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Sales Made Simple

This refresher course will help you hone your sales skills

Some travel agents are born salespeople. The good news for everyone else is that sales skills can be learned. Even those who have a knack for sales can—and should—continue to refresh their abilities. To that end, here are 10 ways in which you can hone your sales skills.

Develop relationships with clients. “Even in these economic times, people still want to spend money, and they’re looking for a salesperson they like,” says Kelley Sexton, founder of Agents Who Excel, which provides professional development services in the travel industry. “When they find that person, they will justify any money they spend on a vacation.”

In order to get clients to like you, Sexton adds, remember that people have three basic needs: They want to be listened to, they want to be taken seriously and they want to be understood. “You’re not going to be successful in the selling process unless you build a relationship,” she says. “If you don’t, you’re a commodity, and people will just go to the Internet.”

Adds Scott Koepf, president of NACTA, “The process should not be about selling the next cruise or tour; it should result in a client who is with you for life. Change your mindset from getting clients to buy the next thing to establishing client relationships, so that what you recommend will be perfectly aligned to them, and they will come back over and over again.”

Sexton also suggests being helpful even when someone just wants to check a price. “Do your best to help them, and ask them to remember you next time,” she says. “Don’t short-circuit the sales process. Build the relationship, and they will come. It doesn’t have to be a sale every time.”

Follow the three-second rule. “You have three seconds or less to make a significant positive impact on the client or potential client,” says Stuart Cohen, president of Exclamation Points Inc., a sales consulting firm. “The way you answer the phone can make or break a relationship. If you answer as if you’ve



been waiting for that call all day, and that customer is made to feel welcomed, that will set the pace, versus feeling like they interrupted your day.”

This is especially critical for home-based agents, who do much of their business via phone, as well as email. You also can make your voice-mail greeting and email messages convey a smile by making them sound or read as exciting, upbeat, welcoming and appreciative, he says.

Spend more time qualifying new clients. It starts with asking prospects the right questions that will help you get to know them. This won’t happen in one quick phone call but rather over a few calls and possibly even face-to-face meetings, according to Koepf.

“An unsuccessful way to sell is what we in the industry lovingly call the ‘body snatchers in Mexico’ [approach]. It’s when you don’t even get through Customs, and the timeshare people are already pitching you,” Sexton says, noting that when you take your first call from someone, he or she is not yet a client. “You must build a relationship first.”

And that starts with qualifying them with questions that go beyond where they want to go and what their budget is—such as what they like to do and why they want to take that vacation.

Share your passion. Sharon Walters, a TravelWizard.com affiliate based in Petaluma, Calif., who is a Top Producer and

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cover focus
developing sales skills

BY MIMI KMET



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member of her host agency's Million Dollar Club, attributes her success to "an absolute hunger and passion for my job. And I impart that love of travel and the different countries and cultures to my clients and get them excited."

During her initial connection with clients, "I engage them right away and get them excited, and then they're in. If you're on the fence about it, you're not going to make any money."

But it's not just about her passion. It's about what's important to the client as well, which goes back to qualifying them. "Letting them do most of the talking is very important," Walters says, adding that she's finding, through listening, that many clients are interested in trying new destinations, "because a lot of the destinations that were not affordable to them in the past are affordable to them now."

Provide service before the deal is closed. "With the economy the way it is, there are so many more deals out there than ever before," says Nancy Weinstein, an independent affiliate of America's Vacation Center based in Carlsbad, Calif. "From a consumer standpoint, there's no way to track them. So I try to provide service before the deal is closed."

Specifically, with the help of her host agency's Agent Power program, Weinstein sends a quote and, if a deal comes in on that hotel, tour or cruise, she lets the client know that she can match it. "That shows them value," she says. "It's all about building trust, and that's what's really going to help you close the sale."

Selling is a learnable skill that needs constant refreshing, according to NACTA's Scott Koepf.

Position yourself as a client's designated travel agent. To do that, Cohen suggests using what he calls "the phrase that pays"—actually, three sentences: "Thank you for making me your travel agent," "I am grateful for your business" and "Do you have any friends or family who need a vacation?" If you ask for referrals at the end of every conversation, eventually that customer will give you one, he says, adding that those phrases should also be added to emails and voice-mail greetings, "because repeat and referral business is the silver bullet to success."

Stay in touch before and after the sale. "I'm absolutely hard-headed when it comes to followup [to close a sale]," Walters says. "I'll basically beat the horse until it's dead, and it usually pays off."

Not getting a return phone call or response to an email is no reason to give up, Walters adds. In many cases, clients are as busy as you are—if not more so—and they will appreciate your persistence. For example, she recently booked a client with whom she had been in touch for about two months, and he finally booked a \$20,000 trip to India. Three weeks before making the booking, he was very busy and didn't know what he wanted to do, "but because I took the time to listen to him and I didn't give up on him, he gave me a credit card number," she says.

Walters stays connected with clients between bookings by sending blanket emails at least four times a year, asking them if they want to book a trip. "Even if they're not ready to travel, they'll often ask you to get back to them at a later date," she says.

And if the clients book elsewhere, make a note of when they were going to be traveling and follow up afterward, asking how the trip was and how you can help plan their next vacation. "You have an opportunity

to win that customer back because you followed up when you didn't even get the business," Cohen says.

Be available. "I don't work 9 to 5 because my clients don't purchase travel 9 to 5," Weinstein says. "I have clients all over the world. My hours are when my clients want to book travel." Weinstein also works on weekends, when a lot of the larger agencies aren't open.

Cohen suggests making an appointment to call clients at a specified time that's convenient for them, rather than asking them to call you back at their convenience. "Don't say, 'Call me when you're ready.' That's basically giving away the booking to someone else," he says. "The object is to get them to commit on that first phone call. If not, every hour that goes by while they're thinking about it decreases your chances that they will book."

Broaden your horizons. "Be willing to open your region to other destinations," says Walters, whose specialties include Asia, the Middle East, Africa, destination weddings and wine country. "I hate to see a client go away because I'm not familiar with a destination."

For example, if you receive a lead for Hawaii and you've broadened your niche, you may be able to upsell the client to Fiji or Tahiti. "Maybe not the first time, but put a bee in their bonnet," she says.

Keep on training. Selling is a learnable skill that needs constant refreshing, according to Koepf. "Training is sorely missing in our industry in that there's not nearly as much training on sales and marketing as there is about product knowledge," he says. "Try to think about training time being 75 percent on sales and marketing and 25 percent on product knowledge. In most cases, agents have that reversed."

Koepf suggests using the sales training provided by NACTA and other organizations, both within the travel industry and outside (such as Dale Carnegie courses) that emphasize pure sales techniques and relationship selling. "If you believe in the relationship process, it can be used for selling anything," he says. @



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