AEO Sales Webinar Series

Article 2 – Rules for establishing a structure on calls and in meetings that keeps you in control.

Now that you have created a working environment of rapport and trust, it's time to set the agenda and expectations for the call or meeting. To stay out of the prospect's system and work the Sandler Selling System, you will need to establish some ground rules.

Has This Happened to You?

You've finally obtained the appointment. You arrive at the appointment on time, but before you can ask your first question, the prospect demands, "OK, show me what you've got."

Or, perhaps, you invest time and energy gathering information, working up prices and putting together your presentation. You believe that you are going to get the sale. Instead, you leave with nothing more than the prospect's promise to give your presentation some "careful thought."

Unfortunately, the above scenarios are all too common for many salespeople. If your expectation about a meeting is different than the prospect's, it's a sure bet that someone (you) will leave the meeting with feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Two key elements for maintaining efficiency and effectiveness in the business development process is to keep both parties on the same page and the process moving forward. Miscommunication can cost you time and even the sale. Opportunities that become stalled can drain resources. Therefore, each sales interaction, whether face-to-face or via the phone, needs to be focused on a mutually-agreed-to objective with both you and your prospect working toward a mutually beneficial outcome that drives the process forward.

We call this agreement the Up-Front Contract.

Adding Control and Predictability to Your Sales Call

The up-front contract defines the agenda for the meeting, mutually agreed upon by both parties. With a strong up-front contract, there can be no misunderstanding of the purpose, process and intended outcome of the meeting. Reviewing the contract at the beginning of the meeting ensures the integrity of the agenda.

In addition to the objective and intended outcome of a sales meeting or conversation, the time element and the role each party will play in reaching the intended outcome should also be agreed to in advance, preferably when the meeting is scheduled, and then reviewed and reconfirmed at the beginning of the meeting.

Agreeing in advance about the topics for discussion, the information provided and by whom ensures against both misunderstandings and unfulfilled expectations.

The up-front contract not only sets the direction and tone of the discussion but also provides a guidepost for getting the conversation back on track should it begin to wander off course. It establishes benchmarks by which to measure the progress made during the meeting.

Without an up-front contract, the prospect will be in control.

Establishing the Ground Rules

An up-front contract is simply an agreement between you and the prospect about what will happen during an upcoming interaction. An up-front contract in the sales arena should meet the same standards as legal contracts:

- **They should be communicated as specifically as possible in clear language.** In other words, no vague or wishy-washy words should be used.
- **There must be explicit and mutual consent by both parties.** Far too often, one person will not ask for consent before launching into his agenda.
- **Both parties must be able to understand and uphold the agreement.** To be able to be considered a contract, the purpose of the meeting and the intended outcomes must be defined in advance, and both parties must have the capacity to execute the agreement.

Components of an Up-Front Contract

The five elements included in every effective up-front contract are time, purpose, prospect's agenda, salesperson's agenda and outcome. These components must be clearly and explicitly stated and mutually agreed upon by the salesperson and prospect. Every phase of a sale should begin with an up-front contract and end with an up-front contract for the next phase.

1. Determine the purpose of the meeting, contact or future action.

Every contact with a prospect should have a specific purpose. Ideally, that purpose is to move the selling process forward.

2. Determine the prospect's agenda for the meeting and their expectations before and during the meeting.

The prospect's agenda ideally needs to be established before you define yours. Not only does this protect you from being blind-sided during the meeting, it will also contribute to building trust and rapport with the prospect.

3. Define your agenda for the meeting and your expectations of the prospect before and during the meeting.

Be clear and specific in your requests to the prospect for answers to questions and other information. Keep in mind that it is your responsibility to transform a prospect's wishy-washy response into a specific, committed one.

4. Determine the date and location of the meeting, as well as the amount of time to be spent in the meeting.

Err on the side of allotting too much time rather than too little.

5. Determine the expected outcome of the meeting.

The end result will usually be a decision to proceed with or stop the selling process (i.e., to identify if the prospect is going to buy or not). It is particularly important that the outcomes are clear and unambiguous. Remember – 'think it over' is not an acceptable outcome.

