



The Balancing Act



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Art Waskey is a speaker who truly delivers. In addition to a 45 year career in sales and marketing, Art is the author of multiple books on selling and a monthly column The Art of Sales. He shares these insights as an in demand event and conference speaker as well as leadership coach.

Is Anyone Listening?

As automation replaces people in customer service positions, the sense that no one is really listening grows. The debacle of my recent passport application is a case in point. I filled out the required paperwork and delivered it to the US Post Office. Ten weeks later, I received a text from the State Department with the date that FedEx would deliver my passport. As I was scheduled to be out of town that day, I contacted FedEx to change the delivery time. This involved cycling through the numerous automated attendant steps of FedEx's answering system and waiting. When I was eventually contacted by someone at FedEx, I was asked the same questions that I had already entered in the automated system. I rescheduled my delivery.

When that date came and went with no passport arriving I was forced back into the automated attendant system. Again, I supplied it with my information and filed a lost shipment report. The requisite 30 day waiting period passed, with no contact from FedEx and

no package delivered. I had to use the automated system to report this. Then I was informed that my lost package claim report was closed.

Now I had to re-initiate my passport application with the State Department where I was faced with a similar automated process. Again, there was no person to talk to. I eventually turned to my US Senator, whose office was able to have the passport resent.

This type of consumer frustration is all too common today. Businesses that can provide in-person service, however, can use this problem to their advantage. Today, a person answering the phone or behind the counter in your shop, who can address customer needs, provides real value-added to any transaction. The independent gas distributor that has a team to answer calls and provide face-to-face product or service advice has a distinct sales advantage over online transactions made through a virtual supply channel or manufacturer's website.



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Make Personal Connections:

To remain competitive in a world with lots of alternative purchasing channels, independent companies must provide excellent service. To do this, management and employees need to practice what Stephen Covey describes in his book, *The 8th Habit, from Effectiveness to Greatness* (the-8th-habit). He writes "The 8th Habit gives you a mind-set and a skill-set to constantly look for the potential in people... we must learn to listen to our clients and fellow employees." When we do this, we "indirectly affirm people's worth as whole people and empower the unleashing of their potential." This is the opposite of what an automated consumer response system does.

Here are four ways to strengthen your personal connections with your clients and in so doing, ensure future sales:

- **Clarity** – To know the customer's goals or priorities, it is imperative to ask clarifying questions. These questions are best posed in person so you can read your client's body language.
- **Commitment** – Whether selling or leading others, you need to project commitment through your emotional energy for the task at hand. If your commitment is strong, the client or team member will pick up on that positive

energy and be more willing to embrace your proposals.

- **Translation** – Be sure you are asking the right questions, ones that reveal your prospect's wants and needs. Translate these responses into solutions that match the needs of your customer. Remember, to accomplish your goals, they must first be relevant to the goals of your customer.

- **Trust** – Unless you have the genuine involvement of the strategic decision-maker, particularly regarding his values and line-of-sight priorities, you won't be successful. Only by making a sufficient emotional connection with the client will you gain the kind of trust that enables you to close deals.

Finding Balance

To avoid the disconnect that automation can create focus your attention on the people you work for and with. Selling and leadership has been, is, and will continue to be about making personal connections. Find an effective balance between the use of the latest digital technology and your innate people skills. A vital component of that equation is knowing the added-values that contribute to the customer's true goals and priorities. The challenge for today's independent distributor is all about finding that balance.

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Provide value-added personal service.
2. Ask clarifying questions to learn about your customer's goals or priorities.
3. Project commitment through your emotional energy for the task at hand.
4. Making emotional connections with clients builds trust and business.
5. Find a balance between the use of digital technology and your innate people skills.