Customer comeback

So you think you know what your customers are really thinking? Anna Britnor Guest asks IT managers to spill the beans on the salespeople that make them smile – and seethe!

Have you heard the one about the IT director who would only book first meetings with salespeople for 4pm on a Friday – just to see how serious they were?

It wasn't a game but it was a test – and many failed. So, what do your customers really think of IT salespeople? Are they impressed by your professional approach, or secretly resolving to call your nearest competitor?

For Stuart Jenkins, IT manager for a large manufacturer, finding the right people to handle his business comes before finding the right products.

"Over the years, I've found that selling and buying are all about relationships," says Stuart. "The first meeting has nothing to do with product – it's about how we react with each other. If the interpersonal stuff doesn't work, we simply won't buy from them."

So the old adage that people buy from people they like would appear to be true? "Fundamentally, the relationship is a friendship," sums up Stuart. "But solely within a business environment. Some salespeople try to make it social but this doesn't work for me at all. I don't see it as a social thing."

Richard Johnston, desktop services manager of a county council, looks for a salesperson prepared to go the distance. "I need someone prepared to build a relationship over time, without expecting a quick sale," he says.

Both IT managers agree that demonstrating a real understanding of the challenges a customer is facing is a real point scorer. "They need to already know the types of issues councils are facing and to understand our specific needs and constraints," explains Richard. "It's very frustrating if they have no concept of how local government works."

Stuart agrees: "The seller has to understand what's driving me and my business – it has to be totally relevant and timing is more crucial than ever!"

To sell successfully to network manager Alan Hill you have to prove yourself over time. He states: "The salesperson seems genuine, you undertake a project, it's successful and so it builds – it's all about repeat business."

And it seems that most customers will reward salespeople who deliver on their promises with that elusive golden egg – loyalty – which is when the real selling can begin. "When I talk to a salesperson I know and trust, I am interested in what they say," expands Alan. "They build that trust by listening and understanding where we are – and by not being pushy."

Being arrogant, pushy and aggressive appear to be the IT manager's most-hated sales traits. But what are the other stumbling blocks in establishing a successful working relationship?

"One of the most annoying things is when a salesperson pretends to be technical but then can't answer a 'tricky' question," says Alan. "If they can, I'll be impressed. If not, I'll lose respect."

Stuart cites a similar experience: "We met a salesman from a company we hadn't dealt with before. The chemistry worked well, but when Alan asked some fairly innocuous technical questions it became evident that he didn't know anything about his products. I don't mind meeting a 'brochure-presenter' but please set my expectations! If you pretend to know all about it and you don't – well, that's the end of it!"

Richard Johnston presents another frustration: salespeople who teach him to 'suck eggs'! "Just because I'm a manager doesn't mean I don't understand the technology. New sales contacts sometimes assume this and explain things in very basic terms. Unfortunately for them, I automatically switch off."

Overselling of the technology is another common obstacle. "If a salesperson oversells the capability of a product it will sour things for the future," says Richard. "It's much better to tell me that it will only do 75% of what we want – we may still be happy enough to go ahead."

"I need suppliers to whom I can say what I feel," adds Stuart. "If I say, 'This product could be great but it's missing a widget,' don't take offence! Go away, look at it and respond, based on your knowledge of my issues."

If you can manage all this as a salesperson, there is still no time to relax. The other key to successful customer-supplier relationships lies in the nurturing they receive post-sales. Stuart explains: "I don't want suppliers who make

Dos and don'ts

DON'T pretend to be more technical than you are
DON'T be arrogant and assume you can solve all their problems
DON'T expect to be the only supplier your customer deals with
DON'T be aggressive, pushy or expect immediate results
DON'T oversell your product
DO listen
DO know your customer's specific business pressures
DO work to their time scales
DO take ownership of problems – and prioritise resolving them
DO be open, honest and trustworthy
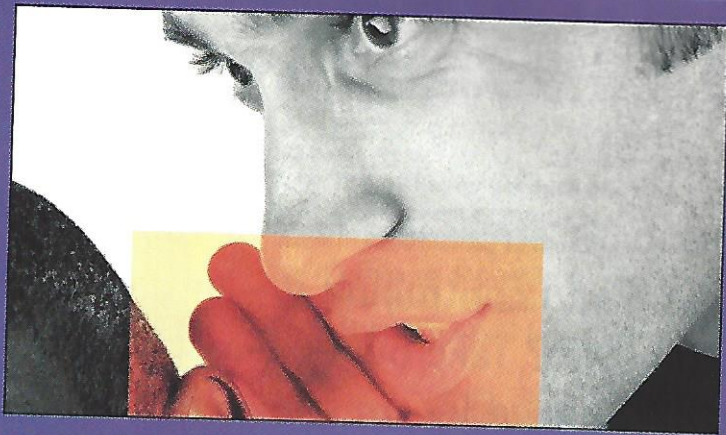
excuses. If something goes wrong, I want it fixed first – then we can talk about it. The suppliers who cause us most headaches are typically those whose products are 'intangible', like software development. No matter how well we think we have pinned down the spec, we still end up thumping the table because we feel they are wriggling out of something we expect."

Rod Coate, IT supervisor at a trade association, has his own unique way of describing this particular frustration. "Buying software development can be like ordering a car with a sunroof and being told you might not get the sunroof. Eventually you do get a sunroof but at the expense of the windscreen, so you have to pay extra for a periscope to see where you're going!"

So, if you're looking to scale new sales heights this century, start with some serious self-examination. Effective customer communication must be the beginning and end of your millennial efforts.

As IT director of a large insurer, Jas Patel sums up: "You can be offered the best bargain in the world, but if you don't like the salesperson, you'll never buy."