

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Handling Objections

When the groom stands at the altar and says, “I do,” a strange metamorphosis occurs. Suddenly, his charming idiosyncrasies — the personality quirks his bride fell in love with — become aggravating habits she will spend a lifetime correcting.

Similarly, something odd happens when a customer gets close to a purchase decision: objections magically appear. Strange, often new or unrelated reasons to not buy trickle from the person’s lips for no apparent reason. The customer whisperer recognizes these buying signs for what they are: an indication that it’s time to close the sale and move his client on to the happy land of ownership. It’s at this critical juncture where less-enlightened associates take the bait and argue with a client or, worse, simply give up.

Our attitude about objections and the people who present them reveals much about our own motives and personalities. For the previous generation of salespeople and for many today, the essence of selling is persuasion — convincing customers, through compelling argument, that a particular product or service is superior to the alternatives in quality, utility or value. Armed with facts, sales aids and endorsements, these salespeople charge headstrong into a presentation only a fool could resist. To them, objections represent either an irritating inconvenience or an opportunity to demonstrate their prowess in verbal arm-wrestling. For marginal salespeople, objections present a difficult or even insurmountable obstacle.

The customer whisperer knows his clients are not interested in arguing or wrestling. They’re interested in satisfying the need, want or desire that sent them shopping in the first place. For the customer whisperer, objections are a normal part of the decision-making process. When objections appear, customers are nearing a favorable decision. It’s time to use the customer whisperer’s calm, assertive leadership to take clients by

the hand and gently guide them through the final steps of their journey.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Consider your own decision-making process as you peruse the menu at a favorite restaurant. Your thinking might go something like this:

Chicken or shrimp?

Hmm.

I had chicken yesterday, but it was fried and this is baked. I don’t feel like fried

+ CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

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

food today, and the shrimp will be fried. I think I’ll have the chicken.

All this happens in a few seconds. Several objections are raised and dismissed. It doesn’t mean you will never again eat fried food — you might even change your mind on the spot if the waitress explains how the shrimp’s sauteed with saffron — and it certainly doesn’t mean you’ll skip lunch. This is just how our brains are wired to make small decisions.

Bigger decisions require more deliberation. Objections are more likely to be expressed verbally. We’ve been conditioned since childhood to slam on the brakes before we spend a lot of money. We need a logical reason to proceed. Rationalization becomes part of the process. As explained in last month’s article, people buy emotionally, and use logic to rationalize their decisions.

You have a choice when you encounter an objection. You can make matters worse, or you can seize the moment and help clients rationalize their decisions. Confrontation will force a client to slam on



Recognize objections for what they are: buying signs. They’re not a problem, they’re an opportunity

the brakes even harder. Or, you can add your foot to the brake pedal by agreeing with the objection. The customer whisperer will remain calm, ease the tension and process the objection in a reasonable, careful manner. Here's his system to guide clients through their objections.

HANDLING SPECIFIC OBJECTIONS

All objections can be classified into two categories: specific and general.

Specific objections relate to price, product or terms. They must be dealt with forthrightly.

The customer whisperer instinctively retreats to his presentation when he gets a product objection. The client has said he's not done shopping yet — he hasn't made a choice. Safely nestled among shiny new musical instruments, the customer whisperer can help the client find the right color, size or style. He addresses price concerns by returning to product features and revisiting the benefits that were important to the client. He justifies value.

He can also show a product that meets the supposed budget, knowing it's not the one the client wants. There's nothing better than having a client say, "No, I don't want this one. I want that one." The customer whisperer agrees and helps rationalize the client's choice by saying, "Well, it never makes sense to spend money on something you don't want. Would you prefer this one instead?" Remember, almost everyone spends more money than they thought they would when they find something they really want. Don't you?

Many salespeople find it difficult to return to presentation. It feels like going backwards. We're ready to close the sale, but our client isn't. It's frustrating, especially if we forget that objections actually mean a purchase is under active consideration.

The customer whisperer is not in a hurry, but controlling tempo is still important. In the previous article on qualification (February 2008), we discussed slowing things down when clients want to race to the products. Now the tables have turned, and it's *the client* who's trying to slow things down. We need to keep things moving, and there's nothing wrong with going in reverse and getting an instrument back into the client's hands. We have avoided confrontation and maybe even dif-

fused a ticking bomb. Now, we have an opportunity to use music to rekindle the client's emotions.

A price objection is often about terms. There's nothing wrong with asking, "Were you thinking about paying for this all at once, or would you like to see some payment options?" Any discussion of terms creates an opportunity to sit down and look at options on paper.

