

# Going a Different Direction

**Why canned sales presentations cost you the sale.**

**By Marc Trezza**





In many conversations with agency salespeople, I am often surprised that even the most sophisticated sales professionals get caught in the presentation trap. They spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for a razzle-dazzle presentation and often lose sight of the issues at hand.

Everything agencies do before a presentation—prospecting, contacting and qualifying potential clients—is aimed at creating the opportunity to present what they assume will be solutions for the creditor. Everything afterwards—the downhill run to the sale itself, including overcoming objections, negotiating and closing—is designed to support and reiterate the presentation. Consequently, agencies devote a tremendous amount of time and resources to creating what they mistakenly believe are compelling presentations and proposals. Nine out of 10 times, they are wrong.

Despite finding the sales process increasingly difficult and appointments harder and harder to get, agencies continue “conventional” sales tactics that get the same lousy results year after year. The irony is that most of these sales efforts are lost on prospective clients because presentations that come too early in a complex business-to-business decision process are largely a waste of time.

Many agencies hate to hear this because the presentation is usually the key weapon in their sales arsenal. It is their security blanket, their comfort zone, and they loathe giving it up. They seem to be on a mission to relentlessly educate the prospect because, after all, prospects will not buy what they don’t understand.

“Features” such as state-of-the-art technology, references, insurance and bonding, performance superlatives, etc., have nothing to do with a successful presentation. Every agency makes those same claims regarding those same features, making them virtually meaningless in the ultimate decision-making process.

A presentation can take prospects to a higher level of understanding, but it must take place at the right time and in the right way—which is *not* at the first meeting. That is one of the least effective methods for accomplishing that goal.

### **Is Your Presentation Essentially A Lecture?**

The service provider is the talking teacher, and the prospect is the listening student. The big problem with teaching by telling is that the listener remembers little information and often finds the assumption insulting.

▶ **Ultimately, the presentation trap exacerbates communication between buyers and sellers, leading to frustration, misunderstandings, conflict and adversarial relationships—all of which impede the agency's ability to create cooperative and trust-based relationships with prospective clients.**

### **Conventional Sales Presentations Are Not Focused On the Prospect**

A typical sales presentation rarely devotes more than 20 percent of its focus on prospects and their current situation. Generally, a typical presentation devotes 80 percent of its focus on describing the service provider, its solutions and the rosy future that could be yours—if you buy. Therefore, a conventional agency sales presentation fails to help clients understand why they should hire you instead of the other qualified agencies vying for a spot on their roster. It usually focuses on the agency's assumptions about the solution being offered, which likely has nothing to do with what will actually get the creditor to hire you.

Nevertheless, many agencies spend most of their time focusing on the “assumed” solution, instead of addressing how your agency could affect the client's business. As a result, while clients may be impressed with the slickness of the presentation, they will still lack a compelling understanding of how they will benefit over their existing agencies (who they are probably happy with) or even why they should trust you.

### **Agency Presentations All Sound the Same**

Your competitors are following the same strategy and are busy presenting to their prospects, as well. Unless you have no competition, your clients will surely

hear their same old story, too. They may meet with you as well as one, two or even more of your competitors. In each meeting, an agency presents the best side of its “solutions.” Your team tells clients they need the solutions that only your firm offers, and your competitors make the same arguments about their solutions. In every case, the presentations are heavily skewed toward the seller and their assumed solutions, and the solutions and justifications offered by all of the agencies are all the same. It's all backwards. It has to be about the buyer—it cannot be about the seller.

### **How Clients Receive Presentations**

If creditors hear the same thing from every agency, what do they use as their selection criteria? Price. As you may have already discovered, the credit industry has started a downward spiral to commoditization—the natural outcome of presenting too much of the same thing, too soon and too often. Commoditization of the industry is the result of our own actions. We have no one to blame but ourselves.

To avoid falling victim to the presentation trap, ask yourself these critical questions:

1. What percentage of your presentation/proposal is devoted to describing your company and your capabilities (features)?
2. What percentage of your presentation/proposal is based on



your clear understanding of your prospect's business, actual problems and objectives? Do you understand how your services will benefit the client?

