# Solution Selling Isn't Enough When Promoting Lab Services

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Let's first look at a definition of solution selling (also referred to as consultative selling). Basically, it's asking clients questions about the problems they're having with a product or service, and the sales representative talks about the solution his/her company offers to fix it. This sales approach has been in vogue since the early 70s as evidenced by a book by Mack Hanan called *Consultative Selling*. An interesting point: questions persuade more powerfully than any other form of verbal behavior. The Greek philosopher, Socrates, discovered this about 2400 years ago. He used questions to teach. And he was very skilled at asking a series of easily answered questions that inevitably lead to a logical conclusion.

Before the development of consultative selling, salespeople used a basic technique some refer to as "show up and throw up." This is Era 1 sales. In business-to-business situations, it equates to a futile approach, because it implies babbling about your wonderful product or service without any back-and-forth conversation to uncover specific needs. If you're a sales rep reading this, forget Era 1 sales. You won't get very far. In fact, you could get yourself fired for lack of new business.

**Solution Selling: What the Winners Do**

Under the conventional solution selling method (Era 2 sales), labs instruct (or *should* instruct) their field staff to align a solution with an acknowledged customer need and explain why it's better than the other lab's. A conversation example could sound like this:

<u>REP</u>: I've talked to other offices like yours, and they tell me they have issues with their lab. What are some of yours?
<u>Client</u>: Well…..let's see. Things are going well with ABC Lab right now. We don't really have any barn-burning problems. They have a reliable courier, and the report turnaround is usually the next day into our EMR. (Pause) The only thing I can think of—but it's not critical—is sometimes it takes a week to receive supplies after we've placed the order.

REP: Oh, we can fix that. We deliver supplies within 24-48 hours after receiving the request. We never get any complaints about it. Would you like to try us out?
CLIENT: As I said, it's not a major problem, and we're not going to bring in another lab just because of occasional slow supply turnaround. There's really nothing else significantly problematic going on that would cause us to try another lab. Thanks for stopping by. Check back with me in three or four months to see how things are going.

What's happening in this brief conversation? The client perceives a small issue but doesn't think it's worthy of trying a different lab.

It's not sufficient to uncover problems and immediately offer solutions. What else should he/she have done? It's here where implication questions become essential in the selling process. It can emotionally transition a conversation from probing about facts to understanding the emotional drivers if a problem persists. Let's look at what a master-class representative would have done using an implication technique during a conversation:

REP: I've talked to other similar offices, and they tell me they have issues with their lab. What are some of yours?
Client: Well…. let's see. Things are going well with ABC Lab right now. We don't really have any major problems. They have a reliable courier, and the report turnaround is usually the next day into our EMR. (Pause) The only thing I can think of—but it's not critical—is sometimes it takes a week to receive supplies after we've placed an order.
REP: I'm glad things are going relatively well with your lab. However, I see how it can be frustrating not to have the proper lab supply on hand. How does the doctor feel about this?
CLIENT: He can get frustrated, and he asks me or Joannie at the front desk to call the lab and expedite the order.
REP: Does it mean he has to ask the patient to make a special trip to a patient center?
CLIENT: Yes, that's usually what happens.
REP: Do you think it's embarrassing for the doctor *and* inconvenient for the patient?
CLIENT: Yes it is—now that you mention it. The doctor likes to handle his patients' lab needs here at the office because it helps with patient compliance. In the past, he used to refer them to a service center for blood draws, but many patients forget or procrastinate.
REP: Have your medical assistants run into problems with the lack of any supplies?
CLIENT: One person mentioned it to me. She complained about spending time checking in different rooms. It was an obvious case of frustration, which I can understand.
REP: I think we can both agree this situation creates awkward and aggravating circumstances. Let me explain our supply delivery policy.

What effect has the marketer had on the client's value equation? He/she has taken a seemingly irrelevant issue and mushroomed it to where the client thinks more seriously about it. If not at this point, the customer may consider a trial with this lab should another issue surface. Not only has the salesperson expanded the problem, he/she has also fostered an essential sales attribute—credibility. One other important point: using implication questions are particularly powerful when selling to decision-makers and those who are highly influential.

These principals know success depends on seeing beyond the immediate problem. They understand effects and consequences. Implications *are* their language. So, speak their language. You will influence them more effectively.

**Solution Sales: The Good and Bad**

Given the above scenario, those in lab sales covet finding a client undergoing lab issues. It's the raw material upon which reps build meaningful sales interactions. If an office experiences lab glitches, and a marketing person stops in at a propitious moment, a provider or office manager will undoubtedly welcome a conversation. Unfortunately, that scenario parallels playing the lottery.

It stands to reason when a lab representative speaks to an office manager or provider for the first time, he/she hasn't built trust or rapport. There prevail two primary objectives a salesperson should have when making his/her initial sales call. First, lower the client's defensive shield by building trust/credibility and second, find out the circumstances of the client's lab. Uncovering the incumbent lab's background is straight forward, such as independent or owned office, primary/secondary labs, satisfaction level, decision-making process, specimen collection (in-house vs. patient center), connectivity, likes and dislikes about the lab, etc. However, asking many questions can easily develop into a boring meeting. There is no "get" for the client. It highlights the notable adage for the customer: what's in it for me?

