

# Master Salesmanship™

The Guide to Superior Selling Techniques

**“Most salespeople do not know how to gather accurate and meaningful information from prospects to learn from their losses.”**



## Improving Post-Decision Debriefs With Prospects

By Richard M. Schroder

There’s nothing quite like the feeling of closing a sale. Whether it’s a large sale or a small one, salespeople celebrate first and then try to understand why they won so they can replicate their success. However, there is much more to be learned from losing. But most salespeople do not know how to gather accurate and meaningful information from prospects to learn from their losses.

Salespeople often ask prospects why they lost a deal, but they typically don’t get a straight answer. In fact, according to proprietary sales research data, prospects tell salespeople the complete truth about why they lost less than half the time. In fact, research has shown that salespeople learn the complete and accurate truth about 40 percent of the time. In other words, in 60 percent of new business situations, salespeople do not have a complete and accurate understanding of why they lost.

There are many reasons why prospects are not candid during debriefs, including:

- Prospects do not want to hurt the salesperson’s feelings
- Prospects fear confrontation and/or criticism from sales reps
- Prospects often have issues with the sales rep or sales process that can impact their candor
- The real reasons for the loss may make the prospect look bad.

There are also many ways in which salespeople inhibit the feedback process:

- Salespeople are often caught off guard by a bad call and may be unprepared for conducting a debrief
- Salespeople usually do not know the right post-sale questions to ask (and how to ask them)
- The reasons for loss are difficult to obtain if the sales rep is not selling directly to the decision-maker.

All of these issues combined prevent salespeople from fully understanding their prospects. The good news is that this situation can be alleviated by better incorporating a formal, post-decision debrief process into your sales cycle.

Here are seven ways for you to improve your post-sales etiquette and get more candid feedback from prospects post-decision:

**1. Give early notification that you will conduct a debrief (regardless of the outcome of the sale).** In order to make the prospect comfortable and illicit honest and, more importantly, actionable feedback, you should let the prospect know early in the sales process that, regardless of the outcome, you will be conducting a post-decision debrief call at the end of the process.

**2. Schedule a separate debrief call.** Do not debrief on the same call as when you hear about a loss. When you hear about a loss, prospects have one goal in mind: to get you off the phone as quickly as possible. Therefore, getting good feedback is always challenging. Instead, schedule a separate debrief call after you have accepted the loss. Be sure to let the prospect know that you will not try to change his or her decision.

**3. Use a debrief guide.** Using a questionnaire maximizes feedback and keeps the conversation focused. Research has shown that salespeople who use a debrief questionnaire have a 15 percent higher close rate than those who do not. Sample debrief guides can be downloaded at [www.theanovagroup.com/debriefguide.htm](http://www.theanovagroup.com/debriefguide.htm).

**4. Take responsibility.** Make sure that you really want candid feedback; prospects will be able to tell if you don’t. Don’t get defensive or angry, don’t debate with the prospect and don’t try to resell the prospect.

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*...and much more!*

*“Management’s efforts to increase productivity are effective, but the bottom line lies with you — the individual salesperson.”*

## Knowing Customers’ Wants Puts You Ahead

In order to get more business, you have to discover what your customers want before you can satisfy their needs. Finding out what that something is takes detective work. It involves asking your customers what they desire most and then acting on those responses. If it is something they do not expect from you, so much the better.

Here are several ideas that can help you discover what your clients are seeking:

**1. Increase time spent with your customer.** This sounds simple, but is often overlooked. Opportunities abound to get together. Most people eat lunch; perhaps you could grab a quick meal together. Or maybe the time is right for an account review. Whatever the excuse, getting in front of your customer helps you learn about his or her problems. You need to ask questions, learn about his or her needs and then respond.

**2. Send ideas that help your customer’s reputation.** Look for news items or special features that pertain to your customer’s company and/or industry. You may even learn something about a customer’s company that even he or she didn’t know. This is all part of building a rela-

tionship with the customer that says, “I’m looking out for you.”

**3. Send out a quarterly “best customer” newsletter.** The catch is to provide something that a customer looks forward to receiving. People appreciate learning about new ideas and unique approaches. Your goal should be to provide descriptions and enhancements that can help your customer do his or her job better. For example, you could offer discounts as part of a customer appreciation month in your newsletter. Just make sure every article has a value-added slant.

