



# 10 Major Mistakes Senior Sales People Make

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You are a senior sales person, which means you have been selling successfully in your industry for 15 or more years. Your longevity as a proven producer rightfully earns you respect among clients, peers, and management. And, some of you are operating on cruise control most of the time . . . you've become complacent. Frankly, it's easy to "wing it" because veterans believe that they "know it all" as a result of producing so well for so long, knowing products and services inside out and knowing the industry cold.

Here are 10 major mistakes that contribute to complacency with suggestions for how to avoid them. The result can be renewed focus, determination, *and* higher closing ratios!

**1. Industry Ignorance.** You have been selling to firms in your target industry (or industries) for so many years you are convinced you know everything that's happening and is going to happen. Really? When was the last time you sat by yourself, did an analysis of the three to five major trends in your target industries, and put your predictions in writing about how those changes will impact your client's needs and therefore your products and services? Do you know the specific causes of those trends? Why are they happening? And most importantly, if those trends continue into the future, how will the industry be different one, three, and five years from now? Furthermore,

do similar industries exist that could use your products and services? If you do the above analysis once a year and put your thoughts in writing, "Bravo" for you! But chances are high that you haven't done so because your natural tendency is to focus on specific firms in specific industries. And by staying so close to them, it is very difficult to know what is changing in the bigger picture, except for what you learn from your best clients. The good news is that you can create a process of doing an annual industry review more easily today than ever before, thanks to the Internet. First read books and articles on competitive strategy techniques for analyzing industries and competitors. It will give you a jump start toward seeing and understanding industry changes. Second, read Standard & Poor's Industry Surveys (updated every quarter). Third, read the annual reports and 10K's of the biggest players in your industries. Fourth, identify and read the periodic reports of the stock analysts on Wall Street who follow those industries. Finally, join the major industry associations and read their publications on industry changes and trends. If you do these reviews consistently for three years, and keep doing it, you will become an industry expert. And it's a small jump from industry expert to trusted advisor, a transition you already know how to make. You will be one in a thousand!

**2. Too Few Questions.** You don't ask enough questions because you already know

most of the answers; why waste time? Instead, you're inclined to show off your knowledge and end up talking too much, especially at the beginning of the sales process, thus missing two crucial points. First, your prospect truly believes their business is significantly different from competitors'. You know their business is 90%+ the same because of your cross-industry knowledge. Your prospects do not see what you see; don't try to convince them otherwise. Just listen intently as they tell you how they're different and search for ways your products and services can help enhance those differences. Second, you must take time and ask a lot of questions up front, even though you've heard it all before. Remember, your prospects will not be truly open to your influence until they are convinced they have influenced you first. So be quiet, listen reflectively, and take notes with a *genuine* look of interest on your face. You put yourself in a superior position to influence them later if you do the above first.

### **3. Limited Business Knowledge.**

You've spent your career in one functional area of business. How much do you really know and understand about finance, marketing, human resources, R&D, manufacturing/operations, and information technology? Can you explain the key dependencies and interdependencies among these functions? Do you know how a decision in one functional area impacts other functional areas? If you don't know, you have some studying to do. Gaining a true understanding of how a *whole* business works puts you in a position of seeing the broad implications for clients buying what you're selling, including how they can more broadly leverage what you have to offer. Few sales people can see and make these connections. You set yourself far apart from the crowd when you do.

**4. Low Emotional Connection.** You know that logic makes people think and emotion makes them act. Your long experience makes it easy (automatic?) for you to talk about your products and services and

answer any question. It takes extra energy to focus on each individual prospect to discover how to best connect with them emotionally. You must pay attention to their body language, facial expressions, intonations, and multiple sub-texts in order to know where to direct the conversation. You must stay "you" (prospect) focused (not "I" focused) and constantly look for opportunities to build rapport, "like-ness," and to convince them you truly do have their best interests in mind. Identifying and reinforcing each person's unique, positive characteristics takes skill, energy, and focused attention . . . every time . . . regardless of the number of years you've done it.

**5. Organization Structure.** It's very likely the organization charts of all of your existing accounts are out of date and you haven't yet developed charts for your prospective accounts. How do you get current charts? Ask your client or prospect for a copy, *and* for updates. Or, create your own using an organization chart tool. Granted, these charts become a work in progress because you typically cannot get all the information at once and people and structures change. The real value in having the charts, beyond knowing who reports to whom, is to identify key decision makers, key influencers to key decision makers, dependencies (one direction) and interdependencies (both directions) among departments and individuals. Furthermore, it gives you a map to highlight what areas of the business use your products and services or could benefit from using them. It is one thing to believe you have all this information in your head, it's quite another to put it all down on paper in an organized way. Most importantly, these charts will quickly point out what you don't know and where. Client and prospect knowledge is power. Create your maps (organization charts with flows and relevant connections), keep them up to date, and you'll be even more effective.

