

Sell without selling

By Rick Solomon, CPA

Easier than you think

The very thought of selling strikes fear in the heart of many accountants—a fear often based upon mistaken beliefs. If we believe that selling means being pushy, manipulative, or unprofessional, we naturally resist it. While we've all observed this style of selling, there is another option. Selling, when approached from a place of service, can be both professional and rewarding. Professional selling is nothing more than discovering needs, exploring solutions, and moving forward in a mutually agreeable way, without the need for control or manipulation. The truth is, nothing sells better than just being yourself. Learning how to sell this way can have a huge impact on your practice.

What would your practice be like if you could attract as many clients as you wanted? Not just any clients, but clients who appreciate and value what you do for them, and are willing to pay you very well for it? Are you wondering where these clients are? Actually, in any given geographical area there is likely to be an abundance of such clients. If these opportunities surround us, the real question is, how do we engage clients in this type of relationship? Sales communication skills differentiate your firm, communicate your value, and motivate clients to engage.

The deciding factor

When selecting an accountant, a client only has their *perception* of that accountant's value to decide if they will be hired, and what they are worth. Unfortunately, because most accountants



do not understand how to create a high perception of value or how to meaningfully differentiate themselves, many great opportunities are lost. Even in those cases when the client is won, the lower value perception often results in a lower fee than the accountant might have negotiated.

The mistake made by most accountants at sales meetings is telling clients great things about their firm, why they're the best choice, and so on. Since everyone

does this, for the most part it's ineffective. People also discount most claims made by someone who is selling to them. Effectively communicating your value and differentiating your firm requires a different approach, and following a specific process and structure. Before we explain how to accomplish this, since it is value we're selling, let's define value.

Value, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. Basic accounting and tax services are necessary and valuable.

... people don't hire us because they understand what we do, they hire us because they feel we understand them.

Trust is being built as the client realizes that you're focused on them first and not yourself.

However, such services are often perceived as commodities, which limits their perceived value since all firms can provide them. From the client's perspective, your value is significantly greater when they feel you understand their business, their goals, and their problems. When you follow the process and accomplish this, the client perceives that you care and that you're there to help them. This high value perception is a significant differentiator and becomes the basis for higher fees.

Relationship-based sales

There are two keys to success in relationship-based sales. The first is that people don't hire us because they understand what we do, they hire us because they feel we understand them. That understanding is communicated during the discovery process described below. The other key is that it is not our services that people buy so much as the results they perceive those services will provide. Here's how to apply these two keys for a huge impact on your sales success.

The discovery process

At the start of your next meeting with a prospect, before you discuss tax or accounting issues, tell them you would like to learn more about their business. Ask about their goals, as well as some of the issues they might be facing. Asking questions and listening is what we call a *discovery process*. Open-ended questions give them the space to tell you what is most important to them and what they are hoping to accomplish. From there, you will discover what issues they're facing that might be obstacles to their success.

As issues come to the surface, ask questions to discover the implications, business or personal, of what is not working. For example, if a business owner tells you they're having cash flow problems, ask how it's affecting their business. Ask about its impact on them personally. Not only do you want to bring facts to the surface, you also want to bring feelings and frustrations to the surface. Often it's

these unwanted feelings and frustrations that motivate the client to take action. Ask what they've done to address the problem. Remember, this is a discovery process. Discover.

Listen like you've never listened before. This is critical to the success of the discovery process. Be fully attentive to what they're saying, and you'll know what to ask next. Ask questions, listen, and dig deeper. A very important relationship-building process is taking place as you do this. Trust is being built as the client realizes that you're focused on them first and not yourself. This perception results not only from what you say, but also from your behavior. Because of this perception, when you talk about solutions later on, they will be more inclined to listen. This is the most critical component of what it takes to draw clients to you. Do not discuss solutions during discovery, even if asked to do so. Just keep the focus on them for now. You can only experience the power of this approach by doing it; there is no other way.

Discussing solutions

Once you've gained an understanding of their goals and issues, you can begin to discuss possible *solutions*. The key here is to describe how your services will address the problem or achieve the goal. Be sure the client understands and agrees with your proposed solutions before moving forward. If they are not in full agreement, find out why and if possible adjust your solution to better fit their needs, or perhaps clear up a misunderstanding.

Now it's time to discuss the *fee and other details* about getting started. If you have followed this process, the client is focused on the results and benefits they will enjoy and your fee is not likely to be an issue. Quote your fee with confidence and certainty. Ask the client to let you know if they ever feel they are not receiving value for what they are paying. This makes it much easier for them to say yes.

CASE STUDY:

After working through your sales course, my partner Sherry actually had the first opportunity to put it to the test. Before taking the course, Sherry thought of sales as being pushy and an exercise in arm-twisting. These are behaviors that are not natural to her and she was very uncomfortable in selling situations. But she decided to take your advice and "trust the process."

Sherry met with a prospective client a few weeks ago and used the process during the meeting. The prospects were very comfortable with Sherry and confident that she would be a good fit for their company.

She quoted them a price that was close to three times what they had paid last year. But after carefully considering her offer, they decided to hire us and brought us the check! We are now discussing additional work to be done monthly throughout the year.

We are delighted with the results we saw in our first test of the "Sell without selling" sales process. We never would have thought Sherry would actually be looking forward to her next sales meeting!

Henry H. Jones, CPA
Jones and Associates, A.C.
Bluefield, VA 24605-2031

A proactive advisor

When all is said and done, the client is buying a relationship with a proactive advisor who understands their business and is there to help. Selling your services can be easy and rewarding when you follow this process. Best of all, you will experience growth like never before!

Rick Solomon, CPA, is CEO of RAN ONE Americas. For the past 16 years, Rick has helped thousands of accountants add new business to their practices. Rick can be reached at rick.solomon@ranone.com.