

Articles: Differentiation – Apples and Oranges

"How are you different?"

Everyone who has ever been through a job interview has been asked this question. Every one of us who is or has been in a client-facing role has also been faced with that question. Differentiation is one of the most critical aspects of a sales strategy. Many studies verify that people make choices based upon differences rather than similarities. We all want to be chosen, and, typically, if a potential buyer does not understand how our differentiators warrant our selection, we state and restate those differentiators in as many ways as possible. In our traditional marketing efforts, we have our differentiators called out in a brightly-colored box on our business cards, proposals, white papers, and every PowerPoint slide we create. Our traditional marketing strategy is based upon shouting it louder and more often in commercials, advertisements and brochures.

We know that rarely works, so where do our differentiators really come from?

Many sellers believe the business should supply the differentiators. Shouldn't our differentiators be an integral part of our vision and our marketing strategy? Shouldn't every offering that may be part of a solution have its own list of differentiators? After all, why would we build a solution or even an offering if it isn't different from everything else out there in some objective way...better, cheaper, faster?

Some of our more advanced sellers have come to realize that differentiation may be found outside of the technical aspect of the solution, for example in the Client Relationship, Sales Team, Delivery Leadership Team, and Deal Shape.

Let's look more closely at Deal Shape. What do we mean by this? Is "Deal Shape" a reference to Price being what really differentiates us? Actually, it includes a number of other things besides Price: terms and conditions, payment schedule, payment milestones, ownership of assets or derivative works.... On a certain level, Deal Shape gives some insight into differentiation overall. So, with so many factors involved, which ones should you include? The answer is, you should include the ones that make a real difference to that particular Client, and the only way to find that out is to ask the Client directly. You can try making assumptions, but that does not work and why assumptions don't work was the topic of a previous Post.

The first key point to remember in creating differentiators is that **selling is not one Corporation meeting with another Corporation; but rather one person (you, the sales professional) meeting with another person (the client)**. Your marketing team can develop differentiators in commercials, advertisements and brochures to make your company more appealing in the marketplace, but the differentiators needed for *a person* to select us come from you.

This brings us to the second key point to remember: **Differentiation is in the eye of the beholder**. The following scenario will be familiar to many of you: you visit a client and hand

over the glossy marketing materials for your product that include 'rock-solid', 'amazingly unique' differentiators. With barely a look at the materials, the client looks you dead in the eye and says, "That's nothing special -- everybody offers that." What you thought was a 'silver bullet' has just disintegrated before impact.

The hard truth is, *there are no silver bullets*. Leave-behinds, glossy brochures, and marketing booklets are a great place to start, but they will never replace the meaningful conversation that you will have with the client about where he or she wants to go as a business, as a professional and as a person. Differentiation is all about how we can deliver a truly different path forward for that client based on our insights and a solid understanding of their issues and challenges.

You can't create a short cut for this work. Meetings based upon the standard 'capabilities' presentation created by marketing where you bring ten of your people to present to ten or more of the client's people do not lead to the discovery of what really makes a difference to each individual client. In most of those 'capabilities' presentations we do all the talking, mostly about our stuff, and the clients rarely even speak. How do we expect to truly understand where they want to go and why they want to go there when we do all the talking? With every one-on-one conversation with the client, you will come to understand what is truly important for that person. Selling is aggregating all those one-on-one conversations. If you do that you will come to understand how you can help that group of people. And once you know that, you will be in a better position to really differentiate yourself – and your company – for that client.