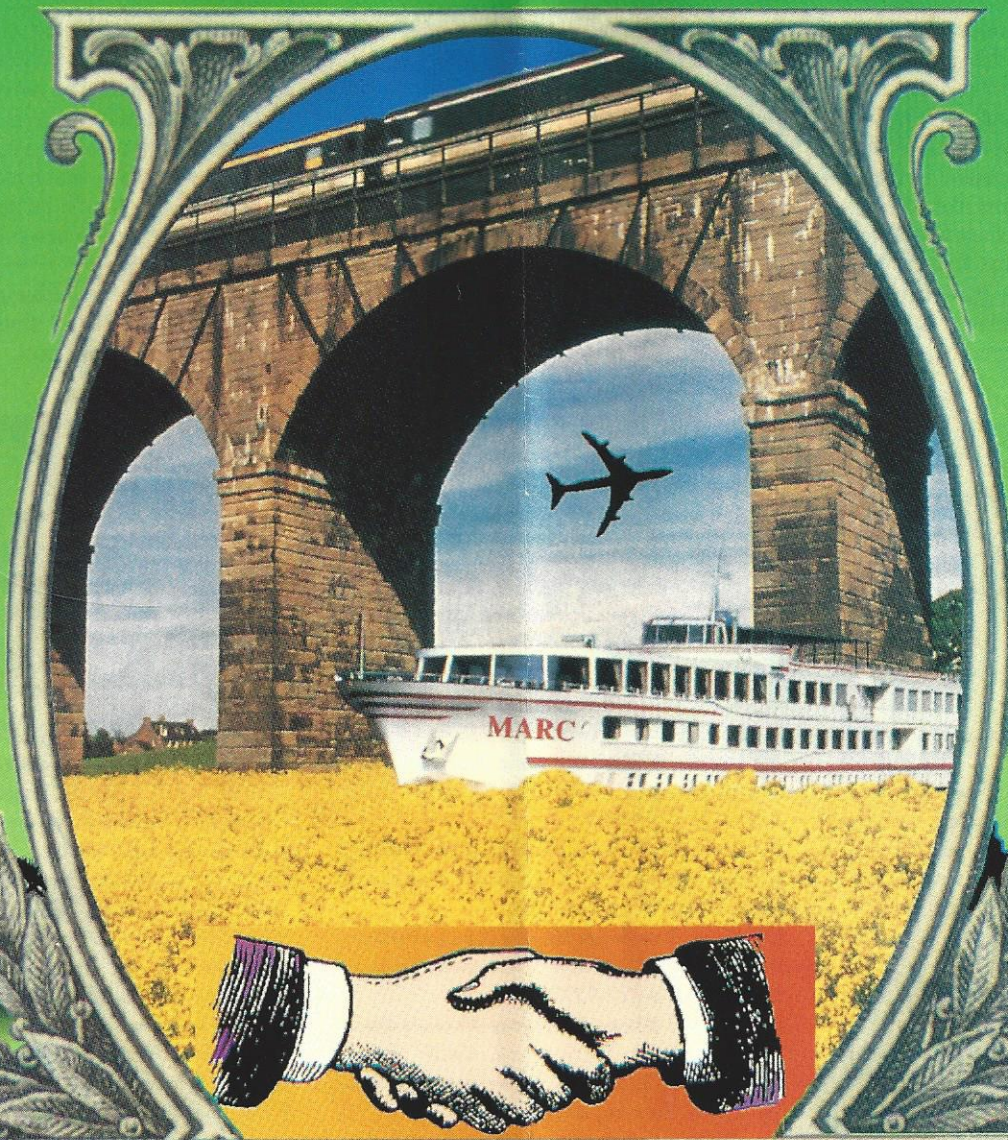


HOW WELL CAN YOU SELL?

Every sale has key junctures, points at which the deal can be clinched—
or lost. Take this test to uncover the anatomy of a sale.

BY DAWN M. BARCLAY



ONE DOLLAR

IN THE LITTLE MORE THAN 15 YEARS since the first large-scale CRS systems were introduced in the 1970s, computers have become the lifeline of most travel agencies—the link to airlines, hotels, rental cars, and ultimately profits. It's not enough anymore for a travel professional to be a destination specialist, a ticket dispenser, a troubleshooter, a visa procurer, an itinerary planner, a map decipherer, a current-affairs ace, and an accountant. You must be well versed in all the latest computer enhancements, too.

Automation has become so important, however, that it too often eclipses a travel agent's seminal role: salesperson. If you aren't skilled in selling, the number of computer languages you know or countries you've visited are irrelevant. Without sales savvy you risk losing bookings, and in a business of slim profit margins, bookings are everything.

