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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians: Psst ... I've Got an Offer for Your Library That You Can't Refuse

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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Pssst... I've Got an Offer for Your Library That You Can't Refuse.

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A salesman walks into a library and says,

"I've got a new Database Product that the company has just developed, and I wanted to personally tell you all about it. When I describe its features and benefits, your library will want to buy it. We even have some special, limited-time incentives for you to consider that are tied directly to this product."

"Oh yeah" says the librarian.

"Can I try it out for free for a year?"

The correct answer to the librarian's question is:

- If it were up to me, I'd do it, but our company policy is that trials are extended only for 30 days or less.
- I can honor your request, but only if you make a three-year commitment to buy.
- Great idea, but I've got to speak to my manager for approval. Hopefully, he'll be in a good mood today.
- Sure, but only if you agree not to take your salary for a year. This way, we both won't be able to pay the rent.
- When pigs fly.

When the inevitable events of my life conspired to unceremoniously drop me into the world of sales, I had many notions of what a salesperson is supposed to do, supposed to look like, and, most of all, I had no idea how a person could earn a living by just speaking to other people. I had heard tales of how successful salespeople are able to travel the world in comfort and at the same time make significant sums of money, but my only reference points to the world of selling were watching the movie "Glengarry Glen Ross" and seeing "Death of a Salesman" on Broadway. Yikes!

All I could think of was the **Richard Nixon** poster popularized around the time of Watergate that showed the disgraced President's face with the caption, "Would you buy a used car from this man?" Stereotypical visions of men in plaid suits with inappropriate ties, garish pinky rings, accompanied by a fat cigar in their mouth, permeated my thinking as to what a "sales guy" possibly should look like. "Sign here pal and it's yours."

Although I will admit to have indulged in the smoking of a fine cigar on occasion, I have neither plaid suits, nor inappropriate neckwear in my wardrobe. Moreover, my initial vision of what a salesperson in our business should look like was not entirely accurate since the majorities of my sales/marketing colleagues over the years consist of a well-coiffed and well-dressed group of people that I am proud to have been associated with.

With the establishment of my consulting practice after many years of working for some of the finest information companies in our business and then writing the definitive book on the process of buying and selling of information, I have had the great honor to speak at information industry events, at local SLA library chapters, and to MLIS students at library schools throughout this country. I have spoken about how to break down the barriers of misinformation that seem to exist between the salesperson and the information professional so that the business of buying and selling information can proceed unencumbered. In the interest of transparency, I'd like to share some of the questions that have been asked of me at these meetings, complete with my responses.

Salesperson Continuity

A recurring question from the audience involves trying to understand why there always seems to be a constant change in the assignment of salespeople to the customers' accounts. Whether by choice or not, salespeople seem to be more on the move than ever before, which means that if you dealt with Alan in 2013, who was replaced by Joe in 2014, you probably will see Jane in 2015 telling you that she is your new sales rep. Hard to establish any rapport with your sales rep under this all-too-familiar scenario.

To me, this sales rep revolving door approach used by some companies in our business is one of the root causes of why a number of major information industry firms are not hitting their sales objectives. They are forgetting the most basic premise of the sales success mantra, which states, "People buy from people; they don't buy from companies!" Ours is a relationship business, and to establish this mutual trust, time to work together must pass between the two parties. If over a five-year period the library has seen multiple salespeople from the company, how can a relationship even hope to be established? It simply can't.

For most sales organizations, the rule of thumb in the measurement of salesperson attainment of their goals is broken into three categories based on the reps's performance. There is the top 20%, the bottom 20%, and the rest of the staff falls somewhere in the middle 60%. This means that a good sales director, with company support, will reward the top 20% and will hopefully prepare them for senior executive positions, while at the same time, actively replace the bottom 20% and then concentrate on working with the middle 60% to get as many of them as possible into the top category. The goal of this methodology is to keep the top performers satisfied, weed out the folks who are not doing the job, and work with the majority to help them succeed. This is an example of Basic Sales Management 101.