When to Use an Up-Front Contract

You should make an up-front contract:

- On the phone, prior to the first meeting.
- Any time you start a meeting with a prospect.
- Any time you start a new step of the Sandler Selling System.
- At the conclusion of every meeting about what will happen next.
- At the conclusion of a sale to discuss future business and referrals.

Although the ideal situation is one in which you make an up-front contract on the phone with the prospect prior to the meeting, there may be times when you either forget or do not feel comfortable doing this. In these cases, you should make an up-front contract with the prospect at the very beginning of the meeting, using the same elements of a strong up-front contract. In fact, if you forget or otherwise get side-tracked, you can reset the up-front contract anytime during a meeting. Just remember, it is most effective "up front."

Even when you do the right thing and make an up-front contract prior to a meeting, you should still review the contract with the prospect at the beginning of the meeting. After all, the prospect may not remember everything that was discussed and agreed to previously.

A quick example:

During a meeting, you learn that your prospect must verify with the CFO the availability of the funds earmarked for your service. You can't proceed until he confirms this, so you set up another meeting.

Part of the up-front contract for the next meeting should specify that:

1. The prospect will talk with the CFO by a certain date before the next meeting.
2. The prospect will call you to report the outcome of that discussion.
3. You can then decide whether to hold the scheduled meeting or cancel it.

The only way a meeting can go as planned is by planning before you go - planning in which all parties are involved.

It is the up-front contract that makes the activities of a meeting manageable and measurable and the result favourably predictable.

Overcoming Obstacles to Making Up-Front Contracts

There are some forces working against you while trying to establish and maintain an up-front contract:

1. Your prospect is not familiar with making verbal contracts that stick.
2. The prospect thinks he can change the contract.
3. A contract is only as strong as its weakest link. Each of the elements must be specifically stated in concrete terms.

What can you do to avoid pitfalls?

1. Develop a strong contract. Stand firm and ensure that you cover all of the elements of an Up Front Contract.
2. Don't rush. Take your time. Make sure you and your prospect are clear as to what is going on at every step of the way.
3. Most importantly, review, repeat and remind your prospect of the contract as often as is feasibly possible.
4. No mutual mystification. Any communication you have with your prospect must be part of a clear understanding as to what happens next. An up-front contract will eliminate mutual mystification.
5. No wishy-washy words. When a prospect says to you, "Things look good, and I'm hoping that next week we might be able to do something," you may think, "Wow! I've got the order." The prospect may be thinking, "I'm not sure who I will give this order to." Chances are, it may not be you. Strong up-front contracts eliminate wishy-washy words because you have agreed clear outcomes.
6. No intellectual smoke screens. You can sense when prospects are blowing smoke at you. If you trust your gut, you will probably be right most of the time.

What should you do if the contract is breached?

There may be times when you arrive at a meeting for which you established an up-front contract, only to find that the prospect is not prepared to fulfil it.

If this happens, there is no longer a contract. You must find out why the prospect has reneged on your previous agreement. Then, you can determine whether to continue the meeting, reschedule the meeting or end the relationship with the prospect.

If the result of continuing the meeting will not be in your best interest, then you should not continue. All too often, salespeople are more concerned with pleasing the prospect and not “making waves” than they are with looking out for their own well-being.

In summary

By establishing strong up-front contracts with your prospects about upcoming meetings or conversations, you significantly minimise the potential for misunderstandings and unfulfilled expectations during those events.

The up-front contract adds an element of control, so that you and your prospects don’t approach these events with differing expectations.

The language of the contract should be specific, not open to interpretation by the prospect. If the prospect needs to take some action to prepare for the meeting, that information should be discussed and agreed to as well.

Up-front contracts give you greater control over the selling process. They help selling conversations remain focused on relevant topics that keep the selling process moving forward. Think of them as the roadmap for the meeting or conversation. If the discussion starts to wander off track, the contract can get you back on course.

Most importantly, instead of engaging in the traditional buyer-seller dance, the upfront contract creates a situation with two professionals interacting as equals by establishing an agenda and sticking to it.

Take the time to revisit the recorded webinar to hear examples of what an Up Front Contract might sound like.