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ANTICIPATING & MANAGING OBJECTIONS

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Sales Skills Note – Anticipating and Handling Objections (Concerns)

So what is an objection? We can define in many ways...a misunderstanding, an idea or unique feature 'planted' by the competition, a genuine need for something we don't have, a fear of something for instance and to look at an objection in that way is just fine.

However, is there an alternative way to look at an objection? How about looking at any objection as a GIFT or Opportunity? How might that change the way you view objections? The reality is we face objections all the time and if you look at an objection as a gift you are more likely to welcome them and indeed proactively find them. If you see the objection as something to be cleared out of the way and or minimised then it leaves you one step closer to the order. Worry, particularly in a competitive sale, when you don't have any objections in front of you!

Before we move on just a thought about the word 'objection'. That is really part of our sales language so from a customer perspective we would recommend using the word concern as it is a softer word (at least in English!).

Customer concerns can of course be very generic or very specific to the solution, product or service you are offering or indeed about your organisation too. We would immediately recommend making a list of those common concerns that you hear on a daily / regular basis and getting prepared – more on that later.

The technique we use for handling concerns when we are both training in the classroom and selling ourselves is a very well established and proven technique and great at helping you prepare for those common concerns (more on that later). Here it is...**APIAC!**

ACKNOWLEDGE, PROBE, ISOLATE, ANSWER, CONFIRM

The best way to bring **APIAC** to life is to work through a typical customer concern. You might hear the following:

'Your product is not sensitive enough'

The first thing we do is **ACKNOWLEDGE** the concern. We could choose to ignore a concern and of course you can if you just feel it was a throw away remark. Our preference would always be to immediately note the concern and then you have a choice to either handle it immediately at that point in the conversation or come back to it later in the same conversation. A really good way to **ACKNOWLEDGE** a concern is to restate it in question form – in this case we could say:

'Mr / Mrs Customer, earlier in the conversation you talked about product sensitivity; it sounds as if you believe our product is not sensitive enough, is that correct?'

We **ACKNOWLEDGE** the concern (or concerns of course) for a number of reasons including:

- It demonstrates to the customer that you have listened to them
- It also demonstrates to the customer that you are going to address it
- It checks for understanding on your part...we were seeking a Yes or NO with the question 'is that correct'
- The customer might immediately start to elaborate on it (great – more information)
- And finally, it gives you some thinking time if you have never come across the concern before

Now before we move on we know that a customer's concerns are either REAL or FALSE – so how do we know in any given set of circumstances whether the concern is REAL or FALSE? Well, we do it by questioning them and finding out more about them.

The next step is to **PROBE** the concern by asking some good questions and actively listening to the answers to assess whether it is REAL or FALSE. Here are some examples of the typical questions we could ask.

- How do you measure sensitivity?
- What would you be comparing our sensitivity too?
- What level of sensitivity do you require for your key experiments?
- For which of your experiments do you require the greatest / least sensitivity?
- For what proportion of your experiments do you need the greatest sensitivity?
- What experience have you had of using our product? Which product was it precisely that you used?
- If you have used the product, what specific experiments did you conduct using the product? What were the results?

The questions should help you understand if the concern is REAL or FALSE and of course will have given you an even greater insight into the customer's work. If the concern is REAL we are going to have to understand how we minimise it...if sensitivity is mission critical for the customer and we don't have the sensitivity required for the customer's science then it might mean that we have to walk away from this one. If the customer only requires occasional levels of sensitivity that we don't have then we may be able to minimise that concern with other more relevant advantages that we have.

If the concern is FALSE then (unless it is a misunderstanding which we can understand during the **PROBE** and subsequently correct) it is likely the customer is trying to hide or mask the real reason they don't want to engage / buy from you. So how do we handle false concerns? If you feel it will stop you ultimately doing business with this customer then you have to address it.

