

What Do Customers Want?

by Elaine Schmitt

We know that strong customer relationships are critical to be successful in sales. But what qualities do customers really want from salespeople?

To discover this answer, we asked our clients which qualities they admire most in salespeople. From a list of 20 qualities possessed by top salespeople, we asked our clients to select the five that they think are the most important. The results?

- Reliability and responsiveness
- Honesty and integrity
- Value alignment and delivery
- “Customer-first” focus - cares about us and our business
- Listening and understanding

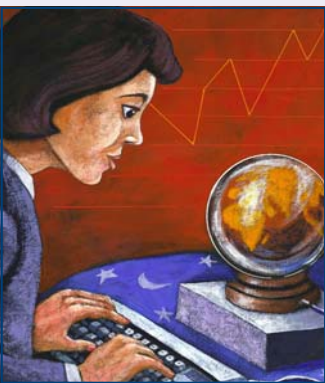


Reliability and responsiveness

Are you dependable? Can your customers count on you? Are you timely in your follow-up. One of our clients provided a stellar example of this quality.

“When managing the learning for a 200+ sales organization, I engaged several suppliers to build and execute our learning curriculum. In an effort to link the different courses together, I asked the suppliers to learn each others’ courses and vernacular so they could tie to each others’ programs in each of their respective courses. Even though many of these suppliers were competitors, most of them responded positively and collaborated with each other to create a cohesive end-to-end training curriculum where the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.”

These suppliers demonstrated reliability and responsiveness. Our client could count on them to do the right thing for her company, even if it meant working arm-in-arm with the competition.



Honesty and integrity

In the book **The Trusted Advisor**, authors Maister, Green, and Galford list credibility as one of the four components of building trust. They describe credibility as being *believable* in the rational sense and as being *honest* in the emotional sense. Believability can be validated by checking someone’s claims against the direct experience of others, which doesn’t take long. But honesty takes longer to evaluate because it takes longer to assure oneself that all dimensions of an issue are being covered. The book maintains that salespeople tend to focus on logic, facts, and credentials, or the rational side of credibility. They tend not to spend time enhancing the emotional side of credibility, which involves conveying a sense of honesty.



The best sales professionals spend time on both. They focus on finding ways, even though they might be painful, to convey their honesty and integrity. Here is one example.

On an international engagement, one of our client executives felt that our travel agent waited too long to book flights for two of our partners, which resulted in about \$1200 of additional travel fees for our client. When the client executive expressed her concern, the managing partner authorized a credit to our client. Upon learning of this situation, the customer was impressed that our company had presented a resolution to an issue he didn't even know existed. Actually, he was impressed and grateful for the honesty and integrity. Through this small act, our client executive made a huge impression on her client.



Value alignment and delivery

In our book **Building a Successful Selling Organization**, a CEO shared several key actions salespeople can take to demonstrate value:

- Call on me, my internal constituents, and sometimes my customers regularly
- Ask for input from me and other lines of business before presenting a proposal
- Understand our business drivers and goals and show me how you are clearly aligned to helping us achieve them
- Present me with new solutions, without my asking, sometimes packaging things in different ways that suit my needs
- Work effectively with all levels of my organization, respecting our people and what they are trying to do
- After implementing a solution, see if we are happy with it and what benefits we have realized
- Communicate the value that we receive from your products and services
- Handle unforeseen problems with a sense of urgency and accountability
- Always exceed your commitments

Demonstrating value involves articulating the business impact our solution or our company delivers. Whether the selling organization is responding to a customer problem, delivering and implementing products and services, or preparing for and executing a sales call, we need to constantly step back from internal issues and demands and wrap ourselves around the customer. **The pinnacle of extraordinary account management is to demonstrate value at every point of contact with the customer.**

One of our clients cited an experience with their CPS client executive as someone who aligned to their needs and brought value.

After successfully implementing and embedding CPS' account management process throughout their selling organization, this customer considers the process as their "standard way of supporting their customers." As new salespeople come on board, they learn of the program through an introductory eLearning course and then they go through a formal training workshop where they become licensed and certified on the process. Given the economic downturn, the customer was forced to delay formal training for 2 to 3 salespeople who were hired to sell a new product line. Once aware of this situation, the CPS client executive offered to provide



the formal training materials and defer the licensing and certification fees until the customer was in a better financial position. She also offered to coach the new hires until they could get formal training. Even though this "alignment" meant lost revenue in the short term, it will mean stronger customer relationships in the long term.



Customer-first focus – cares about us and our business

One of the best ways to improve our customer focus is by changing our conversations, which will change the way we think and behave. Selling organizations need to challenge the status quo through intentional focus and questions about old assumptions of the customer needs.

- Why would the customer want to use our product or service?
- Who cares about our offering and what authority do they have?
- What is the impact of our offerings on our customer's customers and how might we measure that?
- What are the best next actions that we can take to demonstrate the value of our offerings and how they align to our customer's business objectives?

Answers to these questions require salespeople to change the focus of the lens they use to view the customer. The lens changes from product, price, and commodity to value, return, and a business relationship that will help the customer achieve key metrics. This may take many out of their comfort zone, but it is not an option if the objective is to put the customer first and to increase the value we bring them. One of our clients shared this example of customer-first behavior.

"When I was a district manager in Canada, we had an AT&T rep for our cell phones who semi-annually reviewed all our statements and proactively recommended changes in our cell phone plans to better manage our costs. While in most cases this meant fewer dollars for AT&T per cell phone, it was in our best interest. This created trust at a deep level."



Listening and understanding

In his book **The Lost Art of Listening**, Michael Nichols says, "Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters. The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person."

To demonstrate this desired characteristic, a client described a recent experience with a salesman at an electronics store.

"The salesman listened carefully to what my requirements were. He suggested a less expensive product than the one I had originally looked at. He processed the transaction, arranged delivery, and called once the product has been delivered to ensure that I was happy with the performance."

This reminds me of a similar anecdote.

A business executive is the mother of two young boys. Her position requires a professional-looking wardrobe. Even though some people might relish the idea of spending a day at the mall, the last thing this working mom wants to do after a week of travel is to go shopping—especially with her boys. Her personal shopper at Mark Shale was empathetic, and convinced her to come to the store on a Saturday. When she arrived at the store, a dressing room had been turned into a pre-school for her boys. They colored, read, and played while their mom shopped worry-free. Everyone was happy! The personal shopper listened, understood, took the mother's concerns seriously, and took appropriate action.

So now that we know what customers want, how can we help our salespeople to emulate these qualities? Certainly, their success depends on our ability to develop and nurture these characteristics within them. Great salespeople want coaching and constructive criticism to reach their full potential.

But the real key to salespeople's success will be found in long-lasting, high-value relationships with customers. Building a sales culture that (1) enables customer-focused outcomes (versus focusing on transactions); (2) positions the organization as a solution provider and problem solver; (3) focuses on the customer's business drivers and aligns to them; (4) channels resources into making the customer successful, and (5) builds an emotional connection to the customer will encourage the qualities that customers admire most and, in turn, help build and develop trusted customer relationships.



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