

The Ultimate Guide *to* Building Relationships

Key Strategies to Build Strong Relationships with Buyers



We all have heard the old sales adage: “People buy from people they like.” And a significant body of behavioral science research supports this statement. According to famed psychologist Dr. Robert Cialdini, liking is one of the six principles of influence outlined in his seminal book, [“Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion.”](#)

When you have a strong relationship with a buyer, you tend to have more influence with that buyer. That means the buyer respects your experience and advice, they're more likely to value your contribution to the decision process, and there is a greater chance of such buyer becoming a “long-term” customer.

Follow these four strategies to build a strong relationship with your buyer, and you'll go a long way towards having an easier time closing more business.

#1 DEVELOP RAPPORT

One of the quickest and most effective methods for building sales relationships is building rapport. Rapport enables smooth communication because it allows people to be at ease. Sometimes rapport happens naturally, you might instantly hit it off with someone. This is often how we start friendships. Other times, you have to be more deliberate in building rapport with someone.

Four simple techniques to help you develop rapport with your buyers are: mirroring and matching, empathy, sharing common experiences, and active listening.

MIRRORING AND MATCHING

We often don't know why we like or dislike people. Mirroring and matching are based on the powerful concept that, at a subconscious level, people like people who are like themselves. Neurologists call this phenomenon an interpersonal body and neural synchronization. Conversely, when people are not similar, it is harder to have relationships with those people.

Two mirror and matching techniques involve body language and voice. For example, if the buyer sits down and crosses his or her legs, you do the same. This sends a positive subconscious message that you're paying attention to all his or her communication, including non-verbal cues. It shows that you consider them important and signals that you're on his or her side. The same rationale also applies to mirror and matching the pace and volume of someone's speech. But be sure to avoid unconsciously mimicking an accent.

Remember that these mirroring and matching techniques work at the subconscious level. Buyers won't do business with you because you're mirroring and matching their body language during a meeting. However, they may be more comfortable with you and thus more open to learning more about your solution.

EMPATHY

Now let's consider how empathy helps develop rapport.

You can be empathetic by allowing the buyer the opportunity to talk about themselves and their problems. You should then listen for and echo the areas of most concern to them and validate their area interests or concerns. Most importantly, avoid talking about your solution until the buyer has had the opportunity to discuss his or her problems.

SHARING COMMON EXPERIENCES

Imagine that you're talking to a stranger and you suddenly realize that you know someone in common, went to the same school, or like the same sports team.

How do your feelings about that person change? Or imagine that you have been assigned to work on a complicated project with a co-worker. You don't know this person well, but after working together on this project, you feel much closer.

Why? There is a body of research that supports the idea that people feel a greater connection to another person if they share some experience with that person. So, another powerful rapport building technique is sharing common experiences with the buyer. That's why when we first meet someone, we usually talk about the weather, sports, or current events.

As a sales professional, the time to start thinking about sharing common experiences with your buyers is during your pre-call research. Research people you're meeting using Google, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Read their posts, see if they have been quoted anywhere and pay attention to previous jobs. Focus on areas in which you and the buyer have something in common such as career history, education, geography (where the buyer lives or works), sport, etc.

Another powerful technique is to create shared experiences by working collaboratively with the buyer to define problems and then develop solutions. If the buyer feels that you're working together to solve a problem, they develop a stronger relationship with you. The buyer will also take greater ownership of the solution—critical to helping you close more business.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Are you a good listener? Most of us think that we are good listeners, but did you know that research suggests that we only remember 25% to 50% of what we hear? That means that we can miss up to 75% of what the buyer is saying!

One problem is that many of us confuse passive and active listening. Passive listening is the physical process of receiving sound waves being transmitted to the brain (i.e., hearing). Active listening means that you're suspending your thoughts to focus fully on understanding what you hear.

Active listening is a fundamental sales communication skill that's important for all aspects of selling. Active listening makes the buyer feel important, understood, appreciated, and respected. Active listening also helps you prevent misunderstandings and increase your knowledge of what is important.