**4. Target only growth customers.** Do you send direct mail to your existing customers? That’s like going into a grocery store without a list. You end up paying for more than you need. Take the time to look through your customer list and target only customers who present a potential for growth. Database software programs simplify this task. By setting up an ideal customer profile, you can match up those in your database who are most likely to yield results.

Hopefully, these ideas will provide you with a start in getting more from your customers. Once you establish your customers’ needs, you are that much closer to satisfying them. Acting on that knowledge can provide the extra value you need to stay a step ahead of your competitors. ■



## Improve Your Sales Productivity

By Homer Smith

Sales management has become more and more interested in “sales productivity” to combat the pressures of cost increases and competition. For example, there is emphasis on telephone selling and placing routine customer orders by company computers. These measures release salespeople for more productive face-to-face sales calls.

### How Can You Be More Productive?

Management’s efforts to increase productivity are effective, but the bottom line lies with you — the individual salesperson. How can you be more productive with every call you make? First, you have to make sure that you are successful more often. And second, you should be planning your time to allow the largest number of sales calls possible.

Successful sales results start with quality prospects. Are you finding the right people for your products and/or services? Are your prospects “prospective” buy-

ers or are they just names on a list? Be sure to qualify prospects before trying to sell to them.

### Make Your Presentation Dazzle

Closing a sale is, of course, very dependent on a top-notch presentation and firm, convincing close. Take chances, be different and get the prospect interested in buying by offering him or her an exciting and honest presentation — one that is packed with benefits and relevant information and that stimulates the senses. Then, move in — friendly, but decisive — for the close. See if you don’t have more productive, “yes-filled” days!

Good time management is vital for higher productivity and it calls for more sales within the same time frame. Time for more presentations is made by cutting out non-essential activities. For example, you can replace routine face-to-face calls with other contact methods, like a telephone call; organize your territory to cut out back-tracking; or make more appointments to cut out unnecessary waiting.

More person-to-person time during your working day and more “yes, I’ll take it” answers will send your hard-won productivity and profits soaring. ■

***“The best way to improve your sales effectiveness is to learn why you win and lose, so that you can reinforce your successful behaviors and rectify the selling deficiencies that are holding you back.”***

## **Improving Post-Decision Debriefs ... (continued from page 1)**

**5. Take notes.** Tell the prospect that you’ll be taking notes. This will make him or her feel important and compelled to talk more. Your average debrief should last about 10 to 15 minutes.

**6. Probe for specifics.** Ask “How do you mean?” or “Say more.” Other great ways of getting candid feedback include asking, “How can I improve on this?” “How can I make it better?” or “Can I get your advice?”

**7. Consider having someone else conduct your debriefs.** Once you have a debrief guide, you could have someone else within your company (such as an inside wholesaler or cold caller) conduct the debrief. You could also find someone outside of your company to do this work for you.

### **Benefits Of Post-Decision Debriefs**

By incorporating these tips and techniques, you will improve your post-decision debrief process and reap many important benefits. The most notable advantages are that it will allow you to:

- Develop your own organic self-improvement training program by applying prospect feedback to your entire sales process.
- Improve the effectiveness of your sales presentations.
- Determine key drivers for closing new business.
- Identify prospect perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of your company’s products and/or services.
- Uncover unmet prospect/customer needs.
- Benchmark and track your sales effectiveness against the competition and identify ways in which competitors are positioning themselves against you.

### **Improve Your Sales Effectiveness**

Every year, salespeople and companies across America spend significant time and money on sales training. However, most salespeople do not align their sales training with actual data and feedback from their prospects, and this is a huge lost opportunity for salespeople to improve their selling efforts. This situation begs the question: If salespeople don’t understand why they lose, how are they expected to improve their performance and ultimately win more business?

The best way to improve your sales effectiveness is to learn why you win and lose, so that you can reinforce your successful behaviors and rectify the selling deficiencies that are holding you back. It is only after you obtain accurate and candid feedback on your sales performance that you can institute meaningful change.

By implementing a process for conducting better debrief calls, you will unlock a vast source of prospect information that will allow for continuous sales improvement and ultimately increase your close rate for years to come.

