

Hotel Selling's 'S' Factors: Six Serious Selling Sins & Sound (Rx) Solutions

by Ed Iannarella

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1. SKIPPING RAPPORT: Would we BBQ chicken without 1st greasing the grill? No way! Too sticky a situation. Same applies to all other aspects of selling without 1st establishing rapport. For most selling situations, whether we like it or not, whether it's fair or unfair, a good rapport is the single most important part of the sales process. We naively think of closing as wearing that label, but study after study shows that human connection reigns supreme in selling. Did you know that of all customers who left for a competitor, 80% of those said they were satisfied with their previous purchase (source: Harvard Business Review)? So, satisfaction does not translate into loyalty. But bonding emotionally is at the heart of rapport and loyalty. That same Harvard source reports that 97% of loyal customers are loyal for life! Although there certainly are other reasons people buy from us especially in a difficult economy (e.g., discounts we offer, their addiction to our brand or location, they literally must have our product/service due to a command from above or a demand from their client base, etc.), people typically "buy" us before they buy what we're selling. Buyers like to buy from people they like, feel comfortable with, and/or trust. This is the essence of rapport.

Let's recognize that although rapport building is generally taught as the 1st step in a sales call, it must be an ongoing process throughout the entirety of any sales interaction. Yes it's often difficult to do with some prospects who are just different from us or who won't allow us to bond for any number of reasons. Sometimes, lack of time inhibits our ability as well. Researching your prospects (via Linked In, social media, organizations' websites, addictomatic.com, and even listening to vocal clues about prospects from their voice mail messages) can often offer opportunities that may give you an edge to connecting with them. As other studies tell us, words (i.e. verbal communication) are the weakest way to connect with others. This tells us we have to master the other 2 "V's" of communication: Visual (body language) and vocal (voice related) clues that comprise 93% of our effectiveness as salespeople (check out FAQ's on nlp.com).

2. SUBSTANDARD "ASKING" SKILLS: As doctors (and great salespeople) all know, "prescription" (solutions) without proper diagnosis (qualifying) is malpractice (poor selling).

To get what we want from someone (like a prospect with roomnights), keep these principles in mind: We have to ask specifically by stating exactly what we want, do it quickly, and ask at the right time (in the selling cycle and when the prospect is ready, willing, and able). We must also learn to ask for the same thing in different ways on occasion, and always ask someone who can actually help us (decision makers/influencers)! Quick tip: Never ask, "Are you the decision maker?" If they are, they may think you're challenging their authority, and if they're not, they may feel humiliated. Much better is to ask, "Who else, besides you, is involved in the decision-making process?"

3. SALES PRESENTATION "ERRORS OF OMISSION": We're all sometimes guilty of "errors of commission," things we did wrong such as mentioning too many features, addressing the wrong needs, and taking too long to address the correct needs. However, far more frequent are "errors of omission," things we neglected to say or do. Here are some of the most common (and dangerous) errors of omission: not addressing the prospect's most important needs first (or worse yet, ever!), not directly comparing ourselves to other prospect options during our presentation, missing prospect "signals," passing on the chance to validate our worth, and not

asking for confirmation from our prospect before closing.

Diffuse stress associated with a prospect's most important needs by tackling them before other, less critical needs. Don't shy away from direct comparisons. Instead, "Dare to compare!" We owe it to our employers and fellow workers who depend on our revenue-generating skills. Remember to point out your product (amenities/services) and your personal points of differentiation (what makes you different/better as handlers of their account). Be sure to include your "USA's": Unique Selling Advantages© especially if the competition offers similar things. Notice prospect signals by closely observing them through active listening to their tone as well as watching their body language. Validate during your presentation by offering 3rd party testimonials (what others said about you/your hotel: provide visual proof later via e-mailing attached testimonials) as well as by mentioning any awards you/your property/brand has recently won. Verify prospect receptiveness on occasion during the presentation (How's that sound so far?) and do so at the end of this "meeting needs" step before quoting rates and attempting to close.