Try using the approach outlined at the next stage along the lines of 'so, if we could....'. One thing is for sure – you are going to have ask more questions and actively listen to every word that is said. Alternatively, have the courage to smile and whilst being very respectful of the customer's position challenge them:

Mr / Mrs Customer; I appreciate you have a choice and although I would love to win every order I compete for I have to accept that sometimes people just don't want to buy from me. I won't be offended if you tell me the real reason for saying no and I certainly will not take up anymore of your time'

This approach can sometimes open a door that until that point was firmly shut to you. It's not something that many sales people will do!

The next part of **APIAC** is perhaps the least intuitive...it is **ISOLATE**

So we have discovered one customer concern and before we go any further we need to check if the customer has any further concerns at this point hence we might say something along the lines of:

'Mr / Mrs Customer; apart from your concern about Sensitivity, is there anything else of concern to you right at this point in time?'

Or we could say (variation on a theme)

'Mr / Mrs Customer apart from your concern about our sensitivity do you see any other risks in doing business with me at this stage?'

You need to find the words that work for you and that you feel comfortable delivering in a natural way. If you find another concern at this point go back to the start of **APIAC** and **ACKNOWLEDGE** and then **PROBE**. It is important that you pull out all the concerns at this point.

Still in **ISOLATE** our next step is to now use the IF question and this is often referred to as a trial close and we might say something like...

'Mr / Mrs Customer IF I could satisfy you on the sensitivity concern you have and show you how our product would you give you the sensitivity and the subsequent results required would you be prepared to move the next step with me...indeed...would you be prepared to buy the product from me?'

Any hesitation from the customer at this stage might indicate you might still have some hidden concerns...clearly the customer feels uneasy about something. It is important that you have the courage to voice that with the customer.

Now we can deliver the **ANSWER** to the customer which of course will be very much based on the answers you received at the **PROBE** stage – this is where we need to prove our case – PROOF is everything at this point. Data, facts and validated information are far more convincing than anything you just say – put yourself in the customer's shoes – you would want proof also.

So in this instance we might need to show some existing data, an application note, credible publication or a reference from a customer. It might also mean you have to run a customer sample hence leaving enough time in the overall process to do the science and deliver the results to the customer. If doing this in front of the customer it is important to observe their reaction to your answer...do they sound / look convinced or are they still uneasy about something? If so you have to again have the courage to voice that with the customer...

Mr / Mrs Customer; you don't look / sound convinced...I've clearly missed something!

Once you have delivered your **ANSWER** with proof we can move to the final stage of **APIAC** and **CONFIRM** (or Close).

Mr / Mrs Customer, can I just **CONFIRM** that I have put your mind at rest about our sensitivity and how this product will give you the sensitivity you require and subsequently the results you need for your work.

So that's **APIAC**, just one way to handle customer concerns however in the heat of the conversation an easy one to follow.

Other key thoughts

- It's a REAL concern but not that important to the customer – how do I handle it? The simple answer is out-weigh that concern with other the benefits of your product / solution / organisation that align against the customer's most important requirements.
- When in the Sales Process should we pull the customer's concerns out? An easy one that...as early as possible! If we leave them uncovered then we might run out of time to overcome them if we uncover them too late in the customer's buying process. Remember you might need to run customer samples to prove your sensitivity and that could take days / weeks to organize.
- Anticipating the concerns that we face is key in the sense that we can prepare for them. One good way to prepare is to generate a list of **PROBE** questions and the likely **ANSWERS** you are going to have to provide (with proof)
- Classic traps – we hear a concern and immediately jump on it and answer it! Easy to immediately say to the customer in this specific case 'yes it is - let me show you all this data'. Hence very easy to end up winning the argument only to lose the sale since you haven't understood the concern to any real extent.

In summary, anticipating and managing concerns are key skills for successful, professional salespeople. Using **APIAC** as an easy to remember tool in the "heat of the battle" can be a powerful and effective way to handle REAL concerns, get behind the FALSE concerns and, of course, win more sales!