Resolve Buyer Objections; Close More Sales

By Conrad Elnes

You will never lose a sale, unless the buyer has one or more objections than you can answer effectively. Ironically, however, if you deal with objections in the way that is most "natural" for you, your chances of being consistently successful are greatly diminished. In fact, even highly-experienced salespeople close only about one-third of their new prospects, while losing two-thirds to objections. Despite all that has been written, most salespeople are not confident when dealing with objections. Now, that can change for you. My studies provided new insights and techniques that will enable you to prevent or resolve most objections and close the sale.

To share these valuable insights with you, I'll answer the following important questions in five segments:

1. What are the most common classifications of prospect objections, what do they indicate, what are the most effective responses?
2. How can I conduct my sales interviews in ways that prevent or minimize frequent objections? (An objection, like sunburn, is easier to prevent than cure.)
3. How can I uncover hidden objections that cause prospects to stall?
4. What attitudes are essential for dealing with objections?
5. What are the latest techniques for resolving objections?

Many salespeople have employed the following approaches to dealing with objections and added thousands of dollars per year to their income. Read on, and reap the rewards for yourself.

First: Classify Their Objections
An objection can be defined as follows: An objection is a buyer’s unfavorable perception about your product or service that creates a specific obstacle to purchasing from you. (e.g. “You can’t meet our delivery requirements.”)
Using this working definition, we can classify buyer objections in several ways and respond accordingly. As you think of objections by classification, your responses will be more effective and more pleasing to buyers.

**Easy vs Hard**

First, objections can be considered "Easy" or "Hard." Easy objections are generally the result of misunderstanding, misinformation or confusion about some aspect of your product or service. Correcting the misinformation or clearing up the confusion is nearly always enough to satisfy prospects and put Easy Objections behind you. In contrast, Hard Objections are true, and there is nothing you can do to change them. For example, if a customer wants a leather couch, which is unavailable, and cloth is unacceptable, you are dealing with a Hard Objection. Hard Objections requires skill, but they will not necessarily cost you the sale. (More later.)

**Spoken vs Unspoken**

Objections can also be classified as "Spoken" or "Unspoken." Half of your prospects will openly express their objections. These prospects are more assertive and socially competitive; they feel comfortable challenging you. The other half, being less assertive, are inclined to avoid the conflict and hurt feelings they might cause by raising an objection. Instead, they withhold their objection and create a hidden obstacle to completing the sale. Unless you become extremely skilled at encouraging prospects to voice them, unspoken objections will cause stalls when you attempt to close the sale. They are the most frustrating. You do not have an opportunity to answer them; you lose the sale; you never learn why.

**Overt vs Disguised**

Objections can be classified as "Overt" or "Disguised." Overt objections are stated in precise language that makes them understandable. Disguised Objections are often revealed in the questions that prospects ask or when they waffle when asked to buy. The greatest danger of Disguised Objections is your failure to recognize them. For example, if an objection is raised in question form, such as, "Can’t we pay when we receive our order?" You may
respond, “No.” Although accurate, this answer may be "wrong," because of the prospect's temporary cash-flow problem. Therefore, the prospect may bury the concern and leave it as a reason to resist buying from you. If prospects ask questions that contain a negative contraction, e.g. can’t, aren’t, won’t, etc. acknowledge the concern and probe for more information. A waffle may sound good at first, then it turns and bites you. For example: “You have an excellent product, but I’m just not interested.”

**Presentation vs Closing**

Finally, objections can be classified according to when they occur during the sales cycle. "Presentation Objections" arise during the presentation and "Closing Objections" are raised as a response to your closing attempt. If a prospect objects during your presentation, the cause may be the way you are presenting your product or service. For example, if you tend to describe only its features, the prospect is likely to raise concerns related to pricing. An objection, other than price, may occur if you describe both a feature and a benefit without dramatizing how the benefit provides a solution to a specific, acknowledged issue of this buyer.

