



How to shorten the time to first Sale

- Jim Lewis, Founder & President, Princeton Sales Partners, LLC

Whether you are a newly hired sales executive or a manager who has just spent month trying to find just the right sales candidate – the next challenge is identical:

How fast can you become productive and begin closing sales?

If your company is like most, the journey begins with a very healthy dose of Product Training. Perhaps it is tradition or it might be that the company feels that in order to sell you must be able to **tell** prospects all about your offering.

You will see in a moment why this may be the **Worst** way to start your education.

Imagine a newly minted sales executive making a first call on a first prospect. Loaded with recent knowledge about the company value proposition, it's leading position in the marketplace, and lots and lots of information about the products and services – all this information bursting at the seams – the sales person proceeds to open the proverbial fire hose and drown the prospect with information about you.

You think I'm kidding and this doesn't happen at your company? It's an inevitable aspect of our human nature that in order to gain credibility with people we all have a natural tendency to tell people what we know. This is even more pronounced in recent sales hires because they still have that new challenge glow around them. And by the way, didn't they just make a life changing decision to join your company. That has to be very exciting! And, they want to tell the world about it.

A number of years ago in one of our workshops there was a student who was a very senior PhD chemist. As we made introductions around the room he mentioned that his specialty was glue. Filled with intrigue we asked him about glue. As soon as we asked the question we knew we had made a mistake. His eyes twinkled a bit and then he launched off into a treatise about glue – information that we never knew and

probably would never, ever care about. Something about molecular structures and viscosity and isotopes, and... Well, you get the idea.

When he took a breath to continue, we quickly jumped in to ask him a critical question. “Can you tell us about gluing”. After a few seconds with a blank stare his eyes again lit up and he began to tell us about the application of glue and the different challenges that companies have adhering different materials such as glass, metal and plastic. Now everyone one in the room got it. What our chemist and everyone else realized is that customer problems and goals are solved via the **Application** of your offering – not by the offering itself. This seemingly simple transposition from Noun to Verb orientation was what helped everyone visualize how the problem would be solved (solution) rather than the “what” of the offering.

(Note; take a look at your company’s collateral, data sheets, etc. Do they describe “What” or “Why and How”? Are they Noun-centric or Verb-centric?)

The second dimension of the problem has to do with “Asking” versus “Telling”. Take a look at the chart below. What I have diagramed is the progression that a typical sales person follows from day one through their first 2 years.

Everyone starts at the same point when they join a new company. [START] During the first 6-9 months there is a learning curve to overcome. During this time a lot of emphasis is placed on learning about the company and its offerings. It is the orientation of this training that slows down the progress of most sales people. Why? Because the emphasis is on teaching the sales person all about the company – not the customers. Where is training typically conducted? Training is held at headquarters, in the factory, research center or in the production sites.

So finally after weeks or even months of education the newly minted sales executive is launched into the field to call on customers. At that point, how well equipped is that sales person to diagnosis customer issues and to synthesize “How” and “Why” particular approaches to “Gluing” will work? ZERO!

In the chart I have represented the training cycle in the shaded/hashed red area. The “Eureka” moment happens not when the sales person has accumulated enough information about your products & services. It happens when they can finally Ask Intelligent Questions about the prospects’ environment and understands how and why certain **Applications** of your offerings can be utilized. This is the area of **Competence**. This is the point of Noun to Verb switch that our chemist made. Ask about Gluing – NOT the glue.

They key to shortening the time it takes a sales executive to be competent and begin closing sales is to accelerate their ability to diagnose the customer environment. That requires knowing the right questions to ask – in the customer context. Here are the sales process elements needed to accomplish this:

1. Spend less time on product training and more time with customers
2. Develop a set of diagnostic prompters based on the customer environment
3. Follow a pre-defined diagnostic sales process
4. Utilize a structured mentor approach to make joint customer calls with new sales people.

The most effective learning will happen when training is conducted in the customer context and is live.

For more information about how to shorten the time to first close, contact us at Princeton Sales Partners LLC. 609-333-9785.

