

## Do Your Sales Techniques Stand Out?

Build a strong position for yourself in the marketplace by focusing on your approach to superior client service—not by bad-mouthing your competition.

By Marc Trezza



**S**trategically, a secure position establishes a base for your offensive. Tactically, this secure position helps you use your natural strengths. There are only a few leaders in any industry—everyone else marches in their shadow.

To build a strong industry position you must first determine what position you want and who you want your clients to be. Then you can figure out how you will meet the needs of those prospects better than anyone else. That can't be done without an understanding of what the buyer wants, values, dislikes and prioritizes.

Promises to “out-collect their current agency” (often when you don't even know who that agency is) are overwhelmingly considered insulting by most buyers. It's a sales pitch that's equal parts arrogance and ignorance. Those salespeople are only selling to themselves.

For collection agencies, the most secure positions are owned by those who achieve a loyal client base. Premier positions are earned by agencies that really listen to their clients, and then focus their resources on meeting or exceeding needs in a manner that delights the client. The idea is to make clients so happy they don't even think about talking to another agency, and ultimately they become like salespeople for you.

This does not happen without devoting time to meet with clients and talk to them about the relationship and how it could

*Editor's note:*

*This is the sixth in a series of seven articles examining innovative sales techniques based on The Art of War by Sun Tzu. Read the first article in the May issue of Collector magazine.*

be improved. The sales process I teach my clients sells confidence and trust, not features, and is based on truly listening and then working with the prospect to develop outstanding solutions according to the client.

Sometimes clients don't complain if they are unhappy with your service—they just go away. The process of stroking ourselves with our own convictions and ignoring or failing to uncover a lack of enthusiasm in your client relationship can spiral into disaster.

Think of the sales process as “client service before the sale.” This is an approach that actively involves the new client in the process well before the first accounts are placed. It works so well that one of my agency clients in New Jersey got a referral from a new client that had not even placed accounts yet—they were just so impressed with the agency's sales process.

To solidify your position in the client's mind, and to be in sync with who your client wants you to be, you must be committed to a buyer-based process designed to build true quality partnerships with your clients (as defined by them).

For most agencies, this approach requires a fundamental change. Going up the ladder to achieve a stronger share of market-mind requires a well-conceived, well-executed plan. Coming down is what happens when you are not going up.

In the military, positioning involves occupying a key stronghold in the terrain. In business, and especially in collection sales, positioning involves occupying a key strong point in the market or the buyer's mind.

You own a position in the mind either because you are a leader or because of significant differentiation. Because operationally, all good agencies have access to the same resources and technology, and have to play by the same rules, claims of

your special “features” are empty. They are a minimum requirement, not a differentiator.

The only place you can establish significant differentiation is through client service and sales. But you can't just try to copy someone else or bring in a generalist. You need real-world expertise to restructure, implement, train, coach and drive the entire process.

Competing on fee is the lowest common denominator, and the refuge of the salesperson who does not know how to sell value. As an agency deploying the Insight Selling process moves up, it erodes the competitors' base. That lack-of-competitive-edge dysfunction forces the displaced agency to compete on fee for positions that deliver smaller profits.

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### QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE YOUR STRATEGIC POSITION:

- What position do we own?
- What position do we want?
- Who do we have to outmaneuver?
- How much resource expense and time will it take?
- Can we stick it out?
- Will the results justify the expense?

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### QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE YOUR TACTICAL POSITION:

- Where are we?
  - Where do we need to be?
  - What do we have?
  - What do we need?
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Our bias toward what we know can lead to misconceptions about the world around us, and a deeply flawed imbalance in management.

Often, the more you know about operations management, the less you know about sales management. Why? Because it takes so much focus to achieve in collection management. This drives the inability to take advantage of the most powerful tools and methodology that will differentiate your agency from your competitors. This is what drives the failed feature-selling approach, because features are what management knows best.

Collection growth leaders are those who understand and embrace why that approach will continue to fail; giving away revenue to agencies who truly engage their clients, properly train salespeople to collaborate with prospects and devote the necessary resources to drive success.

Those leaders will recognize the imbalance and get the expertise they need to reposition their sales efforts, even if the best option is to bring that expertise in on an interim basis. You can't wing it. Relying on this type of expertise is the fastest and least expensive way to powerfully strengthen the four critical pillars of management balance that will enable you to outsell your competitors and protect the agency's financial future:

The four pillars are:

- Operations
- Marketing
- Client Service
- Sales

Most agencies expend an exceptional effort to “be all that they can be” operationally, leaving managers little or no bandwidth to develop real-world expertise in sales. This failure leads to lost opportunities.



## SUN TZU'S STRATEGIC RULES

1. OCCUPY STRONG NATURAL POSITIONS
2. ALWAYS SEEK THE HIGH GROUND
3. MAKE AN ACCURATE ESTIMATE OF THE SITUATION

Every agency CEO encounters decisions of where and how to expend energy and resources in two primary areas: Inside (operations and client service) and outside (sales and marketing).

We must keep going back to the original question: "Are you happy with sales?" If not, you can keep doing the same things and hope for a different result, or you can commit to change, starting from the top. Just like putting your running shoes on is the most difficult part of a run, making the commitment to improving your sales efforts and reaching out for help is the hardest part. After that, doing it right starts getting rewarding.

Waiting only increases the odds that your competitor will gain the offensive before you do. Problems don't fix themselves, and playing catch-up is even harder.

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*"The more you know about operations management, the less you know about sales management. Why? Because it takes so much focus to achieve in collection management."*

Sun Tzu said, "The first blow is as much as two." The attack has the advantage of initiative, relegating your competitor to second place. The offensive must be a continuing process. Only

then does it permit you to maintain freedom of action, meet unexpected developments and determine future courses of action.

Like a good chess move, this approach is both offensive and defensive at the same time, putting your competitor at a disadvantage. This is never negative selling or bad-mouthing your competition; that is unprofessional.

Instead, you make them look bad comparatively, because in the buyer's mind, your salesperson exudes a much higher level of professionalism. Your salesperson is much more interested in the buyer. Your salesperson is more knowledgeable, and wants to work with the buyer to craft real solutions. Your salesperson sells value.

When we wish for more time, more funds, more prospects or more clients, we fail to

realize that "just a little more" is not enough. While one agency may be planning for just a little more, a competitor may be focusing on achieving a lot more. Guess who wins?

Sales is a competitive endeavor. The winning agency must give priority to elements that are most critical to success. The ultimate judge of whether you win is the buyers: their decision to hire your agency is the critical vote. If buyers are not choosing your agency over your competitors, nothing else matters. ▣

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