

# GETTING TO COMPETENCE

EARNING THE RIGHT TO SIT AT THE TABLE



# Getting to Competence

## **Are you reaching buyers in today's markets?**

Selling has changed dramatically from the days when a rep could walk in and pitch the features and benefits of a product to a customer. In the past, sales reps were the main source of information on product and market trends. Today, due to the easy access to information, Buyers can get all the information they need online, and in many cases make decisions without including the company's sales rep in the process.

So if the customer can get all the information they need on their own, why should they take the time to talk to you? And if they do, what can you do to improve the effectiveness of that interaction and set the stage for you to be included in their buying process?

## **Are you different than every other sales person out there?**

It all starts with *getting to competence*, or what I refer to as *earning the right to sit at the table as an equal*.

I remember years ago before the start of the "Do Not Call List", my phone would ring several times every night with someone trying to sell me something. I recall several instances where the seller was pitching a new investment that was "promised" to grow 3 fold within a few months. At that time, I did a fair amount of investing.

Unfortunately, I had a buy high/sell low strategy (which I've since reversed), but since I wasn't getting amazing results on my own, their promises for quick gains got my attention.

As I listened further to what they had to say, what was surprising to me was my reaction to what I heard. Even though I wasn't doing well investing on my own, my initial reaction to their claims was "how do I know they know more than I do?"

What I realized is that while they were pitching their product, they were not taking the time to *earn the right* to have that conversation with me. They were not taking the time to let me know that they had the experience and ability to support their claims. They

weren't *getting to competence* and until they did, I couldn't proceed further. So every call, no matter how interested I was, ended up as a lost opportunity for them.

### **Why is getting to competence important?**

Getting to competence is important because it sets the stage for you to prove that *you*, your *company* and your *products/solutions* have the ability to provide *value* to your customer.

Developing competence is the first step in developing *trust*, and without trust you will not get a sale. Additionally, *people buy from people*, and getting to competence helps build that trust so that the buyer will feel comfortable buying from you.

It's also important to note that people buy from companies as well, and customers place a lot of importance on a company's past experience and projects. That is one of the reasons why companies like Amazon, Apple and others dominate their markets.

A company's reputation becomes even more important with large dollar purchases because the larger the value of the sale, the greater the fear a buyer will have in making a buying decision. Sales is not only about a customer buying a product or service. When the stakes are high, the main product the customer is buying is *risk management*.

You may have heard the old adage "nobody ever got fired for buying from IBM." That is because over the years, IBM has demonstrated themselves as a reputable company. Also by being a large stable organization, they have the staying power to help customers feel comfortable that they will be around to manage their business long term. They have proven that there is little *risk* in making the decision to buy from them. In many instances IBM's *competence* has allowed them to win sales from smaller competitors who had better products and technology.

Let's look at another example of competence using doctors. When you first walk into a doctor's office one of the first things you see is all their diplomas on the wall. Are they doing this because they are egomaniacs and want to brag about where they went to school? Well some might, but for the most part, they provide this as a way to let you

know that they have the background, experience and credentials for you to trust them with your healthcare.

I can tell you, that the diplomas are the first thing I look for when I walk into a new doctor's office. When I see Harvard, Yale... among the framed artwork on the wall, my confidence in them definitely goes up a notch.

Think about an alternate scenario, where you walk into a doctor's office for the first time and you know nothing about them. How would you feel about their diagnosis? Would you question it?

I would, and did. When my oldest daughter was 3 years old she needed surgery for an umbilical hernia. Being nervous about any surgery on my little girl, and not knowing much about the surgeon I was meeting with, I drilled the doctor about his qualifications during our meeting. Fortunately, it turned out that he was chief of organ transplantation at Boston Children's Hospital and did minor elective surgeries on the side. Once I learned about his credentials, not only was I relieved, but anything he recommended afterwards was easily received as expert advice.

In selling situations, the same thing occurs. How many times have you pitched a product to a customer only to get a wide range of objections? Was it because they really had objections about the product, or was it because they had questions about your *competence* or your company's ability to support the claims being made?

### **Getting to competence sequence**

Getting to competence is not a complicated process. It all starts by selling *you* first, then the *company*, then the *product*. By following this simple sequence, you begin the path toward proving your ability to be a knowledgeable resource, and a supplier with whom the buyer can begin developing trust.

As I mentioned above, people buy from people, and therefore establishing personal competence is one of the most important things a sales person can do during the selling process.

## Selling “You”

During my training sessions I run exercises using different tools to help sales teams develop a process for getting to competence using their own individual style. What I’ve found is many great sales people do this already. The problem is they don’t do it consciously, nor do they take the time to ensure they complete the process before proceeding with “their pitch”.

Years ago I was in a sales training session where the trainer and I had a heated debate on how long it took to develop competence with a customer. He claimed it could be done in 45-60 seconds using a couple of prepared statements. I disagreed and spent a lot of time afterwards studying the issue.

What I found from my research was that getting to competence takes time, and gaining agreement about your qualifications is not the same with every customer. I also found that it definitely takes longer than 45-60 seconds. In fact, in one instance it took me over 45 minutes, but that investment in time was well worth it.

It’s a long story, but on a sales call to a major potential customer, one of the attendees in the meeting, the Director of the group, proved to be difficult. By taking the time to get to competence, we were able to turn him into an advocate who was open to working with us. This resulted in a productive meeting and also the development of a significant new business opportunity.

The process of getting to competence needs to be done not only with new customers, but also when meeting with new buying influences at existing customers. Don’t assume everyone knows the capabilities that you and your company can provide.

For example, after one of my training sessions, a sales manager I worked with named Justin took this concept to heart. He started consciously working on getting to competence on every call, and was amazed by the response he got from his customers.

In one instance, Justin had a high level meeting scheduled with a multi-million dollar client with whom he and his company had been doing business with for years. The

problem was that the meeting agenda focused on some serious supply issues that had occurred, and Justin had not met any of the key players before because they had all recently changed jobs.

When the meeting started, everyone wanted to jump right into the issues, but Justin stepped back and asked if they could take a few minutes to review their personal backgrounds and the history of their companies working together. This not only allowed Justin to get to know the key players, but set the stage for him to sell himself and the company to the new buying influences before trying to resolve the issues.

As it turned out, this approach led to a broader discussion about everyone's backgrounds, and as a result, the major issues were not completely discussed. After the meeting, the client's senior person pulled Justin aside and said: "I like the way you handled this meeting. I want to have another meeting to discuss all our issues, but I want to do so only with you."

Justin's time spent *getting to competence* allowed him to build credibility with the Senior Director, someone with whom he would not normally have access, and start the development of what became a strong business relationship.

## **Summary**

Selling to Buyers in today's markets is more difficult than ever, and Sales teams need to develop new approaches to increase their chances of success. By taking the time to get to competence, you begin the process of differentiating you and your company. This allows you to prove that you are qualified to help the customer resolve their business issues and earn a right to participate in that process.

The key is to ensure that you take the time to get to competence before making a product pitch or even asking questions. By doing so, you set the stage to be different than every other sales person out there, and one with whom the customer can eventually trust with helping them with their buying decision.

For more information on maximizing your company's selling efforts, please visit the References Page on our website at [www.tritonconsult.com](http://www.tritonconsult.com) or contact Triton Consulting directly at 978-232-1113.