



Book Tough Calls

Selling Strategies to Win Over Your Most Difficult Customers

Josh Gordon
AMACOM, 1997

Recommendation

While most books about selling focus on the salesperson’s behavior, this book focuses instead on the client’s behavior and the sales approaches you should use depending upon just how weird or annoying - excuse us, that should be "challenging" or maybe "eccentric" - the client becomes. Josh Gordon clearly and effectively presents 20 different classic, difficult behaviors, including everything from "The Client Who Lies to You" to "The Client Who Knows It All." Gordon offers useful strategies for dealing with such personalities and situations, strategies that can help you make your sale and then make a clean getaway. The book is written conversationally and includes no filler or fluff, just plenty of well-organized and helpful ideas. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone who is trying to sell a product, service or idea, because sometimes it is nice to know that you aren’t the problem.

Take-Aways

- One out of every six clients is a problem client.
- Use specific strategies for problem clients.
- Problem clients rarely respond to traditional strategies.
- Ten percent of problem clients have truly problem personalities.
- The other 90% of problem clients are in a problematic situation or have created this "problem" as a negotiating strategy.
- Every client can potentially become a problem client.
- Problem clients fit into 20 specific categories.
- Each category has pitfalls to avoid.
- Specific strategies work with each category and can help you make the sale.
- A client may fit into more than one category.

Summary

Selling to Difficult People

One out of every six clients is a problem client, and while you can sell to them, you cannot sell to problem clients using conventional strategies. Plenty of proven selling techniques that work just fine with most clients will backfire with problem clients. Those clients who aren't "problem people," but who are nonetheless problem clients include those who like a competitor's product or service better than yours, who buy based only on established relationships or who buy based on arbitrary company politics. Clients who are problem people run the gamut from the complainers, the indecisive, the abrasive and the incompetent to the hard-to-read, the angry, the price grinder and the egomaniac. Sounds like fun, huh?

“Buying is an act of power. From your point of view, a sale occurs when someone buys your product, but from a highly political organization's point of view, a sale is a defining moment where organizational power is spelled out.”

Use specific selling strategies with clients who are tough calls. Since only about 10% of problem clients act the way they do because they have problem personalities, the other 90% believe that the style they've chosen benefits them in some way. If you recognize a particular problem client from the start, you can either work around the behavior, or use it to your advantage and close your sale. Every client has the potential to become a problem client under certain circumstances, such as pressure from company politics, and some of your best clients can show signs of problematic behavior at some point.

Defining Your Problem Clients

Problem clients fit into 20 categories. Each presents particular pitfalls and each responds to particular sales strategies. Here are the problem clients you can learn to live with and sell to, the pitfalls you can trip into along the way and the recipes for cures that lead to sales results, no matter how strange the person on the other side of the table may be.

"The Client Who Grinds You on Price"

Pitfalls you face with this client include taking his behavior personally, being so persistent that you become a nuisance, giving up after only a few attempts and passing judgment on a client who has passed judgment on you. First ask yourself, "If I were in his shoes, why would I see me?" Then try sending a letter, calling early in the morning and after five o'clock, getting close to his secretary, networking your way to him and not acting like a salesperson. For self-preservation you must find out if this is the right person to call upon, if you are calling at the right time and if you're selling anything he wants to buy.

"The Client Who Lies to You"

Traps you can fall into include calling your client a liar or putting her on the defensive. Sales strategies include finding out how you can become more important to your client, forgiving her, clearing the air, covering yourself with written proof and keeping a journal of interactions.

"The Client Who Has No Buying Authority"

Mistakes waiting to happen include assuming that because the client is assigned to meet with you, he has buying authority, thinking of him as an insignificant obstacle instead of an important gatekeeper and going over his head without considering the consequences. Strategies include motivating him to admit that he's not the decision maker, asking for the order and asking for a joint appointment with the decision maker.

"The Client Who Loves What You Say, Then Does Not Buy"

Your potential pitfalls include mistaking her for a "relationship sell," assuming that she's going to buy because she hasn't made any objections yet and mistaking nice things she says for buying signals. Strategies include shifting the selling dialogue from a friendly visit to a business call, bringing up objections yourself, stating your concerns and nailing down the level of commitment before the meeting is over.

"The Client Who Complains About Everything"

Errors you can make include agreeing with the complainer about your product and company, and thinking of his tirade as real complaining rather than just a strategy to get you to lower your price or grant a concession. Your defenses include joking with the complainer, asking yourself what kind of attention he really wants, changing your relationship with him, getting friendly, minimizing the importance of the complaints or ignoring the complaints.

"The Client Who Says, 'It Is Not in the Budget'"

A buyer who plays bouncing budget sets you up for these missteps: taking her statement seriously, offering a price concession and trying a prestige sell. Effective strategies include positioning your product as a financial benefit, finding out about the timing of next year's budget, asking for a test period and helping the client find the money.

