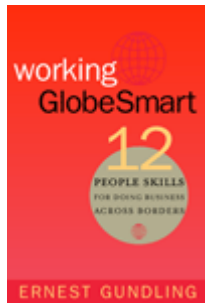


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Selling to Overseas Customers Part III: Closing the Sale

In tough economic times, companies survive and thrive based on strong customer relationships with customers around the world. This is the final part of a three-part series that examines several key challenges faced by salespeople working in a cross-border context:

- Initial contacts
- Handling customer concerns
- Closing the sale

Closing: Climax of the Hunt?

Closing techniques are the subject of avid study and training on the part of countless salespeople. It is as if the sale were a big game hunt and the close the most dramatic moment - the climax of the hunt. We have all learned about "power closes" that supposedly work "like a bear trap." Such devices may produce results when selling widgets to domestic clients, but they are not always the best means for selling to customers abroad who are very sensitive about being bulldozed.

Salespeople tend to misread the signals given by foreign buyers because the patterns of communication are so different. They close too soon or too late, are too forceful or not aggressive enough. The classic mistake is to come away from a customer meeting thinking there is agreement when in fact there is none. The mild "yes" from your host can signify nothing more than polite interest. A "yes" accompanied by nonverbal distress can mean, "We don't want to say 'no' to you directly but please understand what we are telling you." Another hazard is the unenforceable contract. Getting the buyer to sign on the dotted line means little in an environment where the legal system favors local firms and contracts are ignored or creatively interpreted.

The Close Before the Close

The notion of closing the sale is more useful when it is expanded beyond a single climactic event. A better, if more laborious, metaphor than the hunt is the chipping away of a woodcarver or sculptor: the figure being created reveals itself over time. Closing actually begins with hearing out and incorporating the ideas of your counterparts - this shows your willingness to understand rather than dominate or exploit. What foreign colleagues and customers are looking for is often not so much a polished sales pitch as a broader sense of mutual commitment and connectedness.

Steady follow-up even on minor matters is a sign that we will follow through on major agreements. A thoughtful note or a message to confirm key points from the previous conversation can be a symbol that we have been listening to what the customer says and are beginning to know him or her as a person. Making ourselves easily available, revising the proposal or providing additional data to help the customer sell it to colleagues, presenting to multiple constituent groups - each of these actions binds us and the customer ever more closely together, wins their commitment to work with us, and begins to cement a working partnership that will continue after the sale.

The Circular Close

The style of the close need not be direct or pointed like the teeth of a trap. The value of a more circular approach to a sale is that it offers the seller multiple opportunities to learn more about the customer's circumstances, to gauge interest, and to move toward a sale without forcing a response before the customer is ready. Here is a tactful sales approach that mirrors the indirect style of feedback common in many cultures.

Salesperson: *You have a lot of cars in the parking lot.*

Customer: *Yes, it is very full, isn't it? I have a hard time finding a parking*

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place myself.

Salesperson: *So, business must be going quite well for you...*

Customer: *Yes, thankfully the last couple of quarters have been pretty strong.*

Salesperson: *Does that mean that you will be raising factory production goals in the next quarter?*

Customer: *As a matter of fact we plan to increase our goals 5 percent beyond the original plan for the year.*

Salesperson: *So, will you be needing more of our chip sets to accommodate the production increase?*

The Customer Close

The standard wisdom in most sales training courses is that the buyer needs help to make up his or her mind, and the salesperson must constantly shepherd the buyer towards a purchase decision. However, one of the most effective ways to earn respect and create a sense of mutual comfort is through well-placed moments of silence that let the customer take the initiative. Silence of this kind should not be viewed as a tactic or a kind of contest of wills in which the first person to speak "loses." Rather, it is a way to demonstrate our regard for an intelligent buyer and not have them feel rushed or pushed - these latter sentiments are likely to lead to the "yes" that means "no" or "go away quickly."

Once we have replied to customer questions and made a presentation regarding our product or service, reverting to silence gives the people on the customer's team time to think and perhaps consult with each other. This reflects well on our character in a number of countries and can create a felt obligation on the part of the other side to respond. Often at this point the customer will come back with questions that lead toward specific and concrete purchase information: "What quantities can you deliver?" "What is the delivery time?" "When can you schedule this service?" Such questions are very reliable customer-driven closing signals, even from customers who will give us the vague "yes" if we put them on the spot before they are ready.

Careful, complete, and accurate responses to these questions will keep the customer representatives in the driver's seat and give them the information they need, while premature closing gestures will force them into retreat. The final part of this customer-centered close is the simple and friendly act of confirming what each side will do next. This leaves the customer feeling that the choice has been theirs all along and makes likely the chances of an enduring, successful relationship that will bring more sales.

The Close After the Close

In societies where contracts are not strictly enforced - which includes much of the world outside the United States and Europe - the "close" doesn't really close anything other than one phase in an ongoing set of interactions. A signed deal must be bolstered by a number of actions in the weeks and months following the agreement to both keep it viable and to win future business. Customer service on an existing contract, for instance, can be a big part of the decision-making process on the next sale as well as ensuring continued payments on the previous one.

A common strategy used by buyers who are distrustful of foreign sources of supply is to offer a relatively small piece of work to the seller and then watch what happens. The vendor must jump through a variety of hoops to make the agreement work. Meanwhile, this vendor also needs to strike a delicate balance between being flexible and being able to set reasonable limits in the face of unreasonable requests. Erring in either direction can be costly. An inflexible seller will find that much larger contracts the customer originally had in mind suddenly vanish like a mirage in the desert. On the other hand, a vendor who agrees to everything will not even want the next contract because a precedent has been set for low prices or extra services that are uncompensated.

Real efforts by the seller to meet reasonable and even somewhat unreasonable demands will normally set the groundwork for the next sale. The salesperson, for example, who takes an overnight train to deliver a part to a customer in time to help meet a deadline has not wasted valuable sales time but rather guaranteed a warm reception in discussing the next piece of work. The more such gestures are made, the more a hesitant overseas buyer will naturally gravitate toward repeat purchases through a growing sense of security and obligation. So, a single "close" opens the door to a succession of further closes that both preserve the sale and expand the business relationship.

This article has been excerpted from an upcoming book by Ernest Gundling, co-managing director of Meridian Resources, entitled *"Working GlobeSmart: 12 People Skills for Doing Business Across Borders"*. *"Working GlobeSmart"* is scheduled to be published in May 2003 by Davies-Black Publishing, a division of CPP, Inc.

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