

## How to Generate New Business in a Downturn

With the economic climate making things tougher than ever, better sales techniques can improve almost any area of business growth, says communications skills expert and business coach Marc Hogan.



By now, every small business owner will be aware of the squeeze caused by the recession, and many will have felt it firsthand. Now more than ever companies need to take steps to actively hold on to established business and win new customers.

Whether or not we are conscious of it, we all 'sell' every day. Some of us are paid to sell while others need to promote ideas to the board, ask for a pay rise, or win staff approval. Great business people are great salespeople; they influence others and get things done.

The key to any successful business relationship is establishing trust. A good salesperson listens, is honest and delivers when they say they will. They understand the customer's needs and are not too pushy. This might sound simple, but many people feel uncomfortable actively 'selling'.

The following five step S.A.L.E.S. process can be used to move from a mindset of selling to one of problem solving; helping your small firm to align its values and language with your customers and arrive at a solution that is mutually beneficial.

### Solving people's problems

Successful salespeople don't sell, they solve people's problems. They listen to their customers to understand their needs. The same applies to great business people, and never more so than in a recession, when cash flow is tight for many of your customers.

In the case of everyday business, it is necessary to seek out alternative opportunities, such as networking events, online forums, or even dinner parties. A gentle, conversational approach to relationship building in these informal settings can provide the opportunity to learn more about a person as a first step to building a relationship of trust.

### Aligning values

The key to any successful business relationship is establishing trust. Successful salespeople align their values with their potential customers. This could be as simple as wearing clothing that is similar to the customer's or matches the product. Positive body language is also important, from posture to eye contact. In every area of business, a person's behavior reflects on their brand. This is known as the Halo Effect: when a person's body language and appearance is positive, others will assume that this extends to the product or service.

## Language that builds trust

Aligning values is not just about appearance, it is also about words. The best salespeople use similar phrases to their customers to put them at ease and appeal to their values. If they perceive the person to be a risk taker, they might use words like "new" or "exciting", but in today's economic climate, customers may well be risk averse, so words like "trusted" or "guaranteed" could be more effective. Showing understanding in this way can make or break a deal.

## Eliciting customer's needs

To successfully communicate the value of a product or service, it is vital to first understand a customer's needs. This is achieved by asking intelligent and thought-provoking questions and carefully listening to the answers.

An effective method for doing this is to get the customer thinking about their previous experiences of a similar product, and then ask three questions:

1. "What's good about...?"
2. "What's bad about...?"
3. "What changes would you make...?"

This provides a roadmap of precisely what the customer really wants, which makes it much easier to focus on the perceived positives around the product on offer.

## Solutions that are mutually beneficial

The final stage of the S.A.L.E.S. process is to provide a solution that benefits both parties. Nobody likes to be pushed into buying something that isn't right for them and, equally, a business will rarely be happy to sell at a loss. However, if you have worked to understand your customer's needs and align with their values, you should be in a position to offer a well fitting product at a reasonable price.

The simple techniques described above can give you the building blocks from which you can build a mutually beneficial relationship and reach an agreement based on trust. If this trust is sustained by delivering on promises and taking the time to understand your customers' needs on an ongoing basis, you will be better placed to win the new or repeat business so vital to a company's survival.

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