

I spent the early part of my consulting practice advising you on using classic selling techniques to help overcome objections raised by the client-to-be in the buy-sell cycle. Over time it became clear that rather than trying to overcome these objections, you should be raising them for the client-to-be to overcome. I wrote about this idea of racing to object in the August, 2006 issue of the Win Without Pitching Newsletter, titled *Creating Objections*. This month I go deeper into this subject by exploring the five most common objections that you should arm yourself with, for use early in the buying cycle as a means of quickly shifting the power from buyer to seller.

## The Five Objections

Anytime you sense there might not be a perfect fit between the offering or ability of your firm and the needs and means of the client-to-be, you want to raise the objection before the client-to-be does. As I've written in this space previously, the dynamics of objections are such that if the client-to-be raises them, it is incumbent on you to deal with them, but the opposite is equally true. You will demonstrate an expert's selectivity if you raise the concern first. If the objection is significant to the point that the client-to-be would be better served by another firm then you are not going to disguise this over a long sales cycle, so it is in the interest of both parties to deal with this early, before extensive resources are wasted. If the objection is less onerous, or if the client-to-be sees a route around it, he will help you deal with the objection, provided you give him the opportunity.

While it is in your interest to address any objection that you sense, there are five main objections that you should be prepared to drop on the client-to-be at any time. Let's explore them, the language around them and some situations when you might employ them.

### **Objection #1: Money**

Money, or price, being the most common objection, is the first one you should be prepared to raise. Some clients-to-be simply will not be able to afford you. Some will come to you with engagements too small worth considering. And others simply need to know that there is a minimum price of entry to get onto your client roster. Be sure to raise this objection as soon as you sense it. Contrary to what some believe, it is never too early to talk money in a business setting.

#### The Language

An annual minimum level of engagement is a good place to broach the subject of money. (I addressed the math that allows you to arrive at your firm's minimum in the January, 2008 issue, *Business Development Planning*.) Raise the issue of your minimum as soon as need or opportunity is identified. In its simplest form the objection sounds like, 'Before we go too far I should tell you that we have a minimum level of engagement of \$xxx in fees.'

You can follow up with, 'Does the engagement we are discussing meet this minimum?' Or, just silence. Silence is a powerful conversational tool. Like nature, the average person abhors a vacuum and will attempt to fill it. If you can resist filling the pregnant pause, the client-to-be will fill it for you, often by overcoming the objection or by beginning to close the gap between positions that the objection represents.

You might hear, 'Yes, we're prepared to spend that much.' Or conversely, the client-to-be might respond with, 'Oh – we can only afford a fraction of that amount.' In either case the next steps are obvious; one is a sign to proceed and the other a sign to send the client-to-be on his way.

Between these extremes lies interesting middle ground where the client-to-be might consider adding more work to the engagement to meet your minimum. You will also uncover situations where the budget does not meet your stated minimum but might be healthy enough to merit consideration, given your capacity and ability to command a good profit margin on the engagement. In this last example be sure to keep the objection in place while you resume conducting your due diligence. If you do remove the objection, make sure it is the last thing you do before you close.

## **Objection #2: Project Work**

In last month's issue I discussed the idea that you should not be pursuing project work. When it does come to you, begin by raising the objection that you are not in the project business, then see what happens from there. By project, I mean short-term tactical engagements of any kind. Substitute brochure, website, or whatever tactical piece being discussed for the word project.

### The Language

If a client-to-be calls to discuss a brochure assignment then you would respond accordingly: 'We're not in the brochure business.'

Then follow-up your objection with your reassurance statement – a description of the business you are in. In our brochure example you might proceed with, 'We're in the business of developing entire visual branding platforms.' Then further explain, 'We often do brochures and other sales collateral as part of that larger engagement, but if you are just looking for a brochure, ours is probably not the firm for you.'

Now the power begins to shift as you raise the initial objection, stopping the client-to-be at the gate. Continue by probing for a higher value, higher margin opportunity that will determine if you let the client-to-be through the gate or turn them back.

'Before I say no let me ask, is this brochure part of a larger initiative?'

If you remember from the January, 2008 issue (*Business Development Planning*) in which I discussed your business development goals for the year, you do not build a lucrative practice by adding many small projects, but by carefully managing a small stable of high quality clients who engage you at a more strategic level. If the opportunity at hand is nothing more than a small project that would position you as the small project firm, then demonstrate an expert's selectivity by sending the client-to-be packing, thereby preserving your positioning as an expert firm and preserving any future business opportunity.

### **Objection #3: Request for Proposal**

The formal document called a Request for Proposal (RFP) is a sure sign of a bureaucratic selection process designed to bring the illusion of objectivity and transparency to the process. Be prepared at all times to whack this one down as soon as you get a hint of it. The language is straight-forward.

#### The Language

'We don't typically respond to RFPs.'

