



Advisory-Based Selling: 21st Century Client Engagement

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In the mid-1990's, top financial services companies changed the titles of their sales representatives from account executives to financial advisors or consultants. These title transitions were intended to transform perceptions of sales professionals from transaction-focused to advisory-based sales professionals.

Embedding this transformation required sales professionals to demonstrate their elevated status. They wanted to be perceived as seasoned industry professionals possessing sophisticated knowledge, competencies, and skills. Once accomplished, they could be associated with other highly trained professional groups considered client advisors, such as physicians, attorneys, and accountants. Advisory-based selling requires a new orientation to sales supported by new professional skills.

A New Orientation

Advisory-based selling is a client-centered approach focused on processes and communications. Today, clients expect real estate professionals to be process-oriented, enabling flawless execution of goals. Clients want help in deciphering complex real estate markets and financing strategies in order to make informed purchasing decisions. However, they find themselves confronted with illogical markets and chaotic financial times. As a result, uncertainty persists, generating the need for professional advisement.

Advisory-based sales professionals anticipate client uncertainty. They implement client engagement processes designed to minimize uncertainty and promote goal achievement. Two client engagement processes reducing uncertainty and enabling goals achievement are process consultation and participative communications.

Process Consultation

Process consultation is an advising structure requiring a 'helping' orientation. In order to help clients make purchasing decisions, advisory-based sales professionals can implement client engagement processes that help to stabilize and manage the sales process and elicit client data. Process consultation uses a host of operating principles enabling advisor-client interaction. Several operating principles are:

- Focus on the client, not the product
- Clarify and verify client perception, desire, and need
- Accurately assess self knowledge and capability relative to client purchasing goals
- Remind clients of current market reality
- Enable clients to make informed decisions
- Demonstrate high levels of professional competence, objectivity, and engagement

Participative Communications

Communication is the heart of advisory-based selling. Advisors

must possess an array of highly developed communication skills in order to facilitate effective interpersonal communication, relationship building, and client satisfaction. Unfortunately, most popular sales guides provide only a cursory treatment of formal communication methods; instead, favoring quick remedies for successful prospecting, lead generation, and closing.

Advisory-based selling is a partnership. It is predicated on accurate and informed communication between sales professional and clients. Partners must communicate effectively for the partnership to thrive. Participative communications require both parties to proactively engage each other in dialogue and discussion. To do so, sales professionals must master a variety of sophisticated communication skills. Listening is a primary skill paramount to the successful client relationships.

Here are 5 suggestions for improving listening skills:

1. **Energy:** Listening requires energy. Advising clients is a high intensity experience occurring on many levels simultaneously. Build stamina by practicing listening. Conserve and sustain energy through briefing yourself about clients prior to each meeting.
2. **Presence:** Remain in the moment, the present. Minimize mental and environmental distractions by focusing on what is being said as well as accompanying body language.
3. **Openness:** Maintain a receptive orientation to clients' thinking. Focus on the evolving dialogue. Maximize listening and minimize questioning. Ask clarifying questions as necessary, promoting understanding. Don't judge; gestate.
4. **Interviewing:** Study interviewing strategies. Interviewing is an art and science. It is a highly structured event not a sequence of spontaneous, subjective, and random questions. Properly constructed interview questions will elicit key data, enabling advisory selling.
5. **Observation:** Non-verbal behavior provides clues to the consistency of client statements. Observe the subtleties and nuances displayed through body language and environment engagement. These data can inform; in turn, enhance the meaning generated from dialogue and discussion.

Advisory-Based Selling and the Future

Adopting an advisory-based selling orientation and using process consultation and participative communication approaches will enable sales success in 21st century residential real estate markets. ■

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