Closing Objections are often a buyer's final resistance to making a purchase commitment. The resistance may be caused by an unspoken objection or by a general lack of enthusiasm for your product. In either case, the objections raised this late in the interview are often really excuses. Therefore, they're difficult to refute. For example, how can you dispute with a prospect who says "I've decided I just can't afford your product.”

Since it’s difficult to argue the point, it is more productive to identify the true hidden objection and deal with it. In Section 5, you'll learn techniques for identifying and then resolving only genuine Closing Objections.

"An Objection, like sunburn; is easier to prevent than cure.” CE
Second: Preventing Objections

Many objections can be prevented, thus saving you wasted effort and many lost sales. Several easily learned techniques will pay you big dividends. Before we discuss the techniques, let's examine three important sales interview fundamentals.

First, in its most basic form a sales interview can be divided into four parts, similar to the following: | ER | FF | Present | Close |

Please remember this diagram, as we'll be referring to it often. (Note: Completing all four steps may take more than one interview.)

While Establishing Rapport (ER) you employ listening and feedback skills to build trust and begin to establish a "partnership" with the buyer. During Fact Finding (FF), you should be entirely prospect-focused. That is, you use all of your probing and listening techniques to learn what problems the buyer is trying to solve and what dreams the buyer is trying to fulfill. The Presentation phase allows you to show how your solution can help fulfill the buyer's dreams or solve problems. Finally, during the fourth step, you Close the sale. (Ask for an appropriate commitment.)

Although this interview model is simple and easily followed, even experienced salespeople tend to leap ahead to present exciting product features and benefits before they have identified prospect needs for them. This approach will almost certainly cause prospects to raise objections and indifference.

A second important fundamental applies during proactive sales calls. When you initiate contact, buyers will undergo four mindsets on the way to making a purchase. Neil Rackham, in his book Spin Selling (McGraw-Hill, 1988), describes the four attitudes in detail. I'll summarize them as follows:
BUYER ATTITUDES

Level One: "I'm OK the way I am." (Indifferent – No Pain)
Level Two: "I might be a little bit concerned." (Interested – Latent Pain)
Level Three: "I see the problem." (Aware of need – Active Pain)
Level Four: "I want a solution." (Receptive – Energizing To Action Pain)

Until prospects are Receptive, Level Four, they are likely to be resistant to your attempts to close and will raise various objections to avoid making a purchase. Buyers spend money only to solve their problems (pain issue) or fulfill their dreams; therefore, unless they have a clearly developed problem or dream in mind, your solution will have much less value to them.

A third fundamental of selling will also help reduce the number of buyer objections. There are four increasingly deeper levels of needs analysis that help both you and a prospect fully understand the problems or dreams your presentation must satisfy. Imagine a gold mine. At the mine surface, Need Identification, you use experience to probe for certain problems or dreams that are common among members of your target-markets. If prospects feel a strong rapport with you, they may acknowledge a concern. (A few flecks of gold.) During the second step, Clarification, you invite prospects to describe in detail their view of the problem. (More flecks.)

Quantifying the problem is helpful to you and motivating to your buyers; it helps both of you understand the size and importance of the problem, as well as the costs that may be incurred if the problem isn't solved (A few small nuggets). The final step, Verifying, allows you to reiterate the solution you believe prospects want and to ask them for agreement. (Large gold nuggets.) When buyers agree that they want a solution, they have arrived at a Level Four, and their minds are receptive to hearing your proposed solution. Always Mine For The Gold Nuggets Before You Sell!

Taking the time to dig deeply allows you to lead the prospect through the three levels of attitude to Receptivity. By doing so, you prevent two
additional sales obstacles - indifference and the possibility that the buyer is considering other solutions.

By asking a few additional questions, you can prevent three more potential obstacles to the sale. The first is the possibility of a stall if a key decision maker doesn’t attend your Presentation. Another important point of qualification is a prospect’s ability to buy at this time. Affordability is also a recurring objection that can be eliminated. When you pre-qualify prospects’ budgets, decision makers and timing, you increase the chances of making a sale. Coupling these agreements with the fact that the buyer is at a Level Four Attitude regarding need and sees no other solution, you are nearly assured of a sale. Thus, intelligent probing during the Fact Finding portion of the sales interview can prevent many potential objections.