"In the last six years, the deregulated environment has fostered a shopper syndrome—travelers are looking for the best deal. As a result, sales techniques are what turn shoppers into buyers," says Robert W. Joselyn, president of Robert W. Joselyn & Associates, a Scottsdale, Arizona, industry consulting firm. "People want to be sold on travel. They're just looking for someone to sell them—someone who exudes confidence and is passionate and knowledgeable about his or her product."

Are you that kind of agent?

TEST YOUR SKILLS

Think about what you'd do in each of the following scenarios and then see how your responses compare with the advice given on the following pages.

1 After a long morning of taking reservations, you finally head to the back room for lunch. Five steps away from your desk, you hear your phone ring. Although a group of co-workers are chatting nearby, not one offers to pick up your line. What do you do?

2 A new client has made an appointment to come into the agency to discuss her travel plans. When she arrives, however, the office is at its most frenetic—everyone is on the phone, and you're with a client. What do you do?

3 "Send us to Bermuda," says the middle-aged couple across your desk who are here to plan their annual February getaway. "We're in the mood for an island in the sun." You know that Bermuda won't be as warm as they'd like in February, and you're sure they'd prefer the Caribbean island where you and your spouse occasionally escape. But these clients are experienced travelers and you're hesitant to disagree with them. What do you do?

4 You agree with your recently engaged clients that Hawaii would make a perfect honeymoon. They want something tropical, romantic, and isolated—not to mention far from the in-laws. Although you've had prior success selling a terrific package complete with secluded villa, gourmet dining, and activities skewed to the young and glamorous, you hesitate to suggest it because the couple are college students. How do you determine what they can afford?

5 After listening to a family describe what they're looking for in a Mediterranean cruise, you lay out a dozen brochures and begin to page through them. You offer comparisons of each line, pointing out relevant "early-bird discounts," "inside upper-deck berths," and "air-sea programs" to help convey that you really know your stuff. The would-be cruisers sit very quietly as you make your pitch. When you're finished, they thank you and leave. What went wrong?

6 A corporate client calls and tells you she needs to travel to Manaus on business. "What's the newest hotel in the city?" she asks, "and what kind of travel documents will I need?" You know that Manaus is in Brazil, but since you usually handle domestic reservations, you know nothing about the country's hotels or visa requirements. What do you tell her?

7 After discussing ski-weekend options at length, you present your client with a popular package that meets his requirements and budget. He still seems hesitant to buy. What do you do?

1 THE FIRST HELLO

Think of every incoming call as your paycheck, says John Dalton, author of the book *It's Time to Sell Travel* (Business Concepts Unlimited). Every call is an opportunity to begin selling yourself to a prospective client. **So if your phone rings as you head to lunch, put your lunch on hold, at least long enough to handle the call. Follow your greeting of "Good afternoon" with your agency's name and your name. Or answer politely and put the caller on hold momentarily—then ask a co-worker to take over.**

"But never answer 'Busy, hold,'" warns Dalton. "You leave clients wondering if they've reached the right number. You also give them an impression of your agency as an abrupt, impersonal, and frantic place."

If after identifying yourself and your agency you must put callers on hold, never leave them for more than 30 seconds. "If no one can help immediately, ask if the caller would mind being phoned back at the earliest opportunity," Dalton recommends.

Never answer a call by just saying "Travel," advises Jim Smith, president of the GEM Travel Consortium in Massapequa, New York. Voice pride in your agency. "Just as the vacation begins for the client the moment they first contact the agency, so should their confidence in your abilities."

Once you've started to help a customer, try to avoid distractions, adds Robert Joselyn. "If you have two or three interruptions, a client will begin to feel uneasy about your competence—especially if you keep coming back to the phone saying, 'Where were we?'"

No matter what your mood (irritation, fatigue, boredom) keep it under wraps; as a salesperson, you must always appear helpful, enthusiastic, and articulate. If you're unsure of your phone personality or voice, record your conversations and then evaluate them, suggests Bridjette Powers March, owner of Werner Travel in Anchorage, Alaska. Her agency grades calls based on what tones come over the line—angriness, happiness, eagerness, and so on—as well as clarity of speech. "We had one Czech employee, for example, who spoke English fairly well, but her thick accent was hard to understand over the phone. After recording and listening to her own calls, she improved 50 percent in one week," says March.

2 THE FIRST HANDSHAKE

A client's impression of your agency is formed within the first 15 seconds after he or she enters, says Joselyn. That means professionalism is reflected in the way your visitors are greeted, the way your office is decorated, and even how each agent is dressed.

