



The Challenges of Selling a Service on the Internet

SELLING A SERVICE MAY SEEM TO BE A LOT LIKE SELLING A PRODUCT, BUT THERE ARE SOME BIG DIFFERENCES. IT OCCURRED TO ME RECENTLY THAT MOST OF MY CLIENTS SELL SERVICES, SO THIS SEEMED TO BE A GOOD TIME TO EXPLORE THE DIFFERENCES.

If you're selling a computer, a bottle of wine, or a Bentley Continental GT, your customer will hand over some money and then take possession of a tangible item.

If you're selling an insurance plan, training, or architectural design, your customer will hand over some money but will have little to show for it. The insurance buyer will have a policy and the architect's customer may have a set of blueprints, but these are only bits of paper that have no intrinsic value. If you're a trainer, the buyer may have some hand-outs that you distributed or some notes taken during a class or on-line session.

Those differences require changes in how you think about connecting with people, interesting them in what you have to offer, and making the sale.

Talk about specific benefits. It's easy to focus on features because they're easy to identify. Instead of showing only what you've done for others, make it crystal clear to prospects what exactly you can do for them. What differentiates you from your competitors? Explain precisely what you will provide and how long it will take. This is essential information that buyers need.

Those who sell products learn that they first must sell themselves. If you're selling a service, you are all that you have to sell. You are the product.

An insurance company may deliver a policy or a technician might fix your client's computer, but the service is inextricably associated with you. So you must be willing to satisfy the specific needs of



your clients. Until you prove that you can deliver measurable results, buyers will sit on their wallets.

Find a way to provide proof that you've helped other clients, but do it in a way that convinces prospective buyers that you know their needs are not exactly like somebody else's. And take care to maintain client confidentiality. If you use another client's information in a way that fails to maintain privacy, you'll lose the prospect's trust.

People want to know what you've done for others, but they also want to know that you'll be willing to customize your service for their needs.

Some services can be customized more easily than others, so your website should explain how you will make your service exactly fit each buyer's needs.

If you offer a service that might be used by people of different ages or by both individuals and families, explain how your approach would vary for someone who is 30 versus one who is 60, or between single buyers and families. If you provide a business service, what's different for the 10-person company as compared to the 100-person company or the 5000-person company?

Credibility is Essential

SERVICES ARE ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP SELLING, SO YOU'LL NEED TO SPEND MORE TIME ESTABLISH RAPPORT AND TRUST IF YOU'RE SELLING A SERVICE.

How long have you been in business? How long have you been on-line? Why is it important to you to offer the service you do?

Your website must address the details of your service, but more time will be spent establishing credibility. Credibility is what sets your value in the eyes of the buyer. Without credibility, you won't close many sales. The prospective buyer must understand that both you and the service you offer will be of value to them.

A good photograph made by a professional photographer is helpful. So are your credentials, but don't just put a bowl of alphabet soup after your name. Explain how each of the degrees you've earned provides value. The same is true for associations and licensing. Never assume that the prospective client will understand what all those letters mean, much less why they're important.

If you're a landscaper, photographs of jobs you've done will be helpful—preferably ones made by a professional photographer or at least a talented advanced amateur. If you sell insurance or run an accounting firm, photographs may not have the same value, but testimonials are powerful regardless of the type of service you offer.

You may not be able to share the names of other clients. If that's the case, take the time to explain that privacy is why you're not providing a full identity with each testimonial.

Getting Testimonials

TESTIMONIALS ARE SO IMPORTANT THAT THEY CANNOT BE LEFT TO CHANCE. ASK FOR ONE EVERY TIME YOU COMPLETE A SALE. EVERY SINGLE TIME.

Let the buyer write the testimonial. You can then edit it, or have your marketing professional edit it, and return it to the client for approval. Then you can ask if the client would be willing to have prospective buyers call or write to ask questions about the experience.

And don't forget about the close cousin of testimonials—referrals. Ask for these at the conclusion of every single sale, too. If your client knows somebody who's in the market for what you do, the sale is already about half made.

Keep in touch with clients after the sale. Reach out to make sure that they're still happy with the service you performed for them. You may have other services that would interest an existing client. Email makes following up easy and cost-effective. I've used this monthly newsletter for years to keep in touch with clients who are active and those who might once again become active. Just be sure not to become a pest.

Range and Price

WHETHER YOU'RE WORKING WITH A SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION FIRM OR DOING THE WORK YOURSELF, UNDERSTAND THAT YOU CAN SPECIFY WHERE YOUR RESULTS WILL APPEAR.

A house painter in Indianapolis would want to limit ads to Marion County and possibly the surrounding counties. Insurance agents are licensed to operate on a state-by-state basis. A company that provides training services on-line could have client around the globe. There's little point in paying for clicks from people who live in areas you can't serve.

Fast, cheap, and good: Pick any two. Although this is often thought to apply primarily to products, it also applies to services. If you're delivering a physical product, you can pick fast and good (expensive), fast and cheap (poor quality), or cheap and good (long delivery time).

In the world of physical products, these three properties are interrelated. You cannot optimize all—one will always suffer.



Graphic by Cosmo Catalano

But what happens when you offer a service? Fast and good will still be expensive because you may need to add extra workers to deliver on an accelerated schedule. Fast and cheap may not even be possible unless you have a service with no

options—even then it may be difficult to achieve. Cheap and good also will be difficult, but might be achievable if your client is willing to allow you to work on it only during your “spare time”.

This “spare time” approach isn't always what it seems, either. If the periods between available “spare time” are great, you'll probably spend more time that you should just refreshing your memory.

Even if you charge a lower rate for that “spare time” work, you'll have invested more hours in completing the project.

So in effect the “pick any two” scenario presents a double whammy for service providers, and maybe a triple.

Be Easy to Find

WHEN SOMEBODY IS READY TO TALK TO YOU, BE THERE! THAT MEANS MAKING IT EASY TO CONTACT YOU. SOME LARGE COMPANIES MAKE IT ALL BUT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTACT A REAL PERSON. THIS IS A MISTAKE.

Be sure that every page on the site has a link to a contact form and give the prospect some choices: Fill out the website form, send a letter or postcard to your physical address, or dial your phone number.

If you're concerned about revealing your address, use a Post Office box or a service that provides a personal mail box.

If you don't want to receive calls in the middle of the night, create a Skype number or a Google Voice number that always is answered by an automated attendant.

You may want to place an email address on the site, too, for those who don't want to use the form. No matter how well you disguise this address, it will attract a lot of spam—so be sure that you create a specialized email address that's used only by website visitors.

Choices are important and giving the prospective client choices for the initial contact goes a long way toward illustrating your flexibility.

Products and services may have a lot in common, but there are critical differences during the sales process. Ω



I have never included a political message here and, had any other candidate from either party prevailed, one would not be here now. These are not normal times.