**6. Company Imperatives.** Every business you want to sell to establishes one to five imperatives or major goals for the year;

you must know what they are. Once you know what they are, you link the benefits of your products and services to prospects' goals so it becomes very difficult (impossible?) for your prospect to disagree with what they have been tasked to achieve. Yearly imperatives are easier to discover with public companies, simply go to their web site and read their annual report, CEO speeches, and press releases. Look for similar sources on non-public companies' web sites. In both cases, ask employees to verify and expand upon your findings to determine what's *just talk* and what's *real*. And don't be surprised if some of the people you talk with are surprised to learn what you know; educate them gently.

**7. Objection Responses.** If you've done your job well up to this point, the prospect should be well on the way to being sold. Furthermore, you already know 90% of the objections you are likely to hear from prospects. The classic mistake is that you haven't approached one of the most challenging aspects of selling in a very thoughtful and systematic manner. Buy a three-ring binder and preprinted, colored tabs 1-31. On the first page, number in the order you are most likely to hear each objection that your prospects typically use when buying your products and services. Then write your best response to each objection on pages behind the corresponding numbered tab. Now, edit and refine each of your responses into a script so that it effectively meets the objection and turns it into a benefit. Next, memorize your scripted responses to every objection. Now, will every scripted response be appropriate in every situation? No, but having them in your head when you're in the pressure of the moment will give you significantly increased confidence and comfort in order to smoothly make adjustments on the fly. Finally, keep the binder with you on the road so you can continue to add new objections and refine old ones.

**8. Exceptional Presenter.** You may be known around the office as one of the better presenters, but you need to become an

*exceptional* presenter, someone whose presentation skills inspire reverence, respect, even wonder among colleagues . . . and dread among competitors. Frankly, it's not difficult to do; no inherent talent is required because it is largely technique and you can learn techniques. It does take a very good coach, a positive learning attitude, and the discipline to practice, practice, and practice some more. Once you learn the fundamentals of content, structure, and delivery in concept and in practice, you should consistently work with your own small team to refine your style. This process is especially important when you are preparing for a specific client presentation. What you say, the organization of what you say, and how you say it can have a significant and lasting positive impression on your prospect . . . or it can relegate you to the large group of "just like everybody else". Where do you want to be?

**9. Master Negotiator.** How many workshops, books, and audio programs have you studied on negotiating? Incredibly, few sales training programs cover negotiating, and if it is covered, it isn't in depth. Or maybe you believe that selling and negotiating are different. If so, expand your definition of negotiating. You don't simply negotiate when buying a house or a car, you negotiate everyday. In fact, you negotiated before you left home this morning. Buyers, on the other hand, especially at larger companies where the stakes are higher, are increasingly trained in negotiation strategy and techniques. You must become a master negotiator to stay competitive in your markets. Furthermore, this body of knowledge, skills, and techniques is not easily mastered. Important negotiations are complex, subtle, and sophisticated. Your best approach is to attend a multi-day workshop, put what you've learned into practice, continue to read and use self-training materials, and then repeat your re-education process every year. You will, as a result, deliver higher profits as well as more sales. And the return on your investment is the highest you'll find, period.

**10. Systematic Relationships.** You are undoubtedly already using a contact management tool to track your prospect and customer relationships. The question is, are you using the tool to systematically create and build those relationships? The secret to creating and building relationships is positive, multiple contacts over time. And “positive” means that 80%+ of the time, your contacts are perceived by the other person as beneficial to them. Does your daily practice meet those criteria? Furthermore, have you divided your data base into categories depending on their importance or potential? For example, you may have A’s, B’s, C’s and X’s. You contact all A’s at least once a week, all B’s once a month, all C’s once a quarter, and all X’s get Christmas and/or birthday cards. You’re A, B, and C contacts are an ongoing variety of face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, snail mails, and emails. Yes, it takes a lot of detailed, daily attention to do it well. And at your level, you can afford to hire some administrative help (virtual assistant?) if your employer won’t provide it. Your future, more than any other thing, depends on you creating and building contacts systematically and on purpose. Invest the time, discipline, and money to truly set you apart.

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Avoiding these major mistakes may be easier than you think, unless you make the 11<sup>th</sup> mistake, trying to do it all yourself. There isn’t enough time each week for you to do all of the above alone. Think through what you know works best for you. Search and buy appropriate secondary research information, it’s often inexpensive and readily available. Finally, bring together a team of knowledge and skills experts to help you move to a higher level, faster. You can find a coach for practically anything today, not just for tennis or golf.

What you have read is a small part of the advice I give in my work with senior sales people. If you are ready to move more rapidly to a higher level of effectiveness, let’s have a short phone conversation.

Call my office (408-246-2600) or send me an email at [David@dpalmer.com](mailto:David@dpalmer.com) and we’ll arrange a time to talk.

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