The worst thing you can do is fail to acknowledge a customer's presence, says Ellen M. Gill of AAA Western New York Travel in Buffalo, New York. **If you have no receptionist, excuse yourself from the customer at your desk and greet the incoming client. Graciously tell her you'll be with her as soon as you finish your current transaction. If you're on the phone and see a client walk in, at the very least, smile and whisper, "I'll be with you as soon as possible."**

Seat waiting visitors in a well-lit area and give them two of your agency's most essential sales tools—client profile forms and your agency's scrapbook, advises GEM's Smith. "The profile forms will allow you to get some important information—name, address, travel preferences. The scrapbook, filled with postcards from clients and letters of commendation, will whet prospects' travel appetites and boost their confidence in your firm."

At Gill's agency, a receptionist starts the sales process with walk-ins by obtaining names, addresses and travel biases. She then gives them appropriate brochures to peruse until a travel planner is available. Because the agency works with a limited number of preferred suppliers, the receptionist needs little travel training to give clients the right brochures. (A receptionist could also show prospective clients generic tourism office brochures.) When an agent becomes available, the receptionist accompanies the clients to the agent's desk and introduces them. "Already, two persons at the agency know the clients' names. They've established a rapport before the actual sales process has begun," Gill says.

Just as essential as an agency's meet-and-greet techniques are its more cosmetic welcoming touches. Your office should be a place where you're proud to invite clients. Agents shouldn't eat in view of clients, have cluttered offices, or dress differently from their job-interview attire, says Joselyn. Nor should they be overheard asking, "Has anyone seen Mr. Jones's file? I've been looking for it for a week!"

Larry Gove of Miller-Gove Travel in Emeryville, California, recently gave each of his agents a \$25 gift certificate to Nordstrom department store and asked them to study the salespersons. The agents were then asked what observations they could incorporate into their own jobs. Their findings: The office should always be adequately staffed to keep clients from waiting, agents shouldn't chew gum at work, and clients should be addressed by name.

3 PINPOINTING THE DESIRE

Giving clients what they really want (not what they think they want or what *you'd* like) is the difference between making a one-time sale and building a lifelong agent-client relationship. But don't take that advice literally. To find out what clients actually want, you may need to probe.

"That means controlling the conversation—not by talking the entire time, but by asking questions that uncover what's unique about the client's vacation needs," says Christopher Hooson of Agenda Inc., a travel management consulting firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Qualifying the client gives you the information you need to make appropriate recommendations."

So before you send a sun-seeking couple to Bermuda in February, even if that's what they've asked for, first pinpoint their dream. If you're not sure they'll be happy with their choice, politely explain why: "Bermuda is a lovely destination, but it may be under 70 degrees in February." From the information you garner, you can suggest suitable alternatives.

To successfully confirm a client's request, ask a series of simple questions such as the names of travel companions, dates of travel, and length of stay. Then follow with open-ended questions that dig deeper: Where have clients traveled before? What do they do in their spare time? Do they prefer traveling in groups? The combination of answers gives you a better understanding of what the client is looking for.

The idea isn't to grill clients but instead to put them in the best frame of mind to answer questions and ultimately to buy. Many successful sales professionals establish this ease with body language—behavior that psychologically relaxes clients and makes them feel special. Such techniques include repeating the client's name often, maintaining eye contact, and leaning slightly forward as you talk, thus physically entering the discussion.

Sit beside the client when going over a brochure or itinerary, suggests Rudy Ligtelyn of Ligtelyn Travel in Los Altos, California. "It makes clients feel like they're dealing with a friend in their living room."

Once you've qualified your clients, don't be afraid to present your opinion regarding their requests or to tactfully advise them that the destinations or hotels they've chosen may not best suit their needs, says Joselyn. "People come to you for your travel knowledge, just as they go to a physician when they're feeling ill. If you tell a doctor you think you have pneumonia but he prefers to run a few tests before making a diagnosis, do you take offense?"

4 MONEY TALK

Determining a client's travel budget is perhaps the touchiest part of the qualifying process. Although a customer's age, type of dress, and occupation can provide clues, they aren't always sure indicators. Nor is it wise to ask about a budget point-blank. Clients usually try to get the best possible deal and are likely to low-ball the figure.

You'd be much wiser to offer a choice of price ranges (high and low) and explain the difference in quality between the two. Then let the clients decide which they would prefer. Your engaged college students may wear jeans and drive a jalopy, for example, but they may come from well-to-do families or have sizable honeymoon savings.

The art of successful selling is to recommend a package that doesn't insult the client by being too cheap or too expensive, Joselyn says. "If you've asked about past vacations and where customers have stayed, you should have an idea of what they're willing to spend."

Too often travel agents presume that clients want the cheapest possible vacation, Joselyn says. Ironically their own value system can keep them from selling up. "Because agents don't make a lot of money, they often neglect to mention the more expensive options to clients, assuming the costs are excessive. Meanwhile the client, who often earns more than the agent, might not consider a deluxe package to be extravagant at all," he explains.

