

ASK DON'T SELL!

We've all come across battleaxe sales techniques and many of us wince at the hijacking of NLP to sharpen the edges of those axes. Emma Sargent explains how successful selling is not about applying strategies to influence others to buy your product
by Caitlin Collins

I usually do my homework before interviewing somebody for Rapport; I have an idea as to a likely 'angle' before we meet and I submit my questions in advance. So I was surprised to find myself turning into the driveway of Emma Sargent's house totally unprepared for our meeting. All I knew was that we were going to talk about Emma's innovative approach to sales. My own approach to our interview was simple – an attitude of open interest in Emma, with a willingness to listen to what she had to say and a readiness to ask questions as they arose.

Settled on comfy sofas in the living room, we begin the interview with some background. Emma Sargent and her partner Tim Fearon run their NLP training and coaching company, Ambo Ltd, from their home on the edge of the New Forest. Coming from the corporate world, NLP Trainer Emma used to work in sales. 'But I'd had enough of sales,' she says; 'I'd vowed never to do it again.' So how come she's now making such a name for herself presenting sales trainings? 'It was a client of ours. She wanted me to run a sales training for her, and I told her I didn't do sales trainings. Her reply was brilliant. She said, "I know you don't. So let's talk about what you do do and see how we can apply that to our sales training!" So, largely thanks to her, I'm now running sales trainings!'

Emma is concerned about the use – and misuse – of NLP in selling. 'Of course your purpose in selling is to get the business,' she says. 'But there must also be a genuine intention to do your best for your clients and offer solutions that are right for them. If I can't do that, I prefer

to walk away from a job with my integrity intact. Your intention is key. Many people think of selling in the sense of its being something you do to other people, to influence them to buy your product. Manipulating other people like this is unethical – and it gives NLP a bad name. It makes much better business sense to do the best for your clients: you'll build good relationships with them and the business will keep coming in. So the way I go about it is very different from hypnotising people into buying from me; rather than trying to get someone to do something, I'm looking for a shared outcome.'

Client insight

The way Emma goes about it is indeed very different; it's based on the principle of 'client insight'. 'It's about getting to know your client,' Emma explains. 'The more you understand them, the more likely you'll be able to sell them what they need. I never promote my products at the first meeting, because I need to know what somebody wants before I can tell them what I have to offer. Instead of throwing lots of stuff at them in the hope that they'll spot something that's relevant for them, I focus on what they've already told me they need, so my solution to their problem will fit on the back of an envelope.'

Emma makes a point of distinguishing between solutions and outcomes. 'If the client is in a hurry and wants me to come up with instant solutions, I don't allow myself to be railroaded. It's easy for both clients and sales-people to be too solution-focused: "Here's the problem; get us out of it!" or, "Here's the client's problem; how do we get him out

Sales people need an attitude of curiosity, rather than of confrontation

of it?” It works better to think: “Here’s the client’s problem; now, what does he want, and how can we help him to get there?” Instead of asking the client, “What can I do for you?” my question is, “How can I understand you?” Then what I have to offer will emerge naturally.’

To encourage someone to identify their outcome, Emma asks them what they want, and what’s important to them about that, so they can explore it for themselves. ‘Then,’ she goes on to explain, ‘it helps to get them to imagine they’ve already got what they want, so that from that empowered state they can come up with solutions that can get them there. This avoids the ‘yes-buts’ – when you’re offering suggestions and they’re saying, ‘Yes, but ...’ and coming up with all the reasons why your suggestions won’t work! It’s also easier – it takes the guesswork out of it, and you don’t have to work so hard!’

Where Emma does sometimes have to work hard is in getting her message across to sales trainees, who are often attached to their familiar selling strategies. ‘They’re afraid of asking questions; or they think they’re asking questions but actually they’re not – they’re still offering solutions! And if they’re reacting too much to the content of what people are saying, they’re missing so much else that is being communicated. They also need to be able to extract what’s relevant from the mass of communication coming from the client. I try to instil an attitude of curiosity in the trainees, rather than an attitude of confrontation. After all, most people enjoy being asked questions about themselves and what’s important to them! You need to believe in what you do, believe in yourself, and believe that the client is going to be helpful!’ Maybe women will begin to come to the fore in sales as people find that a more client-oriented approach actually works better? ‘Well, it’s certainly true that this approach suits women well: women tend to be more interested in other people, and less quick to jump in with solutions and try to fix things for the client; they’re willing to let the client come up with their own solutions.’

The Sales Director’s sexy selling

Emma recalls an example that illustrates her client-centred approach. At her first new-business meeting with the Sales Director of a large company, she asked him what he wanted for his sales teams. ‘He replied immediately: “I want them to be able to present creative solutions to their clients.” So I asked him how the sales people would know what solution to present to their particular client. He replied again immediately – he’d got all this sorted out! – “They’ll have received a brief.” What he didn’t realise was how difficult it is to present a solution based on a brief – you simply can’t learn enough from a brief to be able to engage the client, get them excited about the solution, and help them arrive at a place



The relationship you build with your client will differentiate you from your competitors

Key factors for successful sales

- relationship and connection
- client insight, understanding your client
- emphasising outcome, not solution

Key skills for successful sales people

- being interested in your client
- being receptive to what your client is communicating
- asking great questions
- extracting what you need to know

where they can’t not buy. A brief can’t tell you what’s going to resonate with your individual client! The Sales Director’s belief was that if you make your presentation ‘sexy’ enough, the client will go for it. My belief is different.

‘I believe that if you understand your client, what they want, what’s important to them, how they make their buying decisions, and what concerns them, you can present a solution they will buy; and not only will they buy that solution, they’ll be happy with it and so they’ll buy more solutions from you in the future. And that relationship you build with your client will differentiate you from your competitors.

‘So I asked the Sales Director questions about what was important to him and what effects achieving his goals would have on his business. Now he had to really think about his answers! And it turned out that meeting his initial request for Sales Presentation Skills training wouldn’t be the best way to help him reach his outcome. His staff needed help in engaging better with their clients: they needed better client insight before they could pitch their solutions; then their presentations could be greatly streamlined and vastly more effective!’

More spontaneity than strategy

Throughout our conversation I’m aware that Emma is not only very present and engaged, she’s also very warm. I have a sense of our connecting in a natural, direct, spontaneous way. Is this what Emma is teaching her sales trainees? There’s something deeper than strategies, surely? ‘Yes,’ agrees Emma. ‘It’s not about adding tools to the toolbox. It’s more about spontaneity than strategy: noticing who is in front of you and responding directly to who they are in that moment. I spend

time with people to find where we connect, and what comes out of those connections is enthusiasm! I try to teach this to sales trainees – although it’s easier to teach strategies! But I feel so strongly about what I have to offer that I couldn’t try to persuade anyone to buy my training – people buy it because I demonstrate it!’

Well, I’d go along with that. What’s fascinating to me is that our meeting turned out like this: spontaneous, no pre-set strategies; just two people sharing an attitude of interest, a willingness to listen to each other and a readiness to ask questions. And a connection was made, out of which came enthusiasm! The ability to inspire others to meet them in the open space that allows for true connection is, I think, the sign of a very good teacher indeed. ●

Emma Sargent will be presenting at this year’s NLP Conference, November 8th and 9th, on ‘Transforming Sales with NLP’. Her new e-book on selling, ‘Ask, Don’t Sell’ is available from www.ambonlp.com