4. SELF-DESTRUCTIVE LAST IMPRESSION: We've all heard about the critical 7 seconds of an initial prospect interaction, but equally important is the way we exit (a phone call, an outside appointment, a site tour, a group presentation, etc.), as it's pretty easy to undo an otherwise good call with a weak parting handshake, a lack of eye contact, or a far-too-casual "See you 'guys' later."

Practice a sincere "Thank you for your time" and a reasonably firm handshake, or if you dare to emulate me, "mirror" their handshake to establish "physical commonality." Sound too "New Age" for you? Call me for a 1 minute explanation or purchase/download "Reading People" by Jo-Ellan Dimitrius and delve into the area salespeople MUST master to be at the top of their profession: Neuro-Linguistics (NLP).

5. SLIGHTING (OR TOTALLY) IGNORING MENTORS: There are 2 basic ways to learn anything (including how to be the best salesperson we can be): 1) experiential which is learning from our mistakes or 2) through being mentored. The 1st (AKA trial and error) can teach us things we'll never forget, but all too often that's due to the high price we pay in excessive time, money, and hardship required. We are taking the test 1st, and learning the lesson second. Being mentored saves us time and usually reduces the pain of making unnecessary mistakes. Here, we learn the lesson 1st (from others who have excelled at the task and are willing to help us succeed), and then take the test second. Sadly, so many of us still choose to do things the hard way, only to find that there are plenty of painful experiences for us compliments of prospects, clients, co-workers, and bosses. Ouch! Why be a grouch? Be a "mentee!"

If you're lucky enough to have access to live mentors, don't think twice. Just say yes! These can be supervisors at your hotel, elsewhere in your management company, or at the brand level (if applicable) who can make themselves accessible to you on a consistent basis. Ask 100 questions, take lots of notes, try their suggestions on for size ASAP, and report back for a critique to discuss what worked and what didn't. Ask your mentor if you can do anything for them in return. But what if no actual (or willing) mentors are available? All is not lost especially with recent enhancements in technology and communication. Simply look for virtual or surrogate mentors to fill the niche. Available surrogate mentoring sources include CD's from subject matter experts (surf the American Hotel and Lodging's Educational Institute), live seminars or classes, webinars, and downloads (audible.com is great!). If you're part of a chain, tap into your brand's

many e-resources. Remember that many programs are archived in case you were unable to "attend." And speaking for other live mentors, we can't compete with the 24/7 availability factor offered you by CD's, archived sessions, and downloads. Find your mentors and start your learning engines right now. Learning isn't a spectator sport!

6. SHOWING LITTLE OR NO RESPECT: Even if we have a great product or service to sell, or if we have excellent sales skills, we may finish last in getting a prospect's commitment if we're initially perceived as selfish or uncaring before or during a sales call. We may not even get to do a call if we seem disrespectful.

Begin with the end in mind. When calling someone to qualify, to present, or to simply introduce yourself, try this question (or a close variant) immediately after you identify yourself: "Is this a good time or a bad time to speak with you about your ... (upcoming conference/business travel, hotel needs, etc.)?" Some prospects will say it's OK, but due to suspicions about salespeople (compliments of our selling ancestors back in the last century), most will tell you it's not a great time and even give you a reason or 2. This is potentially a good thing for you as you reply with, "No problem. I respect your time and that's why I asked. When would be a better time for us to speak?" Though not always, prospects frequently will then offer an alternate time frame (and despite not verbalizing it, they will be pleasantly surprised at the respect level you demonstrated and that's about as good a 1st impression as you can expect!). And, by the way, you went from a cold call to an appointment call (ending with your "OK great. I'll try you Thursday after 1:00 and thanks for your time, sir."), and your prospect set the appointment! Remember that you "never get a second chance to make a first impression."

About the author:

Ed is President of Stonehenge Consulting Group and an affiliate of the Alliance Group. Stonehenge provides hotel sales performance and top line revenue consulting. Ed is a frequent speaker/trainer at national brand and management company conferences, HSMAI chapters, and U.S. Navy-operated hotels. People from over 30 countries have attended his U.S.-based selling workshops, and he has delivered hotel sales training in 8 countries.