’t buy from me, how many might be happy customers now if I had introduced them to the boss and let him take it from there?”

Closing is not about deception, manipulation or coercion. It is the conclusion of a process that began with a friendly greeting. There are no shortcuts. If you’re looking for a magic answer, consider the magic of sincerity, persistence and calm, assertive leadership. Think of closing as a mere formality. If you want to make friends, make sales. Don’t give up! **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

THE SALES PROCESS

The customer whisperer organizes the sales process into nine stages. For those he has already discussed, we’ve given a brief explanation and the issue of *Music Inc.* they appeared in. Go to musicincmag.com to download these articles.

GREETING	QUALIFICATION	PRESENTATION	DEMONSTRATION	CHOICE	OBJECTIONS	CLOSING	ADD-ONS	REFERRALS	FOLLOW-UP
Creating ease and establishing control. (January 2008)	Getting permission to ask a few simple questions. (February 2008)	Establishing yourself as the caring expert customers need. (May 2008)	Using features and music to raise emotions. (June 2008)	Making decisions irresistibly easy. (July 2008)	Guiding clients through the process. (August 2008)	Helping customers pull the trigger.			