

The Top 5 Selling Mistakes That Accountants Make

I was recently invited to appear as a guest on a podcast run by someone who, like me, works a lot with accountants. During the discussion, I was asked “what do you think are the top 5 things accountants get wrong with regards to selling?”

It’s a fascinating question, for a number of reasons:

Firstly, the term “selling” has a bad reputation in the accounting world. Sales people are seen by accountants as pushy, a pain in the neck, individuals who aren’t genuinely interested in the accountant’s firm, but just interested in making the next sale or, worse still, only interested in getting the accountant to make the next sale for them. With the huge growth in cloud accounting software, accountants are consistently bombarded with emails and calls from sales people all promoting their particular piece of problem-solving technology. It’s all a huge distraction from the real job in hand of looking after their clients’ financial affairs.

Secondly, the vast majority of accountants have never had any training in how to sell effectively. They go through years of intense technical training becoming experts in helping their clients comply with legal requirements, helping minimise tax liabilities... all the key areas of accounting knowledge that their clients expect them to be experts in. Accounting training simply doesn’t include any reference to the soft skills required to build rapport with clients.... It just assumes that the individual can do this already.

And thirdly, because the years of technical training encourages a mind set of expecting questions to have right or wrong answers (a trial balance should actually balance, a particular service either is or isn’t subject to VAT), it can be a challenge for some to have conversations with clients or prospects where there may not actually be a right or wrong answer.

That’s not to say that all accountants can’t sell... of course they can.

If they didn’t sell at all, then they’d be out of business pretty quickly. It’s really a question of degree; some are naturally good at selling, others are truly awful, and many get by but could definitely be more effective. This was something I found out pretty quickly when I set up Proten Sales Development and went looking for an accountant to work with.



I started by doing what every other business owner does who's looking for a supplier of any sort of product or service... I googled accountants in my local area. I looked at around 15 accountant's websites to try and get a "feel" for how they worked and what they could offer me and what struck me initially was how similar they all appeared to be. Most sites gave a list of the services they provided, some had prices, others didn't, they all promised to be honest and professional... well that's alright then! Some were very different, and focussed on telling story from a potential client's perspective.

Next, I drew up a short list of 9 firms who I wanted to approach to find out more, which effectively rejected 6 firms who would never even get a chance to talk to a potential new client, and would never even know of my existence.

I called all nine to arrange an appointment to meet; six appointments were made there and then, two firms took a message and someone called me back within 24 hours, and one firm..... well, I never actually heard back from them at all.

So off I went to meet eight accountants, armed with the list of services I was pretty sure I needed.

Of those eight meetings, six were pretty similar. I was greeted politely and welcomed to the office, offered a drink (but not always) and introduced to the accountant who then spent the next thirty minutes or so telling me about the firm, their experience, the services they provided and their pricing structure. In some cases I was given some marketing literature to take away and read and in almost every case, there was no real attempt to find out if I had the information I needed.

Two meetings, however, were fundamentally different! In both cases, the discussion was focussed on me, my background, what my business was, what I hoped to achieve and what challenges I thought I might face. Then.... And only then... did the accountant talk about how they might be able to help me.

Now I've been selling and running sales teams and businesses for my entire career, I analyse the sales skills of people I meet as a matter of course, so it was easy for me to see how different these approaches were, and more importantly, how effective or otherwise they were. It's no surprise that I chose one of the two "different" accountants, and the working relationship has proved to be just as supportive and constructive as I hoped it would be.

So... Back to the podcast

So coming back to the podcast interview and what I thought were the top 5 mistakes accountants make in selling. It's a really interesting question and, to be honest, the answer I gave could equally apply to almost any other profession or sector. Here's what I said.....

1. Assume that clients and potential clients know what help they need.

There's a fundamental difference between what clients (or customers) know what they want and what they actually need. Often, they don't know what they need because no one has ever asked them the right questions. Unless you take the time to explore what's going on in a client's world (professionally and personally), you're unlikely to uncover all the opportunities to provide additional services.

2. Assume that clients understand the value of the services being provided.

The value that we provide our customers is not what we do... it's why we do it. For example, the value in completing and submitting a personal tax return for a client is not the process of doing this, or even the price that we charge, the value is the peace of mind we provide to the client in knowing that they're not going to get a brown envelope from HMRC, that they understand what tax needs to be paid (before it's actually due). If we don't explain the value of what we do to our clients, they'll only ever see us as a cost.

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3. Fail to differentiate from the competition

Most businesses, especially accountants, operate in a competitive market. Potential clients have multiple options to choose from and will have done their basic research before they ever make contact with us. If their research doesn't identify anything that's different between us and our competitors, what are they going to focus on to make their selection?.... cost!

4. Believe that Pitching = Selling

Explaining a list of your services and your fee structure isn't selling, it's pitching. Professional selling is the process of identifying problems that our clients have, understanding the impact of not resolving those problems, and then offering solutions to those problems. If you start to think of selling as "helping" and you'll make a bigger impact and get better results.

5. Think that accountants shouldn't or don't need to sell.

Every firm loses clients... whether that's because they move to another firm, or they cease trading, retire or sell their business. So in order to just stand still, we still need to find new clients and in an ideal world, we'd want to be working with the right type of clients for us. If we sell professionally, we get to choose which clients we work with.

Selling isn't an "art", effective selling is a set of skills and techniques that can be learned and improved over time.

At Proten Sales Development, we help accountants learn and improve these skills through 1-2-1 or group training and coaching. The result?... you'll become more confident in how to approach discussions with clients and prospects, you'll have a kit bag of techniques to uncover areas where you can help the client, some of which they may not even have realised they needed help with, you'll be able to handle client objections more effectively (especially the dreaded price objection) and you'll win more business, more often.

If you're an accountant and would like to improve how you attract the right type of client, identify how you can help them, overcome objections and client complaints, win more business from new and existing clients, and not get dragged into a price battle with your competitors....

Call us now on 07776 203 431 or email hello@protensd.co.uk

"I gained a greater awareness of what I do wrong / right and how I can improve. The training was clear and concise and structured to ensure useful feedback".

"The session broke down our offering into discrete selling points as well as breaking down the sales process into discrete milestones which need to be achieved. I now understand how to help customers buy, rather than simply pitching to customers. I would definitely recommend Proten Sales Development training as it puts a much more ethical context around the initial sales process and managing relationships with customers"