

property management

Put Prospects at the Center of the Sales Process

If you really want to serve your customers and move them from prospects to tenants, you must put them, not your company, first. By Donald Davidoff

A little while ago, I wrote a guest column advocating that we really need to have a conversation about sales in the multifamily industry. Judging from the number of comments and e-mails responding to the column, the argument that we've been seriously underinvesting in this function and not really considering how buyers have changed the way they shop seems to have struck a nerve. So I thought it only fair to put a little "meat on the bones" and talk more specifically about what I see.



ALL ABOUT WE

Over the past few years, I've looked at more than a dozen sales models and/or sales training programs in the industry. They each have their own unique differences, but, in essence, they all fit into a very similar model.

Despite being framed as caring about the prospect/customer, the reality is that these programs are all very process oriented—in a very “me and my processes” kind of way.

They're all about what we, the salespeople, want ... what we need. They focus on how we handle the first contact, how we tour, how we ask for the business, and how we move residents in. It puts us and our processes front and center, with the prospects themselves merely actors going through our play. Not exactly prospect centered, eh?

Why does this matter? Why should we care about putting the prospects' needs at the center instead of our own need to sell? As Stephen R. Covey notes in Habit 5 of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, if we seek first to understand and only then to be understood, we are much more likely to be successful. And as Daniel H. Pink notes in To Sell Is Human, “attunement” is one of the new keys to success in selling to an informed prospect base. This is the ability to bring our actions and outlook into harmony with others, and we can't do that if our approach is all about us.

If we want an approach that truly and authentically puts prospects in the center, we need to think seriously about the processes they go through as they make their decisions, not how they go through our processes. We need to help our leasing associates align with them, not force them to align with us.

ALIGNING WITH THE PROSPECT'S JOURNEY

Research has shown that there are four clear stages prospects go through as they make their decisions:

- First, they Imagine all of the possibilities. They dream about what they might get, and they begin their search.
- Next, they Refine their approach. They learn about the realities of what's available and what the costs are. They begin to create some criteria by which they'll trade off the pros and cons of various options.
- At this point, they're ready to Examine what's out there. They may have already started looking online, and they now look more deeply into their options. This is also when they'll transition from the virtual to the real world, driving around neighborhoods and visiting communities.
- Lastly, they Commit. Typically, they first narrow down their choices to a list of roughly three finalists and ultimately decide on a final choice.

So our job is now to align our processes with the prospect's journey; and we can do that with a simple four-segment model of our own. Doing so puts the prospect at the center of everything instead of putting our processes in the center. It allows (I would even say requires) us to help our prospects make good decisions rather than “sell” them on anything. And since we tend to hire people who are more service than sales oriented, it lets salespeople serve the prospect rather than feel like they have to be someone they're not in order to “sell” the prospect.



In today's Zero Moment of Truth (or ZMOT) world, prospects are often 65% or more of the way to their decision before they ever talk to a salesperson. Our job in Discovery, then, is often to catch up to them as quickly as possible.

The most important segment is Inquiry. This is where we learn about our prospect's needs and wants—and, more important, the difference between the two.

Advocacy is our chance to shine. This is when we can connect our products and services to the prospect's needs and wants.

Implementation starts with asking for the lease and is also the segment where we deal with any decision-making reluctance.

A key principle in this approach is that leasing associates should never enter a new segment until they've completely met the exit criteria for the previous segment. It may sound counterintuitive, but "if you want to shorten the sales cycle, then slow down the sale." Where this most often plays out is in slowing down the process of entering Advocacy in order to better connect with the prospect through Inquiry.

As an example, most associates fall into an easy trap best called "ask ... answer ... respond." Let's say we're presented with a couple and we ask the open-ended question, "So what's most important in what you're looking for in a new home?" They answer, "Well, we have a 6-year-old about to enter first grade, so being in a really good school district is important."

We know we have an excellent elementary school, and we just can't help ourselves in responding about how good the schools here are, and the pattern repeats itself with subsequent questions.

What's wrong with that? We're identifying needs, and we're presenting benefits, not just features. And we're personalizing them—all the things classic sales training tells us to do.

The problem with this approach is that we keep flipping back and forth between Inquiry and Advocacy. We jump

to Advocacy before we've met the exit criteria of Inquiry, violating a key principle of what I call the InSite Sales Model.

We think we're building credibility by giving good answers, but the truth is you can't build credibility giving good answers in Inquiry, because (a) let's be honest, your competitors also generally give (or at least sound like they give) good answers; and (b) our prospects are naturally very skeptical at this stage. So our answers don't really feel authentic, even if they are ... they're too self-serving.

The reality, as counterintuitive as it may sound, is that we gain credibility by asking really good questions. It shows sincere interest in THEIR situation, THEIR needs, THEIR wants and desires. It gets them talking and puts points in an emotional bank account from which we can withdraw later.

Thus, the better approach is to "ask ... listen; ask ... listen; ask ... listen" and then, when we've asked all of our questions and know everything we need to know, be ready to advocate ... only then do we move from Inquiry into Advocacy.

There's a lot more to building out an entire sales system based on this approach, but hopefully this gives some very practical insight into what needs to be done differently if we really want to put prospects at the center of the sales process. **MFE**

Donald M. Davidoff is the founder of D² Demand Solutions, a technology consulting firm specializing in the multifamily housing industry.