

# Cognitive Flexibility: The Essential Skill Needed for Successful Sales Results

**By Jill J. Johnson, MBA**

Most people have no problem preparing for a routine sales pitch. They do their homework, find the right avenue into connecting with the prospect, and are ready to make the sale. But when you have been working for months on a complex sale or are pitching a piece of new business that will elevate your client base – and your commission – you have to up your game and polish your strategy.

## **The Sales Process is a Dance**

Review all of the notes from your meetings and conversations with your prospect. What words do they use? How do they describe their problem or situation? What do you need to emphasize in the conversation? Then re-read your proposal and think about your key points from your prospect's point of view.

Once you are in the room, let your client lead the conversation. Be deeply and completely immersed in their words, their thinking, their jargon, and their nuances. Despite your level of advance preparation, you also need to be prepared for the deal to stall once again. Perhaps they are not quite ready for the close. Yet.

When you are selling, you need to think about it just as you would when dancing with a new partner; you need to adjust to their steps, balance yourself to their ability, and shift your speed to match theirs. Remember to finesse yourself the same way in your sales meeting—don't push!

All too often, at the beginning of a meeting, prospective clients ask you to tell them about yourself, your services and how you can help them. It is easy to fall into just responding to this type of questioning approach with your canned commentary that you would use when asked what you do at a networking event.

Yet, how can you really answer the questions in a way that matches the nuances of the client's needs? You must spin this around so you can ask questions. This should be done in a conversational manner and if you can, practice by doing some role playing with a trusted ally or colleague so you can get comfortable subtly steering a conversation to gain insight.

## **Use a Cognitively Flexibility Mindset**

In complex sales situations, most people are technically and socially prepped for the meeting. Yet it is essential to be mentally prepped in one more critical way. Complex sales are a multi-dimensional chess game, with many, many plays available. So don't assume that this meeting is going to give you the whole deal as outlined in your original proposal.

You must be mentally flexible enough to not be disappointed if the prospect takes your meeting with them in another direction. That way you will not get thrown if they do, or say, the unexpected. Sometimes prospects want something smaller or less expensive than they originally said or we think they need. They might now believe a different approach or fee level is better for their organization. Or perhaps they really desire more time with you to be sure they can afford the risk of recommending you to their boss or board of directors.

So ride the whitewater no matter where the river of sales takes you—and stay in the damn boat! The twists and turns of any sales sequence are often filled with moments of anticipation, exhilaration, relief, and disappointment. Don't worry if you get a bit wet, you just need to keep steering the boat toward your goal of getting to a yes.

By bringing a cognitively flexible mindset that anticipates the unexpected might occur, you will not get thrown out of the sales boat and you will be mentally agile enough to handle it. Most exceptional sales people have learned the hard way to expect the unexpected so they are listening deeply in these meetings. This is vital if there is a new person in the room who will also influence the decision. This approach to expecting the unexpected keeps you on your toes so that as the meeting moves along you are able to rally no matter where they take the discussion.

## **Recovering When You Are Blowing It**

Sales are often blown because something weird happened in a meeting where the sales person was expecting it to go one way, and then it morphed into the unexpected by someone new to the process who had their own agenda. It feels like a blindsided moment but the truth is that injecting your own expectations (and hopes for the close) into the process results in missing cues and an inability to react to the actual situation at hand.

What you want does not matter to your client. By staying focused on their issues and actively listening to their concerns, you will be responsive and flexible. This is especially true because bringing more flexibility into your perspective means you may ask more probing questions. These questions might uncover the real issues they are trying to address that they were not comfortable sharing in an RFP or initial meeting or their actual decision criteria.

Take the insight you have about them and weave it into your conversation. Pay attention to their facial reactions, tone of voice, and level of attention. Matching the knowledge you gain about their pain points, real issues, and essential needs can take you from the brink of failure back into the game. Circle back to their decision criteria and build your case for how you fit.

## **Final Thoughts**

Even if you only close a part of your deal or get invited to the next level of meetings, you have still gotten a "win." You can use the new insights you gained to adjust and modify your next approach. You will also often discover that sometimes it was the perceived "loss" on the first sale that completely established the base for the bigger and better sale in the future. Cognitive flexibility combined with active listening and effectively managing disappointment are the keys skills needed for successful complex selling.



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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