

Are Your Salespeople “Practicing” on Your Prospects?

by Sandy Geroux

One of the things I always stress for anyone who wants to create a WOWplace is giving people the proper tools and training to succeed at the highest level in their jobs. This is true for every position throughout the company, but probably the most critical for customer-facing jobs, such as sales and customer service. And while in most positions, OJT means we can do a little live “practicing” without real detriment to the business, when we allow sales and customer service reps to go out there and “practice” on live prospects and customers, it can cause real harm to the employee, the customer, the company’s reputation and its top and bottom lines.

Case in point:

I just got a call from a very nice young man who wanted to sell me a subscription to a well-known international directory. But within 1 minute of beginning the conversation with him, it was painfully obvious that he was new and very unfamiliar with the scripts he was supposed to use with prospects. In fact, by that point, he had already said the word, “um” so many times that I got really distracted from everything else he was trying to say.

Then, when I asked him what I thought were probably some pretty standard questions, he clearly didn’t know the answers, which increased his “um’s” even more as he scrambled around to find some kind of answer to offer.

On the flip side, this young man obviously had potential because although he was unprepared for the “technical” questions and answers that occurred on the call, he did a couple of things VERY RIGHT!

What he did RIGHT:

1. He was personable and carried on an actual conversation, rather than simply launching into his script when I answered the phone. I felt he actually listened to what I had to say and was trying his best to answer my questions, even though he obviously hadn’t been told to expect them.
2. He responded appropriately when I said things that were outside the script, such as “*I’m pretty busy today because I’m getting ready to go out of town.*” Most reps, when confronted with a comment outside the script, pause awkwardly and then return to the script, as if their prospect hadn’t spoken at all.
3. Also, to his immense credit, he paid attention to that comment... and then he remembered it, and ended the call with, “*Have a safe trip!*” WOW! I wished I needed the service he was selling because that RIGHT THERE was a WOW, since so many reps pay so much attention to the script that they forget there is a human on the other end of the line – and they miss the opportunity to make a human connection!

What could have used some work (and where his company really let him down):

1. He was obviously too new at both this company and the position of telephone sales to be successful. Neither his comfort level nor his communication skills were up to the task at this point.
2. He didn't really know what he was selling and was unprepared to answer even the most basic questions about the features of the product
3. He didn't know how the product would benefit his prospect, but didn't want to sound like he didn't have any answers, so he fumbled around and started obviously making stuff up... this is a normal human reaction to the embarrassment of being put in a situation like this, but yikes!

What companies can do to help people succeed in similar situations:

1. **Assess your candidates' communication skills.** Give them a quick test of their "ums" and "ahs" by having them read a test script with someone else to mimic a live telephone situation. Have their phone partner ask them a question (it doesn't even have to be feature-related), and watch how they respond. Are they comfortable? Can they come up with competent answers? All I did was ask the young man what the credit report associated with his directory was, and what it did. I also had to ask what he was selling (because he hadn't made that clear), and he was uncomfortable throughout all of it.
2. **When you give them a script, make it succinct and easily understandable.** Include all standard questions that prospects might ask, so reps can easily answer them. Give them time to study the script, the questions and the answers. The worst thing that can happen is for someone to be unable to answer a simple question. It makes the rep sound incompetent, or worse, untruthful.
3. **Re-test their skills after they've had time to study the scripts.** If they've had some communication challenges that seem to be related to a lack of knowledge rather than a lack of ability, re-testing them after their study period will let you know which it is. If it's a lack of knowledge, the skills should increase (and get better with more practice); if not, it may be an indication that this is not the right candidate for this position!
4. **Add little hints and reminders to the scripts to help them remember to be human... not robotic!** Encourage them to use the script as a guide, not as a word-for-word (never-to-be-varied-from) shackle. Who wants to be spouted at by someone who obviously doesn't care who you are (you're just another number to them), what you need (they never discuss it, so how could they know?), and is just powering through a page to get to a "yes" or "no"? No one! Give them the guide and let them use some judgment... and if you find that they can't do that, then what does that tell you about their suitability for the job?
5. **Don't put people on the phones right away.** Unless they're already experienced and comfortable on the phone, give them a day or two (or a little more if they show much promise and seem to need a little more practice and time to get comfortable on the phone). It doesn't do any good to throw someone on the phone when they are obviously uncomfortable



Never forget that the relationship that can be established – or not – on a simple phone call can make all the difference in the world regarding whether that call ends in success or disappointment.

So, is it wise to throw 100 people on the phones, immediately and with little or no training, only to lose 90 of them within 2 weeks because they get destroyed by their failure to have any positive experiences or make any sales? No. The turnover costs alone could kill you. And how many prospects and sales are they losing due to their discomfort alone? Think about it: if a company can't even get a sales rep to sound competent, how "safe" will the prospect feel in giving the company their important business?

It is much better to put 50 people on the phone who are well-trained and prepared to be as successful as possible, right from the start. They will establish more relationships, feel better about themselves, and make some money for themselves and the company... a win-win-win situation!

Side note/brief case study: Lest you be tempted to think there are an unlimited number of candidates available to cycle through your positions and be tossed aside when they promptly fail – or that there are an almost unlimited number of prospects they can call to buy a product or service (which, if it turns out to be the wrong one, hurts future sales and referrals)... consider the example of someone I know who is phenomenal at getting people to do things; he can talk almost anyone into almost anything. The problem is that he doesn't know his own industry, doesn't train his people, doesn't ensure that he's recruiting the right people, doesn't serve his customers well (because he doesn't know his business)... I could go on and on. He also got caught up in the mistaken mindset that there were so many people available that he'd never run out of new prospects. But after a few years, it caught up to him; no one bought from him a second time, no one referred him to others, and anyone who had ever taken a position with him had left and refused to refer other candidates or even purchase his services. He has now gone through 4 different careers (that I know of) and has developed an unfortunate reputation within his community.

Having been in sales myself, my heart goes out to all salespeople. It's hard enough to get the courage to call others and offer your services. However, my heart goes out even more to the ones who are sent into the lion's den unprepared.

The best thing a company that is taking all the time and effort to hire and train people to work in a difficult position such as sales, can do is to implement the best practices above to help them and their employees succeed, so they're not "practicing" their way right out of a position... or the company right out of business.

Workplace: Where employees have to go because they make a paycheck
WOWplace: Where people love to go because they make a difference

3760 Manteo Circle Orlando, FL 32837 P (407) 856.1188 E sandy@thewowplace.com W TheWowPlace.com