"The Client Who Is Indecisive"

Other than sheer annoyance, you can also fall prey to the mistakes of pushing when there is clear resistance, not reading his objections emotionally and losing patience. Strategies include giving him a deadline, using competitive pressure, asking for an order six months in advance, asking for an even bigger order, addressing client's insecurity, offering a "deal" and determining if the client is just afraid to say no.

"The Client Who May Cancel the Order"

"First you say you do, then you say you don't" is the theme song. The sales pitfalls include "loving them and leaving them," assuming future sales and failing to remind her of the benefits of your product. Strategies include keeping the "romance" alive, a continued selling approach, monitoring your competition, selling defensively, starting a tradition and saying thank you.

"The Client Who Buys Elsewhere because He Likes a Competitive Product"

Don't fall into the errors of putting your client on the defensive or pitching before you know exactly why he is buying a competitive product. Successful strategies include giving a comparative, not competitive, presentation; differentiating your product; getting him more excited about your product; getting yourself invited to make a hard competitive presentation to really show the advantages you can offer and giving your client a face-saving way out of continuing to buy from the competition.

"The Client Who Buys Elsewhere on Relationships"

As you try to build your own relationship with this client (strategy number one), don't make the tactical errors of getting competitive before you've proven yourself, chasing every trivial objection or giving up too early. You can also ask to make a product presentation on a level playing field, so you can compete fairly.

"The Client Who Buys Elsewhere Because of Company Politics"

Don't be naïve. For instance, don't assume that simply having the better product will help you win the sale, don't attack political buying as stupid (no, really), don't assume your buyer will fight politics to get your product bought and don't walk away because you think it's hopeless (though it might be). Defense strategies include clarifying objections and asking who raised them; changing the client's perception of your product so he can see that it meets his needs; using higher level contacts within the client's company or sending a promotion to everyone in the company. If you want to be more aggressive, find out your client's political weight and make him look good, so he'll fight for you.

"The Client Who Is Indifferent"

What do you care? Well, the pitfalls with Mr. or Ms. Blasé include straying too far from the sale and not customizing the pitch. Strategies for better sales ahead include customizing the pitch, presenting your product in terms of the client's business, asking if

there's anything else the client would like to hear about, and making sure that you're selling something the client actually wants to buy and has the authority to buy.

"The Client Who Is Abrasive"

Calm down and don't let him push your buttons. Above all, don't let him pit you against your own company (you know the type, the guy who says, "Let's you and him fight!"). Strategies for sales on the battlefield include maintaining the illusion that the client is pushing you to the wall for the best deal, humor, distinguishing between behavior designed to put you on the defensive and real objections, getting to the point quicker, defusing pressure and evaluating any threats.

"The Client Who Is Hard to Read"

You'll fail if you try to get her to talk more, if you assume you have a sale because she's given you no negative feedback or if you let yourself feel uncomfortable. Instead, ask open-ended questions and then be quiet, giving her control of the conversation. Do something designed to get a reaction, ask questions she'll be motivated to answer and request direct feedback.

"The Client Who Knows It All"

Your potential pitfalls include acting like a stereotypical salesperson, being unprepared, trying to compete with his expertise or being intimidated. You'll kill more bees with honey if you seem impressed by his knowledge, sell him ideas instead of information and ask him to talk even more about his expertise until you've maneuvered him into convincing himself to buy your product.

"The Client Who Is An Egomaniac"

To avoid mistakes, you have to figure this out early in the sales call. Then avoid getting into an argument or trying to close too early. Strategies include making her think the sale is her idea, using questions to lead her through a series of "yes" answers, asking her about herself and using flattery.

"The Client Who Gets Angry Over Mix-ups"

Okay, something went wrong and you're sorry, but don't fall into the mistake of getting defensive or passing the blame. Instead, use the mix-up to your advantage, defuse his anger, get him to talk it out and, to wrap everything up neatly and leave with a win-win, find the "magic bullet" concession.

"The Client Who Is Incompetent"

Possible errors include thinking a client is incompetent just because she isn't buying from you or thinking of incompetence only as a negative. Instead, sell her on price and relationships, use your momentum and help her get permission to buy from you.

"The Client Who Does Not Like Your Company"

The mistakes you can make include griping about your company, defending your company as perfect or being persuaded that your company has a worse reputation than it actually does. Find out why he doesn't like your company and address it by building a positive "buzz" about your company, bringing someone along from the home office, giving a corporate presentation or granting an unexpected concession.

About the Author

Josh Gordon is president of an independent publisher's representation firm, where he sells advertising space for magazines. He also writes regularly for *Folio Magazine* on the subject of selling, speaks at industry gatherings and runs private sales-training sessions.