5 THE PITCH

Many agents jeopardize their own chances of making a sale by inadvertently overwhelming clients. "Never offer more than two choices—three, tops," says GEM's Smith. Too many options impede decision-making. Nor are you likely to impress customers by drowning them in travel jargon—you may know what "round-trip transfers" mean, for example, but your clients may not. They'll better understand if you explain that they'll be driven from the airport to their hotel and back again for departure.

To present the product in the way most likely to excite the traveler, the Institute of Certified Travel Agents' Travel Career Development manual suggests speaking the client's language. Sell the benefits of a package—not the features. Customers won't be motivated to buy unless the benefits are clear. **For instance, to sell a family cruise you should establish the desired itinerary, budget, and atmosphere before you haul out every brochure in your files. Then preselect one or two appropriate ships or lines and concentrate on selling those. Don't simply recite the ship's features—in clear and detailed terms point out the benefits.** A cruise cabin described as deluxe (a feature) means much less to clients than explaining how much more comfortable they'll be with more living space and an ocean view (two benefits). Practice using vivid descriptions—"cabins with sitting areas"; "four-course meals"; and "a deep saltwater pool"—instead of empty adjectives like "nice," "pretty," and "wonderful."

If your clients don't like the first ships you present, you can offer one or two other options—but never more than a few at a time. Leisure travel is an important purchase, and the last thing you want to do is confuse or intimidate your clients.

When presenting a product, Ellen Gill describes each aspect of the trip in a positive light, followed by a question such as "You did say you wanted an ocean view like this room rate offers?" That way she gets the client into the habit of answering yes. By linking the features of an itinerary to the client's self-proclaimed requirements, you've got them selling themselves.

6 THE CURVE

It's impossible to know everything about every place. But do make the effort to learn where to find answers to questions beyond your expertise. **If a client wants to know about visa requirements in Brazil, new hotels, or other information you don't know, confidently explain that even though you haven't been there, you know how to find the answers and will call her as soon as possible.**

"Faking it ruins clients' confidence much more than admitting that you're not sure of an answer and then offering to look it up," says Joselyn.

At AAA Lehigh Valley in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Sally McCorison's staff is well briefed on destinations, thanks to in-house training and family trip reports. But questions still crop up. "When our agents are unsure, we consult a co-worker who has been there or we call a tourist board," she says. "Instead of being annoyed by our lack of knowledge, most clients are happy that we're willing to go that extra step."

When clients book travel in person, it's often more expedient to first determine which questions will hinder the sale, advises Hooson. "If you're booking clients at a certain hotel in Bermuda and halfway through the reservations process they ask, 'By the way, does the hotel have evening entertainment?' you probably don't need to interrupt the booking to find out, since nightclubs and discos may be located close by if not at the hotel. You can answer, 'When I finish your reservation, I'll find that out for you.'"

On the other hand, if you're booking a cruise for a client and his elderly Hispanic father and they ask whether there's a Spanish-speaking doctor on board, you should immediately ask if such a doctor is essential. "If the doctor is a requirement, you'd better find the answer before you proceed with the booking," he says.

7 CLOSING THE SALE

If you've done a good job qualifying your client, the close should be simple. It's a matter of reviewing how the features and benefits of the vacation meet the client's specified needs—and asking for the client's business. Too many agents neglect that last, most crucial aspect of the sale for fear that they'll appear manipulative. They may even offer the client the option to postpone the decision, although it could cost them the sale.

"Listen to objections and then counter them," advises Joselyn. "If clients are worried about money, emphasize value ('You'll get seven nights for the price of five'), or downscale the package to meet their needs, perhaps by offering a shorter vacation or a less expensive hotel." Then ask them for the sale ("Would you like me to reserve your space now?").

Also, if the situation warrants, create a sense of urgency, Dalton suggests. **If your ski client, for example, still seems hesitant once you've found a suitable package, you can speed up the sale by telling him that it's no problem to begin a booking. Point out how each part of the trip meets his travel objectives, and then stress that because ski packages—especially popular ones—sell out quickly, he'd be wise to put down a deposit soon. If he still hedges, offer to book a reservation to guarantee the package. If he prefers that you not book this trip, you can search for another one.**

Advise clients that they can always change—don't say "cancel"—a reservation if restrictions permit, suggests Dalton. "And if money seems to be the obstacle, promote the travel-now, pay-later option of using a credit card."

Remember, you're selling clients their dreams, providing them with things they have already professed they want. "The question shouldn't be whether clients will travel, but how," Joselyn says. "Offer options, but not the option to drop the sale."

When dealing with a high-risk product like travel—one in which people invest precious time and money for something they can't see or feel ahead of time—clients need a personal touch. Computer knowledge and destination expertise are essential aspects to travel planning. But without the ability to sell, you may never get the chance to exercise any of the other skills your job requires. ♦

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