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Sales Lessons Learned at Sea

Plot Your Course for Success

By Larry Jacobson



Imagine that you're standing at the wheel of your beautiful sailboat you've always dreamed of owning. You untie the lines, back out of the slip, motor up the channel, and head out to sea. What direction do you head? The compass offers you 360 choices and if you don't choose, the wind and current will take you at their will.

Plotting a course for your boat requires having a destination in mind, and then you have to steer for that heading. Planning to sell to a prospect requires the same pre-planning. Without plotting your course, the forces of sales will carry you where they will and chances are that won't be where you want to go.

When planning a voyage, preparation is key. Ask yourself these questions before leaving the dock or before any important sales call or presentation:

- Do I have the skills necessary? Do I know who is going to do what tasks and do I have the right equipment?
- What obstacles am I likely to encounter along the way and am I prepared to deal with them?
- Do I have an alternate plan in case of hazards along the way?
- Am I equipped with the time, manpower and materials to persevere for longer than expected?
- And lastly, am I focused on the destination so that no matter what happens, I will achieve the goal?

When crossing a 3,000-mile ocean, just one degree off course can make you miss your landfall by hundreds of miles. Before you set on your sales journey, follow these guidelines to ensure success.

Practice

Before venturing out on a presentation to that big prospect you've always wanted to land as a client, practice until you're blue in the face. Run through your presentation over and over again until you know it cold. If you're presenting as a team, don't plan on winging it as to who will handle what portions of the presentation. Assign roles and plan the timing. Be sure your equipment including projector and presentation copies are in good order and are not in checked luggage. Just ask Suzanne who had to use a photocopy of her own outline as the handouts—all because her materials went to Dallas while she was presenting in Los Angeles.

Prepare

Are you ready for questions and objections from the prospect? Sure, you may have reviewed what you think are appropriate questions and objections, but have you looked at it from their point of view? They will ask questions you haven't thought of because they're looking at things from a different point of view than you are.

For example, when presenting an incentive travel program to a prospect, John thought he had everything in order for his presentation of Hawaii as the destination. Because he thought of options for the prospect, he also had a London trip and a Caribbean trip in his hip pocket and knew them both well. However, when he stood up to present the first of the three programs, the president of the company threw him to the wolves by asking, "Why are we doing this? Who says we want to take a trip anywhere?" John had been brought in by the marketing manager who was also surprised when the president vetoed the incentive plan altogether. Had John done his research, he would have been able to answer why an incentive travel program would work well for that particular company. He might have been able to save the day.

Persevere

Crossing an ocean in a small boat requires research, painstaking planning, and enormous tenacity. One must study the winds, currents, tides, and try to predict through this research what will affect the voyage. There's equipment to install, learn about, and repair and these studies never end. The setbacks that come from weather, equipment failures, and the emotional highs and lows of spending day after day at sea are enough to take the wind out of most people's sails—and keeps most sailors close to their home port.

Similarly, unless you're in a retail environment where sales are made on the spot, the longer-term sale is made with inquiry, patience, and perseverance. Insurance sales can take months to close the deal, incentive travel has an average of nine months closing time, and your industry might not be far behind. You are responsible for studying and knowing your prospect and calculating how your product can help them toward their goals and objectives.

Patience is a virtue, especially in selling. It might take hundreds of contacts before finding even one prospect that needs your services, and then it could be months before you even get an appointment. Consider it a passage across an ocean and persevere. It is the tenacious salesperson that usually wins out in the end.

When selling, keep your final goal in mind and know the processes you are using to achieve it. If a change throws you off of your plans, if a competitor undercuts you in price, or the prospect postpones the purchase, stick with it. Come back to the course that you plotted in the first place and persevere. Try again. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal, it is the courage to continue on that counts."

Larry Jacobson is a speaker, executive coach and author of the award-winning best seller, *The Boy Behind the Gate*, based on his experiences while achieving his lifelong goal of circumnavigating the globe by sailboat. As a speaker on sales skills and leadership development, Larry uses the six years of lessons learned at sea to speak with unique authority about conquering fear and staying the course whatever it takes. For more information please visit www.LarryJacobson.com, e-mail Larry at Larry@LarryJacobson.com or call 510-500-4566.

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