Unfortunately, many sales professionals are poor active listeners. Sometimes they feel stress or anxiety and feel that they need to do all the talking. And today, of course, we can get easily distracted by checking our cell phones.

Salespeople are also susceptible to thinking about what to say next instead of what the other person is saying. This is a frequent problem if you are focusing on a script or a list of questions you want to ask instead of

engaging in a natural conversation. We can think 4 - 5 times faster than we can speak, so our minds are often racing ahead.

Here is how you can become a better active listener:

- **Listen with the intention of understanding.** Make a conscious decision to understand what the other person is saying. Understanding the speaker's meaning goes beyond hearing the words. Focus on what the speaker is trying to communicate. Take great care to pay attention to the words, the buyer, and his or her tone of voice and body language. This means you must concentrate on all the verbal and non-verbal information the speaker shares with you.
- **Focus 100% on listening.** Make direct eye contact and face the customer. That means no interrupting! Interrupting tells the speaker that you're not listening to them. Interruptions can also be caused by environmental and mental distractions. Eliminating environmental distractions during sales calls means turning off the ringer on your cell phone and ignoring texts.
- **Ask questions and listen to the answers.** Asking questions shows the speaker that you're listening to him or her. You should also focus your eyes on the buyer. One great way to show you're listening is to take notes. By giving the speaker these visual cues, you're confirming that he or she has your undivided attention.

Asking questions also helps you to confirm your understanding. This will help you eliminate any ambiguity. It'll also show the buyer that you're focusing on what the buyer is saying.

- **Communicate your understanding by paraphrasing.** Repeat what the customer said in your words. For example, "If I understand this correctly, you're concerned about..." It's not enough to listen to a buyer. The buyer must also feel that you understood what he or she said. That demonstrates that you care.

#2 BUILD TRUST

Trust is basic to building a relationship. When the buyer trusts you, the buyer believes your promises, gives you access to power, takes your advice, and gives you referrals. A buyer won't buy from you unless he or she trusts you.

Think about a time when you were the buyer, and you thought the seller was not trustworthy. Why did you think that? Perhaps the seller made a promise and then didn't follow through, or the seller told you what you need before getting to know you. Whatever the reason, for most of us, building trust takes time, but can be broken in an instant.

Research suggests the following four behaviors are key to building trust in sales.

RELIABILITY

We all have experienced reliable and unreliable people. We value the reliable and avoid the unreliable. To become a more reliable person, keep your promises, don't overpromise, and avoid surprises by managing expectations. This also means letting people know as soon as possible if you won't be able to make a deadline.

HONESTY

Nobody likes to tell a lie. But sometimes it's easy to fall into the trap of fudging, omitting, or misrepresenting information. For example, making up an answer so that you won't look bad in front of a customer. Or, not pointing out a math mistake in a proposal that cuts against the customer.

Besides being morally wrong, any advantage a rep gains from lying will be short-lived. If you don't know the answer to a customer's question, admit it, and then offer to find out. Acting in an honest, ethical manner, such as turning down business where your solution isn't a good fit for the buyer, builds trust with the buyer by communicating to the buyer that you're "on their side of the table."

RESPONSIVENESS

The late, great Sam Walton, the founder and CEO of Walmart, had a simple rule about responsiveness: the "Sundown rule." The Sundown Rule is responding to all requests, whether by customers, co-workers, or suppliers, on the same day they're received. In today's world of ubiquitous communication, it has never been easier to answer, reply, or acknowledge a request. When you follow the Sundown Rule, you signal to your customers that you value their concerns through your responsiveness.

OBJECTIVITY

Objectivity may be the hardest trust-building behavior for sales reps to demonstrate. After all, your job as a sales rep is to be biased in favor of your solution. That's what makes being objective such a powerful trust builder: the customer notices when you consider the other side of an issue.

In a sales situation, objectivity doesn't mean you have to sell for the competition. But you can acknowledge the merits of a competitor's solution when appropriate, just be sure also to point out your strengths and differentiators.

Which of these four factors do you think you need to work on the most to increase your buyer's trust?

