

## **How to Shorten the Length of the Sales Cycle – Part I : Why Closing Techniques Don't Close**

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“Some clients take forever to decide, I can’t help it.”

That’s what I used to say to my CEO when I was VP Sales & Marketing Asia-Pacific in my last corporate position, in response to questions on why project X and project Y still hadn’t turned into orders for us.

Does it sound familiar? Doesn’t it also sound as though we are so helpless?

Of course, my previous boss was particularly interested in the high-volume projects, often worth 1-2 million USD each. I was responsible for the sales of high-precision measuring instruments for Asia-Pacific and was usually personally involved in large projects for key accounts like Toyota, Shanghai Volkswagen, Hua Wei, etc.

From my experience in training sales people from diverse industries, I know that this problem is very widespread.

### **About Closing Techniques**

At the time, I had been trained in the more classical approaches towards selling by using so-called closing techniques to get the buyer to make a buying decision. For example, when meeting the potential customer for the third time and after noticing some buying signals, I would say something like “When can we ship the machines to you?”

You see, I implied that they had already made the decision to buy from us. Thus, I wanted to softly ‘push’ my counterpart to confirm my assumption by giving me a date for the shipment. It worked sometimes but often didn’t. In the latter case, I would frequently get fluffy responses like “Oh, we have to think about it, we

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can't tell you now" or "We need the machines on xth July but haven't made up our mind yet, which supplier to choose."

In fact, I couldn't help feeling that my closing technique often achieved the opposite of what it was supposed to. The other party actually became even more closed to tell me what's really going on. Hence, I remained in the dark.

Today I know that closing techniques have a high potential for creating counter-productive outcomes. Therefore I don't use them anymore. I also encourage the participants in our seminars not to use them even though they work sometimes.

### **What to do instead?**

One of the great benefits of the **Stop Selling!** approach is that it provides a considerably more effective way to shorten the length of the sales cycle. It is based on the realization that the potential buyers must first get answers to all their idiosyncratic – meaning, their own peculiar – criteria before they can actually make a buying decision.

For example, prospect A's criteria for buying a measuring machine might be:

- The machine must fulfill 100% of the technical specifications.
- The price must be below 250,000 USD.
- The supplier must have a good reputation, i.e. must be one of the three largest manufacturers for such machines.
- The supplier must provide a quick and reliable after-sales service support.
- The change-over to the new machine must be done in a trouble-free manner.
- There must be good references from other companies using the machine.

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- The operators must accept the new machine as being user-friendly.
- The supplier should provide effective training for the operators.
- The supplier must guarantee an availability of the machine of over 90%.
- The local after-sales service provider must be easily reachable.
- The quality control director who provides the budget for this investment wants to see a true improvement of the quality control process after buying the new machine.
- There is resistance among two of the five operators to work with this supplier because of negative experience in the past
- The CEO of prospect A loves Japanese machines, so it will be an additional challenge for the purchasing manager in charge to make the case for a European supplier instead.

You can easily imagine that this list is not exhaustive and that there might be a number of criteria the seller cannot even think of. Moreover, the purchasing manager might not even be aware at all times of all these criteria that need to be addressed before making a buying decision.

And of course, different prospects might have quite different criteria for buying the very same type of product.

What's more, the criteria may change at any given time due to changes within the prospect's organization or in the market environment. For instance, lower than expected profitability may force the purchasing manager to reduce the budget. Or an emerging new technology may require changes in the specifications for the machine. Or new people who could influence the decision may arrive in the organization and their own criteria might be different.

I have rarely seen buyers who were not interested in making a rather quick buying decision if the purchase was really important to them. But I have seen many buyers who simply were not *prepared* to make a buying decision because there was not sufficient clarity on what the criteria actually were and how all these could be addressed in a satisfactory manner.

As a consequence, we see it as a prime task of anyone who sells to actually assist the buyers in becoming fully aware of their idiosyncratic criteria and then to support the buyers in addressing them, thus facilitating a quick buying decision.

**Conclusion:** If buyers take 'forever' to decide, it means that the buyers still haven't become fully aware of their idiosyncratic buying criteria and/or haven't yet found satisfactory answers. Rather than try to push the buyer with closing techniques that have potential to harm the buyer-seller relationship, the sales person may choose to support the buying process by helping create more awareness of these criteria and their respective answers.

In Part II, I will elaborate on how to actually create more awareness around the buyers' criteria and how to address them in a meaningful manner.



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In 2004, he initiated the Master Coach Alliance ( see <http://www.master-coach-alliance.com> ) in Hong Kong, a network of professional Life, Business and Corporate Coaches. End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm> ) which got published in August 2005. 14 of his articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today and CareerTimes.