When you take the step of qualifying prospects’ price (budget) constraints and you dramatize (personalize) solutions to a prospects’ acknowledged concerns, you eliminate another cause of buyer objections - price issues.

In summary, here are six ways to prevent Presentation and Closing Objections:

• Identify and thoroughly analyze the prospect’s problems and dreams and their monetary value to reach a Level Four Attitude - Receptive.

• Eliminate from consideration all other solutions and suppliers other than you and your product.

• Ascertained that the key decision makers will attend your Presentation.

• Take time to discuss and agree on all the financial and budget factors prior to your Presentation.

• Be certain that no timing factors will force a postponement.

• Dramatize all product benefits as solutions to buyers’ personal acknowledged problems or into fulfillments of their dreams.
Third: Work The Buyer Through A Stall

During the course of a sale, you learn the buyers’ needs and present your solution. Believing that you have earned the business, you close the sale expecting an order. Some prospects comply, but the most frustrating ones are those who Stall when you ask them to buy. The stall occurs after you have spent a considerable time doing a needs analysis and developing a proposal that shows how prospects will benefit from making a purchase. When you close, you expect a satisfying "Yes." If you get a "No," caused by an objection that you can't answer adequately, it is frustrating, but at least the prospect has made a decision. However, a Stall such as "I really like your product, but I want to think about it" is doubly frustrating because it holds out a hope that the prospect may buy, even though you know in your heart that you are unlikely ever to close the sale. The lingering hope that prospects may eventually buy can prevent you from being assertive (and possibly offensive) in ferreting out the underlying reason.

Since so many sales get bogged down in stalls, I have developed some effective techniques that will help you find the cause (usually a hidden objection) and answer it to the prospect's satisfaction. Generally, there are three reasons why qualified prospects want to "think about it":

Reason 1. They are ready to buy but don't want to act too hastily.

Reason 2. They are ambivalent, that is they see some benefits, but also see one or more objections. Or, they may be confused by an offer from another salesperson.

Reason 3. They have a serious objection that prevents them from buying.

It is to your advantage to maintain the partnership in order to learn the prospect's situation and work it through to a successful sale. An unresolved stall leads to a lose/lose outcome.
The **Stall Breaker Technique** is effective when you believe a buyer has stopped coaching you and may feel ambivalent about your offer. It is almost a “miracle pill” for ferreting out a hidden objection. For example:

Buyer (firmly): “I don’t have any particular concerns; I’m just not ready to commit right now.”

Salesperson (Warm and friendly): **“Joe, you’re right. You shouldn’t commit until you’re ready. It’s just that in the past, when people were a little hesitant to go ahead it was almost always for one of two reasons. (1) They had a concern we hadn’t discussed, or (2) Our products didn’t really meet their needs.** (The salesperson points back in time to avoid a threat.) **In your case, is it one of these two reasons or is it something else?”** (The salesperson brings time to the present.)

Buyer: “I guess it’s about your price.”

Salesperson: **“Oh? Tell me about that.”**

NOTE: To increase your effectiveness, memorize and practice the Stall Breaker word-for-word.

If the Stall-Breaker fails to elicit the objection, the final course of action is the "Controlled Release." In making a "Controlled Release," you reaffirm the partnership and gain agreement from the buyer about time deadlines for deciding, with whom they will discuss your offer, what additional input they will seek. After all of these points are agreed upon, you ask permission to call the buyer if you develop any additional, helpful information. Buyers are likely to agree to this request, and it will be in your best interest to call for a brief appointment in advance of the date the buyer expects to make a final decision. Offer to deliver the additional information to the prospect. After doing so, you should attempt to close the sale once more.