#3 DEMONSTRATE EXPERTISE

Another technique you can use to build your relationship with a buyer is by demonstrating your expertise—i.e., the depth of understanding you bring to the sales conversation. By demonstrating expertise, you increase the buyer's confidence that you'll be able to help solve their problem. The idea here is that you want the buyer to think, "Wow! This salesperson gets it."

You can do this by discussing your unique knowledge about your products or highlight examples of how other buyers have solved similar problems with your solution. The best way for you to consistently demonstrate your expertise to buyers is to prepare for each sales call.

PRE-CALL RESEARCH

Effective call preparation starts with doing pre-call research. Depending on the type and complexity of the sale, the amount of pre-call research you should do can vary greatly. For a typical B2B sales call, though, it's

reasonable for a sales professional to spend at least 30 minutes researching and preparing. Start by understanding what's going on at the account level.

Here is a list of questions to kick-start your account specific research:

- What initiatives do they have?
- Recent news or events?
- What are the major industry trends?
- Key competitors?
- What is the sales opportunity?
- How can my solution create value?

OPENING THE CALL

Now that you have done some research, you're ready to plan your call opener. The opening is not about selling, but rather leveraging your pre-call research or general industry knowledge to demonstrate your expertise. This will establish your credibility in the eyes of the buyer.

You can do this by talking about the buyer's situation or concerns they may be having. Depending on what your research uncovers, you may reference specific buyer issues or trends in the buyer's industry. Your goal is to signal to the buyer that you have an appreciation of the challenges faced by firms like the Buyer's, and, by implication, some level of expertise.

Another way of signaling your expertise to the buyer is by asking a thought-provoking question, such as "I noticed that many of your customers are big, national retailers. How is your company dealing with the rapid changes in the retailing industry?" Again, you'll need to use your pre-call research to develop an impactful question.

Your goal is to establish your expertise with the buyer quickly. This will help you earn the right to spend more time with the buyer and move further through the sales conversation. As the sales conversation moves forward, you can further demonstrate your expertise by discussing case studies, explaining best practices especially those supported by independent research, and so on.

When the buyer senses that you're an expert, they have confidence in you. As you do your pre-call research, you should ask yourself how you can demonstrate expertise in your next sales call?

#4 EXPAND YOUR INFLUENCE IN THE ORGANIZATION

Here is a common sales challenge: you have built a great relationship with a buyer only to find out that the person you've been selling to isn't the "real" decision-maker. Perhaps you can't get access to the ultimate decision maker, or you've been working on an account, but the real decision process is still unknown.

Sound familiar? We've all been in these situations before. These problems arise when you are selling into large, complex accounts with multiple decision-makers and influencers – i.e., multi-level selling. A multi-level selling situation tends to arise when, for one or more reasons, a decision-maker is unwilling or unable to

decide without the input of others. For example, the decision-maker needs to get buy-in or approvals from others in the organization, or the decision-maker wants to share the risk of making the decision by delegating some power to others in the organization.

The challenge in any of these situations is that you may never know how the decision is being made or who is making it. So, in a multi-level selling situation, the best way of increasing your odds of success is to sell to all the decision-makers and influencers, including proactively building relationships at all levels throughout the account.

You can start this account-wide relationship building process by first mapping the account by analyzing the key players. That means understanding their level of influence, reporting relationships, and a realistic assessment of the strength of your relationships with key influencers and decision makers within the account. Doing this exercise will help you uncover gaps in your knowledge about the account as well as highlighting potential relationship issues you may have. Weak relationships with key decision makers may mean they won't support your proposal or could open the door for your competitors.

Building great business relationships is a foundational selling skill. When you have a great relationship with your buyer all aspects of selling become easier. Successful sales professionals don't take their relationships with buyers for granted. So, think of an upcoming sales call and ask yourself, "What are the best opportunities I have to enhance my relationship?" Or, if you're working on a multi-level selling opportunity, identify key decision-makers or influencers where you have weak relationships and consider how you'll strengthen these.

The lessons in this guide are part of Sales Readiness Group's (SRG) Comprehensive Selling Skills program. To learn how your sales professionals can improve sales performance, please contact SRG at 1-800-490-0715



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