

Back to the Basics: Selling Professional Accounting Services

By Allan Koltin

Q: You got started very early in your career teaching CPAs and consultants how to sell professional services. What do you remember most about your first sales training session?

A: It's the summer of 1983; I'm 25 years old and a third-year staff accountant. I've just been assigned to teach the AICPA's highly acclaimed "Selling Professional Accounting Services" seminar. It's the first of 12 seminars I'll be teaching this summer, and I'm scared. I haven't spoken in front of such a big group before, and I'm questioning if I'm really an expert on the topic. I walk into the Grand Ballroom, and the room is packed with predominantly forty- and fifty-year-old male accountants, mostly partners, and they are there to hear me teach them how to sell more accounting, tax, and consulting services. I quickly tell myself to take a deep breath and act like I actually know what I'm talking about!

Q: What prior selling experience did you actually have before public accounting?

A: Not much! I learned at an early age that whenever two people get together, one is always doing the selling. In grade school, I learned to sell a "head fake" as a basketball player; in high school, I learned to sell the fact that I could cut the neighbors' lawns, in either rain or sunshine (dependability); in college, I learned how to shine people's shoes and convince them that looking the part was half the battle.

Q: Most young staff accountants are not thinking about selling. What possessed you to get so active at an early age and experience level?

A: I would like to say that there was a grand strategy, but there wasn't. I was in charge of our CPA firm's bank audit group, which performed pre-loan and collateral monitoring audits for banks and commercial lenders. I quickly realized that when

we met with a lender and talked about the services, they typically signed up. Unfortunately, the leader of our group was in high demand as a financial advisor, so I realized that if I was to keep the practice going, I would have to go out and "knock on doors" all by myself.

Q: Were you concerned that you did not have enough experience and would not be able to answer the prospects' questions?

A: I had many sleepless nights worrying about that! I always brought someone out with me who knew more than me and could answer the very technical questions. However, it soon occurred to me that the challenge wasn't having "the answer to the question," but rather it was having the willingness to go "at risk" and actually set up the meetings. I remember Woody Allen once saying, "You can't win the lottery without a ticket," and boy was he right.

Q: What was your strategy on a typical sales call to get the prospect to buy your services?

A: The first thing I learned was that not everyone is a good candidate for your services, so you have to make a lot of sales calls on suspects to have a meaningful funnel of prospects. This would allow you to focus on really good prospects—those who were willing to pay your fee and those who would value your services. Secondly, I learned that oftentimes people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. It occurred to me that if I could gain their friendship and build a relationship, all else would follow. I also applied the same "basics" I had learned from my prior selling experience, which was to look people directly in the eye, ask good questions, be an even better listener, and take good notes.

Q: Can you drill down on these essentials and give us a little more depth?

A: Sure. Looking people in the eye is the ultimate sign of respect. It says that I value what you have to say and I am listening. The best book I ever read on asking great questions was *HOW TO SWIM WITH THE SHARKS WITHOUT BEING EATEN ALIVE* by Harvey MacKay. He had what he referred to as the “MacKay 66,” and it was every question you could ever ask if you truly wanted to build trust and a relationship with the prospect or referral source. When it came to listening, I always told myself, “Learn to listen so you can listen to learn.” It is amazing how much you can uncover if you truly listen to other people. Lastly, I learned that taking notes was a great way to record what I was hearing, but it was also an additional sign of respect because it showed the prospect that I truly cared and valued what he or she had to say.

Q: What, if any, nonverbal cues or secrets did you use to your advantage?

A: The Big Three are all about the prospect’s body language, “away games,” and the value of information. No accounting major ever took a course in body language, but it should be required. Did you ever watch a movie without sound, but were still able to tell exactly what was going on in a one-on-one communication? The cues are there, and it gives you a decision tree of which questions to ask, but also whether your approach is working or not. “Away games,” as I call them, are nothing more than meeting the prospect at his or her office or location. More times than not, the prospect will give you the company tour, which is full of valuable information that will help you in winning the work. You will learn about the culture (*e.g.*, do people smile or not, do people move quickly [have a pulse] or just seem to be cruising [going through the motions], and what the prospect is most proud of, especially when you look at the pictures and plaques hanging in his or her office [don’t miss participating in this golden opportunity]). Lastly, is the value of information. Have a perceived vision and strategy of what you want to accomplish in your meeting and how you plan to go about it. If there are more people than just you representing your team, each person should know exactly what his or her role is and what is expected of each of them. Remember, you need to dig deep in your preparation. I have often said that the value

of information is not in what you know, but what you know that the other person doesn’t know you know! This is your chance to impress the prospect, so be prepared and do your homework.

Q: It has been said that deep down, most accountants do not like to sell because they feel unprofessional, like an insurance agent or used-car salesperson, and they also do not like having to deal with rejection. What advice would you have for them?

A: I like to ask CPAs if they are really making a difference in their clients’ eyes and, if so, can they give me a couple of examples. After they do this, I ask them if they are as good, better, or not as good as other CPAs and competitors. Virtually every time the answer is that they are the best (surprise, surprise!). It is at this point that I tell them that if they are as good as they say they are, then the most unprofessional thing they can do is not to offer up their expertise in accounting, tax, and consulting services and help other potential clients to be even more successful. Clients rarely think of us “asking for the business” as unprofessional. Only we accountants are fixated on that!

Finally, on the topic of rejection, I can’t help but laugh at this one. When I was a young accountant (complete with pocket protector, pencils, and a calculator) and asked a girl to go on a date, if she looked at me with a silly smile and said, “No way loser”—now that’s rejection! Asking a prospect to change firms or hire you is nothing more than a “no” to using your firm and, interestingly, it is not a “no” forever. It is simply a “no” for today. I was given some valuable advice early in my accounting career—it will take nine no’s to get to one yes. I think most of us stop trying after a couple of no’s, give up, and just assume we are not good at selling. The top three percent of business getters in the accounting profession learned the secret many years ago—that each no or rejection is actually a positive because it is getting us that much closer to a yes and actually winning a client.

In closing, we as accountants and consultants have accumulated a lot of baggage, fear, and negativity when it comes to selling professional services. It is about time that we go back to the basics, begin believing in ourselves, and truly understand the incredible value that we can deliver to our clients and potential clients along the way. Remember, you aren’t worth just your billing rate, you are worth a lot more—now go out and show it!

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