Stalls are both frustrating and beguiling, frustrating because you are nearly certain you will never close the sale, and beguiling because the prospect seems to hold out a hope that you will. Most salespeople agree that there is a <10 percent chance of closing prospects who are left with an unresolved stall. Therefore, your sales effort results in a Lose/Lose outcome unless you
learn and practice techniques that help prospects feel comfortable in disclosing their hidden objections. Mastery of the techniques just illustrated will result in many additional sales each year.

Fourth: Prepare Your Mind To Answer

Once salespeople have identified an objection, they usually know enough technical knowledge and power phrases to answer it. Then, why do they generally close sales with only about one-third of their prospects? Why do they fail twice as often as they succeed with first-time buyers?

Most salespeople lose sales to objections not for lack of answers, but rather for lack of prospect receptivity to hearing the answers. Interestingly, many salespeople aren't receptive to hearing what prospects are willing to explain about their objections. Both salespeople and prospects have low receptivity caused by Telling Tension—a compelling need to talk rather than listen. Whenever someone feels a strong emotion such as angry, defensive or enthusiastic, or when objections are raised, Telling Tension increases dramatically and receptivity is correspondingly reduced in both the salesperson and the prospect.

When prospects disclose an objection, they are likely to feel a strong need to talk in order to justify their position. In the meantime, your own Telling Tension will boil as you think of reasons why they are wrong. The compelling need to talk causes an interesting phenomenon called "LO/LO"-Lock On/Lock Out. Since the human mind cannot think two thoughts at the same time, it "locks on" to the one that predominates and "locks out" competing ideas. Prospect receptivity to additional information is your best hope for answering the objection, and it is essential that you manage everyone's Telling Tension as quickly as possible.

You can help control your own desire to talk if you remember MY PUP:
Maintain **Your Poise Under Pressure**. You can raise your own receptivity and gain valuable new insights if you keep a non-defensive, open mind. For instance, you might try this response to an objection: "Your concern about the price is important, and you have a reason for feeling the way you do. May I ask what it is?" Your attitude and probing approach will allow prospects to express their feelings more fully and reduce their Telling Tension. In return, prospects are likely to increase their receptivity enough to listen to your answer with an open mind.

If your goal is to become more successful at dealing with objections, here are four essential beliefs that can help you Maintain Your Poise Under Pressure:

1. Prospects are okay, even when they object. It is especially important that your subconscious mind believes this, or it will betray you. For example, if you are a more assertive person, your subconscious will cause you to become somewhat challenging and argumentative, to talk louder and faster, to use penetrating eye contact as you try to "overcome" the prospect's objections. If you are less assertive, your response to objections is likely to be to break eye contact, to become apologetic and eventually to give in to the objection. Neither of these behaviors leads to consistently successful results. Therefore, it is advantageous to remember that even when a prospect’s objections are not valid, the prospect is still okay.

2. You have a right to know prospect's real objection and to try to answer it. Feeling this way will help you deal with stalls rather than give in to them. It will also help clarify the validity of the closing objections. Many of them are really excuses that leave the true objection hidden in the buyer's mind. You are "okay" when you probe to be sure the prospect is giving you the real objection.

3. The partnership is maintained while dealing with an objection. Imagine yourself sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the buyer's side of the table as you try to understand the buyer's point of view. This attitude prevents a tug-of-war (Win/Lose) and focuses everyone’s attention on clarifying and solving issues.
4. Trying to **overcome** objections causes you to become adversarial toward buyers, and attempting to **handle** objections leads you to use manipulative methods. Both techniques are natural behaviors, but they raise resistance and should be avoided. Rather, you should **resolve** objections in order to help everyone relax and seek creative ways to arrive at Win/Win. In word and deed, resolving implies a cooperative, negotiated solution to an objection.

A high level of unmanaged Telling Tension is your greatest adversary in dealing with prospect objections. You increase your chances of success when you remember MY PUP and prepare your mind by adopting four positive partnership-driven beliefs.

The two benefits you will enjoy from maintaining these attitudes are a noticeably improved closing ratio and the higher level of satisfaction customers derive from their purchases.