GENERAL OBJECTIONS ...

If an objection is not about price, product or terms, it's a *general objection*. For most salespeople, general objections are the deal-killers. The list of these is endless, but here are a few of my personal favorites:

- "I have to talk it over with my husband (or wife)."
- "I have to sleep on it," or "I have to think it over."
- "I have to talk to my (pick one): teacher, sister, tuner, bandmate, kids, designer, committee, trust officer, stockbroker, doctor or relative."
- "I have to see if it fits."
- "I have to pay my taxes."
- "I have to buy a (pick one): house, car, roof, floor, college tuition or vacation."
- "There's an aardvark parked in my driveway."

I added the last one because, years ago, an aspiring life-insurance salesman showed me a book, titled *There's An Aardvark Parked In My Driveway And 1,001 Other Customer Objections*. (An Amazon.com search reveals more than 57,000 entries on the subject of objections.) When people get close to making a decision, they get nervous, and foolish things come out of their mouths.

The first objection on the list is a classic. Can you imagine, during qualification, asking a young, professional woman if she needs her husband's permission to make a purchase? Of course not — you could end up getting boycotted by NOW! Yet, this same woman will look you in the eye and say, "I have to talk it over with my husband." What she's really saying — and what everyone who gives you a silly general objection is saying — is, "I am close to making a decision, and I am afraid. I want to run away, so I'll just ask for a business card and leave." The customer whisperer

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into thinking
that you
have to
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understands these are not real objections, so he can't sell them away, and he certainly doesn't want to take bait and engage in an unwinnable argument.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, it's not possible or useful to memorize a silver-bullet response for every possible objection. Objections usually aren't real. Argument is shadowboxing. Our only alternative is to stay focused and smoke out the real issue.

... AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM

The customer whisperer processes general objections with calm, assertive leadership. First, he carefully listens to the objection. Listening doesn't come naturally to salespeople. However, it is critically important to be a conscientious listener when processing objections.

Next — and this is the hard part — he repeats the objection. He repeats it word for word with no spin. He's never sarcastic, humorous or demeaning. That would instantly and permanently destroy his relationship with

the client. This isn't a game, and he's not trying to be cute.

We want the client to hear exactly what he or she said. A simple, safe way to do this is to say, "What I hear you saying is, 'I have to talk it over with my husband.'" This gives the client an opportunity to hear how silly it sounded. That's why you can't spin it. You must be sincere, and let the client hear exactly what he or she said. Clients will often abandon the objection right there and may well switch to a different objection, which the customer whisperer will repeat with no spin.

Having repeated the objection, the next step is to "question" the objection. "Is it important to talk this purchase over with your husband?" The client has yet another opportunity to release the general objection to the wind, and a surprising number will. My father-in-law was a state trooper, and he once told me how a police officer knows when someone's telling the truth. The truth always comes out the same. If the story changes, it's probably not true.

+ 6 SIMPLE STEPS TO HANDLING OBJECTIONS

1. Listen to the objection — really listen.
2. Decide if it is a general or a specific objection. If it's specific, sell it away.
3. Repeat the objection back to the client with no spin.
4. Question the objection.
5. Dismiss the objection.
6. Move back to presentation or on to closing — immediately.

When an objection changes, the customer whisperer has learned two important things: The objection wasn't true, and the client is nervous and excited. The greatest gift he can give his client is to stay focused, be persistent and guide the client to happy ownership.

The worst thing he can do is give up and send the client home, disappointed. (This is also the kindest thing he can do for his competitor. No sale is easier than one you get on the rebound. It's just like dating in high school.)

After questioning the objection (a couple of times) and discovering that it's not that

important, the customer whisperer smiles and confirms by saying, "Good, I'm glad we got that settled," and moves on. He might go back to the product to rekindle emotions, or he might proceed to a discussion of logistics, but he moves on — immediately. He is now in a closing situation. His client is at an emotional high, and he has calmed the client's fight/flight response.

Processing objections is not a contest with a winner and a loser. It's not necessary to triumph over the objection. It's only necessary to ease the tension, guide clients through the process, and get back to presentation or on to closing.

In the next installment, the customer whisperer turns his attention to closing, but he's not going to offer shop-worn clichés like, "Just ask for the order" or "Consult Ben Franklin." Today's customers are different, and so are today's salespeople.

Until then, try to recognize the difference between general and specific objections. Go back to presentation to sell away the specific objections and process general objections. Find out how important they are. You'll be surprised to learn the answer might just be, "Not very important at all." **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.

