

Look for the Loose Brick
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I hear salespeople say that speaking to a particular prospect was like "hitting a brick wall." The prospect's guard was up in full force. The prospect seemed to get bored or, worse yet, to actually become defensive or offensive, as the case may be, every time the salesperson mentioned a product benefit or feature. It pains me to hear this, as I've known exactly what it feels like to be in such a position.

Whenever I've encountered such a fortress or offensive, my instinct has been to conceive an equally abrasive battle plan or retort the likes of which this very difficult and disturbed character has never seen! No. No. No! Of course that isn't the way to go. We shouldn't be attacking anyone whom we want to call a customer, anytime.

Next time you hit a brick wall, don't attack head-on. Don't ever try that. I promise it is painful. Instead, look for the loose brick. The loose brick is always the one thing which the client needs most. The loose brick is the absolute top priority to the client, at that given time (Be prepared. It will change -- frequently). In the same way they say it is one step that begins the journey of a thousand miles, it's by starting to chip away at that one loose brick that will lead to taking down a prospect's entire wall of defense.

Finding the loose brick requires really active listening and calm questioning, not interrogating. And remember, if you want your prospect to get down to the truth, you may need to expose a little of yourself first to establish a deeper trust. And if you take such an approach to your next difficult conversation, you'll successfully achieve two things.

- Discover the real problem.
If you're actively looking for the loose brick, you just might find out what's really a thorn in your client's side. And it's usually not what you'd expect.

You've got to find what their internal problems are, and they sometimes (read: usually) aren't what's on the surface of their business. In fact, they are rarely related to the products or services you are selling.

Sometimes it's listening to their fears or frustrations about their current job or boss and offering an understanding ear. It could be just asking what their personal aspirations are relative to this project and assuring them that they will be met.

I, for one, spend a lot of time helping my CMO clients improve their working relationships with their CEOs and CFOs. They're concerned with positioning themselves appropriately to gain respect from those executives. Of course, my take on marketing and sales doesn't hurt. It's music to the ear of CEOs to hear their CMOs begin talking about creating marketing strategies that shift spending from broadcast advertising to client relationship-building and sales.

- Avoid death by complex sale.

Complex sales are just that -- complex, and we often just don't have the time to execute them. Some people go into a sales call with a very well laid out plan of what they want to sell. You know what happens then? The buyer very often is inclined to figure out what about the proposal isn't right or needs to change.

You'll be much better served by going into a sales call with a path in mind than without one, sure. But you must also have the willingness to listen and react and find a way to place your value proposition in the context of their immediate (right-this-very-minute!) needs. Once you begin to listen, sales will no longer be a time to sell but to let your prospect tell you what she wants and you configuring your product or service around those needs.

Remember, if you get resistance, stop even thinking about selling. Think about listening and understanding what the person (not the "client" or "customer" at that point) really needs. Your first goal shouldn't be to sell anyway. You need a foot in the door. You need to build a trusting relationship. You need to get a chance to prove that relationship. So first look for the loose brick. You can always upsell later.