**Insight Selling**

There exists a sales method called Insight sales where marketing winners can lower the defensive shield and start building credibility. Professionals name this Era 3 sales. This new breed of sellers bring *value* to the table—the value of insight. So, instead of describing a me-too lab service, the *salesperson* becomes the value. Naturally, if the proposing lab offers a unique test, profile, methodology or special service, there resides a built-in differentiator. But many labs present similar amenities. It distills down to differentiating service levels, and a marketing person corresponds to a significant part of the lab/client equation.

Several years ago, when my sales rep and I were making a call on a prospective account, the office manager described her lab's field rep this way:

> "Steve is our representative for our lab, and whenever I meet with him, I feel like I learn something. He always brings us relevant information dealing with a variety of topics for the doctor and/or our office. He understands our business. He makes it his job to add something to our relationship. Sure, we can get a simple transactional lab service from anyone, but that's just a commodity. We've never had such a collaborative rep like Steve. We appreciate his visits because we know he won't waste our time with just a simple "howdie" call."

I immediately thought to myself this guy, Steve, stands tall in my book. His laboratory trained him very well, and this vendor understands the value their field staff can offer customers. It goes far beyond asking the age-old, insipid question, "Any lab issues I can help you with?" It was obvious Steve and his employer investigate relevant education material to use as handouts to clients and prospects. Such info can be announcements found on the Internet from various government organizations (CMS, CDC, FDA, USPSTF, etc.), pertinent clinical abstracts, Choosing Wisely.org, medical society's evidence-based guidelines, disease testing algorithms, test explanation sheet, informative patient info, etc. The substance doesn't necessarily have to be related to lab testing (in fact, it enhances one's credibility if it's not self-serving). An important point: this type of value approach should not only be part of a first-time call, but it should continue in follow-up visits. If the customer becomes a client, the education approach needs to persist. It not only builds credibility and rapport, but it keeps the competition at bay. Additionally, if future problems arise, the client may be more forgiving due to the respect and empathy they have for their lab service person. Using insights offers a valid reason to see somebody—especially when calling on a prospect for the first time. The marketer doesn't have to be deeply knowledgeable about the topic. The point is, he/she thinks enough of the client to share relevant, health care information. This axiom comes to mind: *sharing creates the relationship and builds rapport*. Once the rep explains he/she thought the doctor might be interested in the subject, the rep (in the initial call cycle) can transition into probing about the incumbent lab. In the world of give-and-take, it's, "I have something you might find interesting, and, in return, I'd appreciate it if you would answer some questions about your lab."

With almost 50 years in the lab industry, I have come to realize that when you sell, you break rapport. But when you educate, you build it. I have asked many providers what else they would like to see in a lab vendor other than testing and reporting results. Some doctors paused and gave it serious thought. The most often response was, "Help keep me up-dated so I can improve health to my patients." In concert with this point, Dr. Graham McMahon in an editorial piece in the August 2015 issue of the *Journal of American Medical Association* had this to say:

> "Physicians are facing enormous pressure in a rapidly changing healthcare environment and look to the education community to help them stay current with advances in medicine and provide optimal care…….clinicians expect relevant education ….."

There resides yet another advantage for using Insight sales: it provides an opportunity to ensure a return visit. When wrapping up a client conversation, a rep could say, "I'm not going to waste your time in the future with meaningless visits. Unless you call me, the only time you're going to see me is when I can present info that will improve patient care. Will you see me again if I stop back?" I don't think anyone would say no to that question.

**Summary**

Solution selling endures as the old standby most reps use when promoting their lab. However, adding an additional ingredient, implication questions, can expand the rep's effectiveness and build credibility. It brings human emotion into the equation—and creating emotion in sales links to a very strong attribute.

When someone claims there are no lab issues to discuss, and the proposing lab has no unique differences, reps typically hand out a capabilities brochure and review their me-too offerings.

The client listens patiently and thanks the rep for stopping by. The seller typically concludes the conversation by requesting the client to call him/her if their current lab's service deteriorates.

Insight selling remains an important approach when promoting a laboratory's service. One marketing company analyzed what sales winners do differently, and they interviewed 150 corporate buyers about recent purchasing experiences. Sales winners not only focus on the negative (asking about problems), but they also focus on the positive. Sales winners—by a margin of 3 times over second-place finishers—use education to enhance relationships and credibility—and to close sales. The health care industry offers a plethora of free public domain communication on research and/or education, thus providing significant available material for marketers to use. Unfortunately, few salespeople use this tactic, but it can be a major differentiator in developing and refining the sales process and in maintaining current clients. As one astute lab rep once told me: "My clients repay me with loyalty because I teach them something they value—not try to sell them something they already know." These are constructive and practical words to live by if you're in lab sales.

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