

## The Invisible Salesperson

*Training your web site to sell more effectively*

Many businesses think of their web sites as marketing packages. They are categorically similar to mailings, printed advertisements, or sales calls. The site (no matter how sophisticated it is) exists as a brochure, floating in cyberspace, waiting to be read.

Customers have a different view of the web. When an individual visits a corporate web site, the site is in many respects the *face, personality, and culture* of the company. Because web sites are so easy to find, the site may be the first contact the customer has with your company. Consciously or unconsciously, the customer will think about your site as an entity—in effect, a salesperson with whom the customer is completing a transaction.

Since your prospects are likely to view your web site this way, it pays to “train” the site to do its job well. The basics aren’t that different from selling in person: do your homework, dress well, explain your benefits clearly, don’t interrupt, and make it easy to close the sale and find you again, if needed.

### Do your homework

Understanding your customer is essential to good sales. It’s important to know what the customer values in order to position your brand and your products effectively. You need to be familiar with the customer’s wants and needs in order to present them with relevant products or services.

When developing, redesigning, or expanding your web application, pay attention to what your customers have told you. If you haven’t been getting feedback via email or phone calls, go out and ask! Customers will gladly share their opinions with you, especially if they perceive benefit to them or to you.

Leverage existing market research about your audience segments. Any research your product or service development staff has already done can be quite valuable to your web development team. Use this research to create profiles or “personas” of typical prospects that will visit your site.

Taking time to profile your potential customers is the cornerstone of your web application. Without this step, you are simply throwing your content or interactivity out into the void.

### Dress well

When your salespeople or retail sales associates interact with potential customers, appearance is vital. If your company is “reliable” or “professional”, your sales reps might dress in suits. If your company’s brand is more oriented toward “friendliness” or “personal service”, the dress code may be sweaters and khakis. Regardless of the image your salespeople project, dressing well is a mark of respect for the customer.

Your web site should be similarly well-attired. Many firms have set a high standard for graphic design on the web. These companies have already helped to mold your prospects’ expectations of what a “well managed” site looks like. Make sure your site’s look and feel is in the same league.

Don’t get carried away, however—you don’t want your site to wear a bow tie and tails on a corporate casual sales call. An elaborate Flash introduction that may be appropriate to Tiffany & Co. won’t thrill someone shopping for an investment strategy. Refer back to your “homework” and tailor your visual presentation to your audience profiles. It’s also a good idea to do credible discount usability studies—test out your designs with real customers and prospects, just to make sure their perception doesn’t differ from what you think their perceptions are.

## Explain your benefits clearly

Businesses that wish to cultivate long-term relationships with their customers have abandoned the fast-talking style of personal sales. Instead of spewing jargon and promises in an attempt to close the sale, a good salesperson will explain the benefits of products or services as clearly as possible. The salesperson relies on the customer's nonverbal communication and questions to point out areas of confusion.

Nonverbal communication isn't an option on the web—unless you count clicking away to a competitor's web site! That makes it even more important to plainly state the benefits you're offering, in language the customer will understand. Avoid acronyms and buzzwords. Write in terms of benefit ("our legal services will save you thousands of dollars") rather than offerings ("our attorneys have decades of experience").

Writing for the web is difficult at best. Writing for prospects who may not know your company is even harder. Consider hiring contract writers and editors to produce your site content. In addition to understanding how people read on the web, a professional writer will notice assumptions and vocabulary that might not be clear to your prospects.

## Don't interrupt

Imagine a sales call in which a well-dressed, articulate salesperson arrives in your office. The salesperson is clearly offering something that is of great benefit to your business. However, the salesperson won't let you get a word in edgewise! Every time you open your mouth, you get more frustrated. Finally, you usher the salesperson out of the office and drop that company from your list of partners.

This scenario may sound unlikely, but it's unfortunately quite frequent on the web. Automatic popup windows, unimportant links (especially those that lead away from your site), gratuitous animations and Flash introductions, huge banner ads, and complex pages that take too much time to download are all great ways to interrupt your customers and lose the sale.

Information architecture and usability testing are two of the best ways to guard against interruptions. A well-designed information architecture (or information design/taxonomy) will ensure that your prospects find their desired content quickly, without any distracting wrong turns or dead ends. Usability testing will identify elements of the web site that obstruct the sales process so those elements can be removed.

## Make it easy to close the sale

Once your prospect agrees to buy your product or service, the purchase process should be as quick and pleasant as possible. In retail, you want to keep your checkout lines small and moving fast. In corporate sales, you want a minimum amount of bureaucracy standing between the closing handshake and the signed contract.

You don't have physical checkout lines on the web, and you can't hand your new customer a pen to sign on the dotted line. However, there are other ways to make the buying experience easy. Make sure there is a call to action—a phone number, a contact link, a "buy now" button—on every screen that offers a product or a value proposition. If you have a "checkout" function, limit the number of screens the prospect has to fill out, and pre-fill as much information as you can. If you're listing a phone number, make sure there's a human being (not an endless menu system) at the other end. Warn your visitors when they are going to a protected or subscription area of your site.

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