My goal as a manager of salespeople was always to keep the staff challenged and provide them with reachable incentives so as to allow them to earn as much money as possible so that both the company and the rep had the wherewithal to reach their yearly revenue goals and, as a result, stay with the firm for many years. However, with the advent of on-line recruiting sites, reps have a far wider network that informs them of seemingly better jobs somewhere else. Tie this fact to a company whose internal policies towards salespeople may be perceived as harsh, and the result is more movement between sales jobs than ever before. It's a sign of the times that may ultimately give the salesperson more opportunity to grow and prosper, but in the short term, the carousel of interchangeable reps annoys the customer and puts added pressure on the company to hire better than adequate replacements.

The problem for the company is that when an employee of many years leaves, a part of the company culture also leaves. Sure, the new person may have great credentials, but ultimately it will take some time for that new person to learn the policies, fit into the culture, and begin to create new customer relationships. In my opinion, working with what you've got is preferable to constant turnover of employees.

Are the "Special Deals" For Everyone, Or Is This Just A Ploy Used As An Enticement To Get New Customers?

"Have I got a deal for you!" How many times has that been said to you? Probably you heard that more times than you care to remember. But the reality is that companies are always offering incentives to entice their customers to buy more products and services. Sometimes, those offered incentives are designed to only attract new customers. Marketing departments work tirelessly to create the incentives to help bring in more business, thus giving credence to the old adage that says, "Marketing creates the need and sales is tasked to fill it."

A big issue for information companies is making sure that every customer is being charged the same as their similar-sized institutions. That means that if Library A is paying \$X for a specific product, then every other library in the same demographic as Library A should be charged as close as possible to the same amount. It's a nice goal, but sometimes over the years, the goal/expectation of uniform pricing for similar-sized libraries goes somewhat amiss.

continued on page 65



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Both Sides Now ... from page 64

For example, if five years ago a special deal was announced by the company that gave a significant discount to a specific product and Library A took advantage of it, then one could easily say that anyone buying that product five years later was being overcharged. That may or may not be true, but the fact remains that Library A was smart enough to take advantage of the offer a long time ago and, as a result, has been paying less than a similar-sized library would pay if they bought today.

So, special deals are offered for a variety of reasons. One reason could be that the company has a new product to introduce and wants some quick sales to gain market share. Another reason could be that the company wants to attract “new” customers and is willing to heavily discount the first year’s price. Of course, the pitfall here is that the customer must be informed that the selling price offered is way below the actual retail cost and that in the renewal year, that price may have to be adjusted so as to fall into line with what similar libraries are being charged.

Some libraries request that renewal prices over a stated time period are capped so as to avoid having to endure a spike in future costs. This is a wise tactic, since by doing so the library can predict future costs. Beware of “special deals.” Make sure that if the company is offering a significant price reduction on a renewable product that future costs price increases are capped.

Why Did You Write the Book?

The impetus for writing the book about how a salesperson and information professional can and should work together for mutual success was to give both sides a look into how the other operates. By understanding each other’s roles and responsibilities, the business of buying and selling information can proceed without mystery and intrigue. I attended too many meetings in my career where a lack of preparation and forethought artificially elongated the process and sometimes doomed the whole encounter.

In reading the various journals and articles about negotiations written for information professionals, I am distressed to read that some people advocate for a contentious attitude on the part of the library person when dealing with a sales rep. And quite frankly, I have a colleague who believes that a little bit of tension between the two parties is a good thing in the negotiation process.

I would almost tend to agree with my colleague were it not for the fact that this is an annuity business. That means that if I sell you a product in 2014, then barring any unforeseen events, I will be back to renew it in 2015. Why purposely create an uncomfortable environment when both parties know that their paths will cross at trade shows, industry events, and renewal time? Negotiations by their very nature can be difficult, so why add to the burden of establishing the final agreement? So I wrote the book to show people how to cut through the nonsense and get both parties on the right track to make a deal.

The **Bee Gees** had a huge hit in the late ’70s called “Jive Talkin’.” The rather simplistic lyrics say:

“Jive talkin’, you’re telling me lies, yeah. Jive talkin’, you wear a disguise. Jive talkin’, so misunderstood, yeah. Jive talkin’, You just ain’t no good.”

The goal for any sales organization in any business is to eliminate smooth-talking, jive-talking insincere people and accentuate a positive relationship, building a sales team that will create the environment to buy and sell information efficiently and productively. 🌱

*Mike is currently the President of **Gruenberg Consulting, LLC**, a firm he founded in January 2012 devoted to providing clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, and product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book **Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success** is available on Amazon and Information Today. www.gruenbergconsulting.com*