3. What is your value proposition? Why should the client choose you instead of any other excellent agency?
4. How much of your presentation is focused on persuading and convincing the client that the features every agency has are your unique benefits?
5. How much of your presentation is focused on the "what" instead of the "how" and the "why?" How well can your clients connect your solutions to their business situation?
6. How much of your presentation is based on what the buyer has told you would justify a change?

### **How Prospects Respond To Presentations**

How do prospects respond to competing "conventional" presentations? First, they concentrate their efforts on the information that falls inside their area of agency-interaction experience. Prospective clients attempt to make the complex understandable by weighing those elements that service providers' offers have in common, and eliminating those elements that do not fit neatly into a comparison chart.

When this happens, an agency's ability to differentiate its offerings from the competition subsides, and price—the one common denominator in all offers—raises its ugly head and often becomes the deciding factor in the sale.

Second, clients may also respond by not responding. They listen politely as you "educate" them, thank you for your time and promise to get back in touch when they are ready to make a decision. Welcome to tickler-file hell.

Finally, some prospects may actively respond. They may ask you to justify the information you have presented or challenge the viability of your solution. While this is the response that every

conventional service provider expects, agencies handle this very poorly. Salespeople do not know how to talk about operational issues, service issues or what value the buyer will recognize compared to what other agencies have offered. They actually have no idea what the agency would have to offer the creditor that would justify a change.

The agency is commoditized, lumped in with everyone else, and beat up on fee because the agency does not know how to sell value.

The lack of professionalism and inability to sell value leaves the buyer feeling dissatisfied with the process and relegated to price as the only differentiator. When this happens, you and the prospect have had an obvious disconnect, and back-peddling on fee is often the only way out.

### **The Solution to the Presentation Trap**

Ultimately, the presentation trap exacerbates communication between buyers and sellers, leading to frustration, misunderstandings, conflict and adversarial relationships—all of which impede the agency's ability to create cooperative and trust-based relationships with prospective clients.

Instead of trying to "sell" prospective clients the first time you meet, use a diagnostic approach—simply stated, conduct a thorough diagnosis to uncover problems and expand your awareness of the client's situation. You have to convert from canned sales pitches to "solutions-based selling."

An interview process designed to uncover everything about the prospect's needs and requirements, likes and dislikes, agency perceptions, why previous agency relationships have failed, what the prospect would like to see from an agency that it's not getting now, and what you would have to offer that would justify a change demonstrates real interest in the prospect. The focus must be on the buyer, not on the seller. Most creditors

make a decision to buy during a well-executed diagnostic process.

The information gained in that process enables the agency to deliver a professional, prospect-focused presentation built around what the buyer is interested in knowing, builds confidence and trust, and establishes your value to the prospect.

Only then will you be justified in making recommendations, and your presentation will reinforce what they have already told you would justify the deal. When you guide your prospects through this process, you will establish a high level of credibility and find yourself jointly developing optimal solutions, which will ultimately benefit both you and your clients—which will mean no more costly six-month failed relationships.

That is how we define professionalism in agency sales, and it is being practiced by only a small percentage of the industry's salespeople. It requires proper training for your salespeople, your sales manager and your agency's president. Everyone has to be on board with this process in order to effectively integrate sales, marketing, operations and client service. Fail to do this, and you will condemn yourself to remain forever in a negative sales cycle. **cm**

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A frequent contributor to *Collector*, Marc Trezza is president and CEO of Search Net Corporation in New York City. As an independent management consultant, he provides organizations with collection sales management and training, management training and coaching, collection marketing programs and bid and proposal writing services. He assists management teams with consolidation integration issues and advises boards, investors and CEOs. He has been both the author and the subject of many articles on leadership, management and sales. For more information on Search Net, visit <http://www.searchnetcorp.com/agency> or e-mail [snctrezza@mindspring.com](mailto:snctrezza@mindspring.com).