

Managing the 'Winds of Change'

By Tom Bird

- **What are your feelings about change?**
- **What internal resistors are switched on for you when it comes to change?**
- **How do you know that change will work?**

We are faced with these questions all the time. And more importantly, so are our prospects and clients...whenever they make a decision to buy our product/service.

When you make a sale it often means that something is going to change for your client – especially with more complex sales. Your product/service might change the way some facet of their business operates, or how they 'solve' a particular problem. But the current economy means that clients are often more resistant to change. So what can you do to maximise your success and increase the chances of a long-term relationship with your client?

In sales we are often encouraged to focus on the end result. We have a sales figure to achieve and, understandably, our energy goes into navigating the sales process to get from prospect to client to decision as efficiently as possible. Once we have made the sale, our mind quickly turns to the next opportunity, either with the same or another client.

So where can we make that difference that will lead to more success - is it really through reading another article on how to build rapport quickly? I believe that one way is to focus on the impact on our client of what we are selling. Through doing this we can increase the chances of success for us, our client and our future mutual business. For anyone who wants to make repeat sales or who would benefit from powerful, positive client references, this is worth considering:

Viewing Selling as a Change Process...

It comes down to change: how people respond to it and how we can manage it to ensure long-term success. Studies show that most people are less than comfortable with change; we generally prefer the comfort blanket of the tried and tested. But a sale often means something being done differently - a change. Even if there are big benefits to the change, we can easily underestimate the negative impact of it on a) getting the sale in the first place and b) making a big enough success of it so that the client comes back for more or tells others about it in glowing terms.

Anyway, enough about the client...let's talk about you! What has needed to be present for you to personally engage with change? Have you been guilty of starting to engage with it and then going back to your old ways? Although maybe a distant memory now, New Year's resolutions are often a good example. Statistically, 95% of all New Year's resolutions have been broken by the 15th of January. Why? In answer, let's look at an example.

Is there enough pressure to change?

So, the excess of Christmas gave way to a little bit of guilt. Letting the belt out another hole, a little extra weight around the cheeks - this eventually compounds to a definite sense that you need to do something! Now you have satisfied the first criteria for successful, sustainable change: you have recognised a definite pressure to change. Without this you are unlikely to take action – it simply won't have the priority in your life.

For our clients, this pressure could be a need for competitive advantage, or some 'pain' because of the way things are done currently. Whatever it is, you need to ensure that the client is fully engaged with the pressure to change – and by client I mean everyone in the organisation who will be touched by it. Often projects fail because the other people involved don't appreciate this pressure to change, so they subconsciously think 'So what?' and go about their other priorities. To engage all the

stakeholders you can start by raising this question with your main contact and asking them how best to achieve it. So having a pressure to change gets us engaged into first gear. We are ready to move forward – but we haven't yet taken the handbrake off.

A clear and Shared Vision

We need to get a very clear picture of what we want to achieve. I might feel the pressure to get fit, lose some weight and generally be happier with myself but what, specifically, does that look like? I need to get a clear vision of what I want: how much I want to weigh, how I will quantify what 'fit' is for me. Without a clear vision the pressure to change might get me started but I am more likely to lack the follow-up.

At one level this is goal setting but think about it from the clients' perspective now. If I am to make a lasting decision and stand the greatest chance of implementing whatever you are selling to me, then my colleagues and I need to be clear on how, specifically, the future will be with your product/service, in addition to having a clear pressure to implement something. You may need to help your client see and communicate this vision effectively. Asking questions is better at achieving this than simply telling them – it raises awareness. Another tip for success here: studies show that visualising the ideal future on its own will not help you achieve it. When asking questions about how good the future will be, ask also about the barriers to success and how they will be overcome. Whilst this 'positive/negative' approach might seem counter-intuitive it helps bring a reality into focus that actually increases the chance of success.

Have I got the ability?

So I now have a compelling picture of what I will be like when I have achieved my ideal weight and fitness level. What now? Have I got the skills to deliver against the vision? I may need to consider my routine so that I am able to add a couple of

sessions down the gym. I may need to consult a nutritionalist or read a couple of articles to help understand what I should be doing with my diet. If I don't have the ability I will simply get frustrated.

In your sales work, to what extent do you help your prospect fully understand what they need to do to get the best from your product/service? What do they need to do differently and what does this mean to them? Often it is the 'how' for them personally as individuals that needs to be addressed: we can help them understand that they need an action plan, they need to communicate the change internally, etc.

It is our job to engage the prospect in these conversations so that they are comfortable that they have the ability to make a real success of what we are selling them. If we don't, and a quick positive start gives way to frustration because other internal departments or individuals can't or won't adapt to ensure success, then the client will get frustrated and it will reflect badly on us.

Help them take the first steps...

When I first take up the challenge to get fit, it helps to have someone there to ensure that I am doing it all correctly. They give me small adjustments and the confidence to continue. Without them, I may be doing things wrong – building muscles instead of burning fat for example. Without assistance in those first steps I might suffer from an uncoordinated approach.

When you have sold something to a new client, how much attention do you pay to these first steps towards success? We might too quickly move on to the next opportunity, inadvertently leaving the client to struggle with implementing the product/service. Again, it is not only the client that will suffer - it will reflect poorly on us.

So what?

What I have outlined here is nothing new: change management specialists have been preaching the same thing for a few years. My challenge to you is to honestly reflect on the extent to which you truly help your clients fully engage with, and manage, the change that your product/service brings about. For a sales professional, the core skills of rapport, questioning, listening and process are a given – you need them to play at the table. But what sets apart a truly brilliant sales person is their ability to really add value to their clients. Often, too much attention is paid to adding value at the front end of the sales process when you are looking to ‘hook’ the prospect. Really adding value is about delivering on the promise that your product/service makes and that probably requires more than you simply selling it.

Help the client stack the cards in favour of a successful implementation of your product/service and you do them a great service: as a client and as an individual. It’s one they are likely to remember and tell others about.