business issues

LEARNING CURVE

Knowing how prospects learn is a critical part of the sales process.

BY ANNE SCARLETT

AS SERVICE PROVIDERS, there's a plethora of things to think about when selling. We strive to create rapport, build trust, offer value, overcome objections and barriers, create a client-for-life relationship and more.

In addition, we try to adjust our approach to best connect with each prospect's buying persona. And woven within those personas we may encounter layers of different decision-making styles, different leadership approaches and different critical thinking methods.

Yikes! It's a lot to consider.

And yet when preparing a prospective client strategy, there is another worthy element that often gets lost: learning preferences.

Why do learning preferences matter when it comes to selling your product or service? The answer is simple. At various touch points during the selling process, we need to educate the prospect. Depending upon the complexity of their need (and/or of your service), you dial your education component up and down accordingly. But do you carefully consider how each prospect likes to receive new information? Perhaps your firm has built a diverse set of tools in which to educate the prospect on your services: project portfolio, case studies, white papers, published articles, in-person demonstrations, online media, video, brochures, analytical reports—and the list goes on.

Or perhaps you simply use the limited materials that are convenient and available to you without adjusting to best meet the learning preferences of the prospect.

Different Learning Modes

In the higher education realm, we sometimes use a simple instrument called VARK to measure the way a student likes to receive information. VARK represents four modes of learning: visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinesthetic. This tool (one of many that exists) serves as a guide on how students like to have information presented in order to achieve the best comprehension, retention and even "Aha!" moments.

It's no surprise that my students at Columbia College, a private arts school in Chicago, like to receive information quite differently relative to my students at DePaul University, where 50% of my classroom majors in computer science, with the balance majoring in advertising and marketing. As the professor, I adjust my delivery of content to accommodate their learning preferences.

By the time we enter the professional world, most of us have expanded to become multi-modal learners. We have learned to readily take in, absorb and synthesize information from more than one mode. For example, I am considered "multi-model," where I regularly tap into all four modes, though visual has a slight lead over the others.

Can your smart, resourceful clients understand what you're trying to teach them regardless of the medium? Sure they can. But does the kinesthetic learner respond well to your one-inch thick analytical report? Probably not. Does the auditory learner jump at the chance to witness and participate in a sample brainstorming session? Doubtful. Does the reading/writing learner fully embrace the content that is organized into charts, diagrams and other graphical representation of content? Unlikely. I think you get the point.

Taking Action

It's too bad that we can't ask our prospects to take indicator tests to measure their learning preferences (and for that matter, their buying preferences too!). Instead, we have to keenly observe their reactions to our efforts—what resonates, what sparks enthusiasm and what they clearly grasp and retain.

Here are four tips for adjusting to your prospect's learning preferences:

1. Ask them directly, or at least test the waters. If you've already developed a rapport and have advanced in your sales cycle, then there's no reason not to directly ask the client specifically how they like to receive information. Alternatively, you could ask if they are interested in something specific, then gauge their response. Example: Would you be interested in taking a tour of one of our recent building projects to experi-

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ence how users are interfacing with the environment? (Kinesthetic.) Or: Our design team developed a series of podcasts discussing the office workplace of the future. Would you like to download them for listening on your commute? (Auditory.)

2. Arm yourself with multi-modal formats. Has your firm created an inventory of your educational tools? This includes anything that illustrates (and proves) the value that you give your clients. Try categorizing them using the VARK definition (at **www.vark-learn.com**) or a similar learning indicator. Are there underrepresented (or absent) modes? Do you have an abundance of densely written materials but are lean on "experiential" ways that your prospect can better grasp what you offer? How can your tools be further developed to reach different learning modes?

3. Adapt to *them*; don't just stick within *your* comfort zone. It's tempting to teach people the same way that you would want to be taught, just like it's tempting to use a sales approach on others that you'd most respond to. Avoid this temptation.

4. Be aware. If nothing else, maintain a keen awareness of how your client responds to the information that you give them. While connecting with their buying persona may be your top priority, remember that you might be able to increase your odds (and get to the "yes") if you also appeal to their learning preferences.

Follow these tips and you'll have a better understanding of how different clients learn—and a better understanding of how you can effectively "teach" them. MSC