*Richard Schroder is president of Anova Consulting Group, a leading market research, sales training and consulting firm. He is a sought-after speaker and a recognized thought leader in win/loss analysis and sales training. He is the author of a new book, From a Good Sales Call to a Great Sales Call (McGraw-Hill, October 2010). For more information, visit [www.theanovagroup.com](http://www.theanovagroup.com). ■*

## **Questions And Answers**

**Q:** What can you do with the buck-passing prospect? I’m talking about the prospect who has to approve the order, but who refuses to make the final decision.

**A:** First, you have to decide if the company has a real need for your product or service, or if the buck-passer is just trying to get rid of salespeople this way.

### **Flatter The Prospect**

You can try flattery, telling the buck-passer that, regardless of the other people down the line, you are most concerned with his or her approval and acceptance of your proposition.

### **Tell It Like It Is**

If this doesn’t work, talk frankly. Tell the prospect you realize that he or she is passing the buck to get rid of you, but explain that you feel like your proposition is of such benefit to the firm that it’s worth his or her personal consideration.

### **Talk To Someone Else**

If you feel that the person to whom the buck was passed would have any influence on the decision-maker, pin him or her down.

For example, you could say, “I’d be glad to go over this proposition with Ms. Stevens, but let me ask you this. If she feels that it is a good one, would you be willing to approve our putting the system in?”

By taking a tough stand, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. ■

*“An efficient territory coverage plan should have the salesperson calling more frequently on and spending more time with the more profitable accounts.”*

## SELLING SLANTS

### How To Plan For Efficient Territory Coverage

There is a belief among salespeople that the larger the territory, the larger the commission checks. Experience and studies have shown that this is not necessarily the case. The trend is actually toward smaller territories that are covered more intensely. Certainly, the territory must be large enough, but it should be measured by the clock, not the map.

It has been proven that smaller territories have yielded business far beyond expectations. Trying to cover too much territory, taking too much travel time, covering accounts too skimpily and counting numbers of accounts instead of dollar volume of sales have cost many salespeople dearly.

Efficient territory coverage is influenced by many factors, some not within the control of the salesperson. For example, the size and shape of the territory are frequently assigned or inherited from a previous salesperson. However, we will assume, in this discussion, that your territory has a reasonable design and sales potential.

#### Account Potential — A Key To Profitable Coverage

Obviously, not all accounts have the same sales potential. An efficient territory coverage plan should have the salesperson calling more frequently on and spending more time with the more profitable accounts.

Account classification is basic to efficient territory coverage and must be the starting point of any successful plan. Previous issues of *Master Salesmanship*™ have discussed what is often called the A-B-C account classification system.

The salesperson who uses the A-B-C account classification system ranks all of his or her customers according to annual sales volume, with the highest-volume customers at the top of the list. The customers are then divided into three or more groups.

A rule of thumb for starters is to classify the top 15 percent of customers as A customers; the next 20

percent as B customers; and the bottom 65 percent as C customers.

By determining the total number of possible calls the salesperson can make in a year, he or she will come up with a call frequency plan for dividing these calls profitably among the A-B-C-rated customers. This entails calling more often on the A customers, less frequently on the B customers and least often on the C customers.

With a reasonable call frequency plan established, the salesperson can analyze the territory to break it up into logical sections for daily, weekly and monthly coverage.

#### Call Cycle Planning

A call cycle is a round of calls in which all A accounts are called on at least once and a portion of B and C accounts are covered in one swing through the territory or through a portion of the territory.

For example, a call cycle in a territory might cover two weeks and provide this coverage: On the first trip or cycle, the salesperson covers all of the A accounts, half of the B accounts and one-third the C accounts.

Depending on the details of the full territory coverage plan, the salesperson might contact all or some of the missed customers by telephone.

This plan is sometimes referred to as the “skip-stop” method because the salesperson skips some customers and stops at others according to a pre-arranged system.

#### The Cloverleaf Routing Plan

By studying a map of the territory and pinpointing the A, B and C customers, the salesperson is able to come up with a territory routing plan that keeps travel time to a minimum and reduces backtracking. This will more than likely come about through trial and error.

One popular routing plan for the typical territory is called the Cloverleaf because of its shape when drawn over the map of the territory. There can be any number of “leaves,” of course, each starting from a central point, such as the salesperson’s home, hotel or main office. The salesperson covers one leaf of the clover on one cycle and ends back at the starting point. ■



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**Master Salesmanship**

DONNA S. DeCARLO — *Managing Editor*  
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CHRISTOPHER FONTES — *Publisher*