Alternatives include a stronger, 'It's our policy that we do not respond to RFPs,' or the more fluid and playful, 'We're not in the proposal-writing business.'

With every objection you raise, you reserve the right to remove it. You are simply reversing the typical dynamics in the buy-sell cycle, asking the client-to-be if he will address the objections for you. His willingness to bend is an indication of the extent to which he recognizes and values your expertise, and an indication of the control he will give you in the buy-sell cycle. From time to time it may make sense to remove these objections (again, only right before you close) but you keep them in place as long as possible as a means of getting and leveraging power.

Again, in this example you can follow-up your objection with silence, or you can proceed right to, 'Before I say no, let me ask you a few questions.' If the client-to-be is willing to dismiss you at the first sign of the objection, then that is an indication that he sees many alternatives to hiring your firm. You therefore you have no power in the buy-sell cycle, which means no power once engaged. With few exceptions, this is not an opportunity worth pursuing.

### **Objection #4: Free Thinking**

Free thinking, whether in the form of a formal speculative creative pitch or just uncompensated strategic guidance offered in the buy-sell cycle, is a danger zone that you want to avoid. Any client worth having will respect the fact that you do not give your highest value product away for free. As soon as you get a sniff of a request to part with free ideas or advice, draw the line by raising the objection in strongest possible terms.

#### The Language

'It's our policy that we do not begin to part with our thinking before we are engaged.'

As I've written previously, prefacing your objection with the words 'It's our policy,' goes a long way to melting resistance. Other means of saying this include, 'We don't begin to solve our clients' problems before we are engaged.'

There is a line that separates proving your ability to solve the client-to-be's problem from actually beginning to solve it. When the client-to-be invites you to step over the line, simply point out the fact that the line is there. 'I understand why you would ask us to come to you with some ideas – you're simply looking for assurances that ours is the right firm for the job. But we would have to send you a contract and an invoice before we began working on the engagement. Keep your money for now, and let's explore other ways we might determine if this is a good fit.'

In my own practice every once in a while I will cross the line and offer insight into the client-to-be's situation – usually a form of diagnosing challenges rather than prescribing solutions, but before I do I will point out: A) the line exists, B) I'm going to step over it, breaking one of my own rules, and then C) watch me quickly retreat back over the line once I've made my point (and demonstrated my expertise.) It's a playful approach that demonstrates a willingness on the part of the seller to work with the buyer while generating an understanding of exactly where the line is. Once you describe the line, the client-to-be will usually not ask you to cross it again.

## **Objection #5: Fit**

The objection of poor fit is a broad one that can cover many situations. You would use it after diligently qualifying the client-to-be and determining that they cannot afford you. You would use it when the client-to-be's needs are clearly outside of your area of expertise. You would also raise the fit objection with an unsophisticated client-to-be who doesn't seem to recognize and value your expertise.

Determining a fit is almost always your objective in each and every business development interaction, and this objective should usually be stated aloud: 'Our objective is to see if there's a suitable enough fit between your need and our area of expertise to merit taking a next step together.' Positioning yourself as an expert requires the demonstration of selectivity that a meaningful exploration of fit implies. If you suspect there is not a fit, say so and see how the client-to-be responds.

### The Language

'I don't think there's a fit here,' is the straight-forward approach. Also try, 'I think you might be better served by another firm.' Feel free to suggest some options, pointing out where your firm differs from those you are suggesting.

In situations where a highly-coveted client-to-be begins discussing an enviable, lucrative engagement that is outside of your area of expertise – something you've never done before – then you should raise the objection. 'While you're talking about something that we would be excited to work on, you need to know that we've never undertaken this exact type of engagement before.' If this is going to be an issue, then have it be an issue early and not late. Objections are your friends when you raise them early, and they are your enemies when the client-to-be raises them late. You build credibility by raising the objection and allowing the client-to-be to tell you how meaningful it is. If he sees your expertise as closely translating to the assignment at hand he may reply with, 'Is there any way you could bring in some outside expertise to help you?' Or, 'I'm not worried. Based on your related experience I think you could do this.'

Your response might be, 'Absolutely - we're not worried about our ability to do this, but I wanted to be upfront with you about our experience.' You are better off raising the objection for the client-to-be to address then you are pretending it does not exist and trying to close with the elephant in the room that nobody is discussing.

## **Summing Up**

Expert firms drive the engagement. Order-taker firms let the client drive. If you want to drive like an expert once engaged then you need to begin to take control in the buy-sell cycle, before you are engaged. Taking control begins with raising objections to the common concerns outlined above. Look for the signs that the concern exists then raise the objection as soon as possible.

From there, sit back and enjoy the awkward silence while you watch to see if the client-to-be overcomes the objection, or if he smacks into it and runs away.

To badly mangle an old adage, if you want the engagement bad enough, whack it hard. If it comes back, it's yours (and you will be properly positioned as the expert); if it doesn't, it was never meant to be.