

## Think Like a Customer or Lose the Sale

By  
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### Changing the sales narrative

“Don’t fall into the trap of thinking like a customer. If you do, you’re done!” This warning has been pounded into the heads of salespeople—and it will follow them until their last day on the job.

Why is thinking like a customer dangerous? It’s the noxious notion that leads down the dark and dismal path to serious trouble—lost sales. If you dare to let yourself think like customers, you may be distracted from your mission and become overly understanding and sympathetic, even finding yourself walking in a customer’s shoes.

Yet, successful salespeople work hard at sharpening their understanding of what prospects and customers are thinking. It takes effort and skill to get inside someone’s head and it starts with asking questions:

- What’s important to them?
- What are they looking for?
- How motivated are they?
- Are they focused or not sure of themselves?
- What are they trying to tell me?
- Do they expect too much?
- Will they be fair?
- What are they not telling me?
- Are they worried about being taken for a ride?
- How concerned are they with making a mistake or getting stuck with a decision they will come to regret?

Accurate answers to these questions help to get an exact picture of what’s going on—and that changes the sales narrative. Instead of focusing on how you’re going to get customers to do what you want, you move to letting them know you’re on their side and your mission is to help them achieve their goal or dream.

In fact, it takes doing the opposite of what salespeople have been told to avoid—thinking like customers. It applies to *all* sales, whether you’re selling burritos from a food truck, diamond rings, engineering systems, real estate, insurance, medical equipment, or anything else.

What is it that the customer is trying to say? Some people have trouble expressing themselves clearly, either unwittingly—or on purpose. People often want others to think well of them, so they answer questions in ways that will impress the salesperson. They may let it be known, for example, that they can afford a purchase that's far beyond their financial means. On and on it goes.

We all use shortcuts for coming up with answers so we can get the job done as quickly as possible. In sales this leads to believing we know more about how customers think than we do. Without even realizing it, opinions become facts and certainty supersedes questioning, doubt, and curiosity, the essential tools for understanding customers' thoughts and behavior.

And at what cost? Lost sales.

### **Four common sense rules for understanding customers**

Here are four basic rules to help zero in on gaining a better understanding of how customers think. And that mean more sales.

#### **Rule #1. Never assume you know what a customer is thinking.**

This is the place to start. Believing we can know what someone is thinking is useful—it gives us the feeling of being in control, even though the deck is stacked against such a notion.

The neurologist Robert A. Burton, MD writes, “We make up stories about our spouses, our kids, our leaders, and our enemies. Inspiring narratives get us through dark nights and tough times, but we'll always make better predictions guided by the impersonal analysis of big data than by the erroneous belief that we can read another's mind.”

#### **Rule #2. Avoid thinking about what you want to say or do next.**

In other words, the human mind isn't up to speed on multi-tasking. When we're with a client and our mind is on our proposal or what we want to say next, we're distracted and unable to concentrate on what a customer is saying.

There is nothing more important than what a customer is saying. If we don't get it at that moment, it's gone. Try as hard as we can, we are unable to recall what we've missed.

#### **Rule #3. Make key word notes.**

It's a similar problem when concentrating on what a client is saying so you don't miss anything, while taking notes disrupts listening. As it turns out, we're not wired to do two things at the same time, while using a smartphone to record the meeting can be questionable.

So, how can you keep your attention on what you're hearing and recall it at the same time? Keyword notetaking helps. Instead of trying to jot down even four or five words at a time, let alone sentences, just one or two key words aid recall later.

**Rule #4. Use “rewind reviews”**

Missing essential information or getting it wrong undermines a marketer or salesperson's credibility—and the chances of make the sale.

An effective way to avoid such unnecessary mishaps is the “rewind review.” You might say, “I want to be sure I understand what you're telling me, so let me put in my own words. Correct me if I get it wrong.” This not only will help get it right, but it sends the message that you're a serious listener.

The battle for the control of the minds of salespeople is relentless. “Don't give-in. Don't let yourself think like a customer,” they tell us. “It's our agenda and what we need to accomplish that counts.” At the same time, we are told to put the customer first. But those are just words that don't ring true with customers unless we think like them.

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