



Thriving in a Hostile Environment

Beachgrass Consulting

Developing and maintaining trust

Without trust, business is almost impossible or at least very expensive and cumbersome. To be effective, B2B salespeople need to develop and maintain a certain level of trust with their customers.

Developing trust in sales is not exactly the same as developing trust with friends. But it certainly has a number of common traits. Once a salesperson has developed trust with his/her counter-parts at customers, this trust becomes an asset, and as any asset, it requires maintenance.

Trust is the result of an individual decision-making process. It is granted by an individual to another person, group or society. This decision-making process is influenced by the truster's own personal characteristics and experience, the trustee's behavior and the environment.

As the person who seeks to develop trust in another person, you have to be perceived by this person as credible, accountable and reliable. This will foster a sense of trust in the other party's mind. Of course, much will depend on the environment. If you act in an environment that does not look safe, you will need to demonstrate much more credibility, accountability and reliability than if you operate within an environment that defuses a feeling of security and safety. Think of a surgeon you meet for the first time in a hospital. If she looks at you and tells you need to be operated with no delay, you will not doubt her diagnostic though you may ask why so urgently. Now think of the same surgeon but now you meet her for the first time in a pub and she tells you the same thing. Will you trust her so easily?

As said, the decision-making process involves the truster's own psychological and historical characteristics. Has she had bad trust experiences in the past? How sensitive is he to risk-taking? What does she perceive her self-image? To resolve much of these internal questions, the truster will test the trustee on his/her credibility, accountability and reliability. So the trustee must demonstrate a lot of patience and accept to be probed. Except some psychopathologic cases, all human beings will give some level of trust to someone who consistently demonstrates he is credible, accountable and reliable.

But what do credibility, accountability and reliability mean?

Credibility of a sales person stems in the first place from her company's reputation and image. The sales person enters the relationship with his company's reputation before him. "If the company has hired this person, she must have some expertise", thinks the to-be truster. Of course, this is by far not enough and the sales person has to build his or her own track record. To build a track record that is conducive of trust building is to under-promise and to over-deliver.

Accountability is simply to acknowledge your or your company's mistakes or mishandlings (never blame anyone within your company and even less the truster's company). Acknowledging misdeeds and mistakes is the first step; the next step is to act swiftly to fix them.

Reliability is to do what you say you will do and do it right. However saying what you will do is almost a promise. Be always sure you can fulfill it. Napoleon once said that the best way to keep your word is to never give it. So the wise sales person will never promise anything she or he is not totally sure she or he can deliver. She should say what she thinks, not what she will do, except when it is completely under her control.

To wreck this trust, the surest way is betrayal, i.e. using what comes out of this trust in a way that hurts the truster. So once someone has bestowed her trust, you have to use what she says to you with utmost care if you want to keep her trust.

Why is it so important to develop trust in B2B relationships? Because, as demonstrated by a number of studies (e.g., Prof. N. Kumar), **trust helps to generate more sales, to foster loyalty and is a reservoir on which to draw in cases of disagreements.**

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