**Fifth: Use Your Imagination And Be Creative**

Success in dealing with objections will increase dramatically when you remember two key points:

- When faced with any objection, avoid feeling defensive, and remain ready to manage the natural Telling Tension that arises.
- When resolving a Closing Objection, be aware that many objections are not real but rather they are excuses offered merely because prospects do not want to buy. Or, prospects may have a real objection that they prefer not to disclose for fear that you will "overcome" it and pressure them into buying.

The latter point is important because you have a right to know their real objection and resolve it if possible. Closing Objections such as, "We can't afford this product," **spoken by a qualified prospect** should not be
accepted as real, or a potential sale will be lost to the real objection that remains buried in a prospect's mind.

However, trying to resolve the excuse leads to debates about affordability. Even if you "win," you really "lose" because, although you've beaten the excuse, the buyer's real objection remains unanswered. Prospects cannot disclose this fact, however, without admitting that they didn't tell the truth previously. Therefore, they will try to find any plausible reason to terminate the interview, and they may resent it if you try to recontact them later.

To help you increase your chances of resolving final objections successfully, I have developed a four-step model to serve as a guide. If you memorize the steps and understand the principles behind them, you are certain to increase your closing ratio with those who consider themselves to be informed buyers.

FOUR-STEP MODEL

1. **Reduce the Tension.** This means remembering MY PUP and acknowledging prospects’ concerns empathically. Maintain the partnership as you probe to fully understand the objection and reduce the prospects’ Telling Tension.

2. **Gain A Commitment to Act.** A question such as the following helps ensure that you are resolving an objection rather than an excuse. "If we can set your mind at ease regarding the price, is there anything else that might keep you from moving ahead at this time?" (Studies indicate that nearly two-thirds of price objections disguise the real concerns.)

3. **Resolve the Objection Creatively.** Most of us learn a way to deal with objections that works occasionally. Success causes us to adopt that technique and stop looking for more effective solutions. You may want to try a new technique called "repositioning." (More later.)

4. **Close the Sale.** In step 2, the prospect agreed to buy if you "set his mind at ease" regarding the objection. Therefore, a close is mandatory and totally buyer-friendly. Use a two part close such as:
A) "Have we set your mind at ease about the price?" ("Yes")

B) "I recommend that we complete the paper work. Fair enough?"

Often the objections raised by prospects are but one component of a larger and more important issue. For example, prospects who raise price concerns may be seeking assurance that they are really making a **Smart Business Decision**. A Smart Business Decision is composed of four components in addition to price. For example: **Quality Features/ Benefits (F/B), Unique F/B, Impeccable Service F/B, Profitability or Performance F/B.** If the partnership is maintained after the objection is raised, chances are the prospect will readily agree to reposition (substitute) the larger concept (Smart Business Decision) rather than dwell only on a limited aspect such as the price. (See #3 above.)

This approach works well with many kinds of objections – especially Hard Objections. NOTE: It is important that buyers agree to substitute Smart Business Decision for price alone.

You never lose a sale unless a prospect has one or more objections that you haven't answered satisfactorily. With the techniques you have learned for categorizing, preventing, uncovering and resolving objections, you are positioned to enjoy a noticeable increase in sales. All that is left for you to do is to practice and apply the skills regularly.

**Conrad Elnes, Author and Senior Trainer**

During his highly successful sales career, Conrad Elnes analyzed the research being performed to learn the secrets of highly successful salespeople. This led to the publication of his book, *Inside Secrets of Outstanding Salespeople* (Prentice-Hall) that introduced him to salespeople throughout the world. Dozens of his white papers have been published in national sales journals, and many credit his ideas for increasing their sales to spectacular levels. You can learn and employ his ideas to increase your sales and enhance your career.
Conrad is the senior trainer for STI International® and has certified other highly qualified trainers to deliver the programs he has developed. To help ensure that your staff stops losing sales to objections and competition, contact Conrad for an analysis of the type of customized training that will be most suitable for them. You will be glad you did.

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“Your competitors are either a little bit ahead of you, or a bit behind and striving to surpass you. Your choices? Train your salespeople, or settle for being second best.”    C. E.