

Business-to-Business Selling



And The Emerging Generations



Business-to-Business Selling and the Emerging Generations

Robert W. Wendover

What would you do if you were George? George is a 59-year-old commercial salesman who has been in the business for 30 years. He has built a book of accounts upon which he has relied to meet his quotas and earn a good living. He has developed long-time relationships with many of those who purchase his wares. In fact, he considers himself good friends with many of his customers. But over the past few years, things have begun to change. In some cases, his older contacts have retired. In others, they have been laid off or moved on. In most of these cases, the person assuming the departing customer's role is his son's age. "Just send me a link to your catalog," they've said. "I'll send you an e-mail if I have any questions. I am assuming, by the way, that all your pricing and specifications are on the web. I appreciate the calls you've made, but I just don't have time for them."

Then there's Josh. Josh received his bachelor's degree in marketing last year. He took a job in commercial sales when he discovered that there are very few entry-level marketing opportunities.

As much as those in sales are struggling to adjust, their customers' organizations are doing so as well.



Having completed the sales training provided by his company, he is now out in the field building a book of business. On one hand, he's had some success opening up new accounts by selling to customers his age. He's discovered that after the initial sales call they, like him prefer to communicate electronically. It saves time, provides a paper trail, and allows him to make more contacts during the day.

On the other hand, there are the long-time customers he has inherited. These are individuals, mostly in their late forties and fifties, who have provided a base of income for Josh and from whom he has learned a good deal about how the business works. That said, they consume a tremendous amount of time, at least from his perspective. Many of them prefer personal contact once per month which demands at least a ten minute phone call, if not a personal visit. When he has responded to these expectations with e-mails, he has sensed that he is damaging relationships. Of course, much of the time he spends with these individuals seems to be consumed discussing the past and his predecessor, whom he has never met. While there is a part of him that resents the time consumption, he's learning to deal with it.

There's also the technology gap. Josh wants to tweet. They want to talk. He sends them a link

to the catalog. A number of them have asked for the paper version. They call him to ask questions he could have answered in an e-mail.

Does any of this sound familiar? As the marketplace continues to evolve, organizations are discovering that the transition of generations within their sales force is presenting a number of unforeseen challenges. Veteran salespeople struggle to adjust to meet the purchasing expectations of young customers. Emerging salespeople find that their habits of communicating digitally are not necessarily welcome by older customers. Veteran salespeople find their products' advantages now being challenged by young customers who have found information and reviews on the Internet. Emerging salespeople are juggling the diversity of attitudes and experiences among their customers who range in age from 20 to 70.

Getting the 4-1-1 On the Emerging Business Customer

To better understand the challenges of this age transition, it's helpful to explore the context of

Today's young business customers expect a menu-driven experience that provides convenience, 24-hour availability, superior service, guaranteed lowest prices and free shipping. Why? Because consumer merchants promise these things every day.



this evolution by looking at the major differences between veteran salespeople and those who are increasingly assuming their roles. After all, much of this miscommunication is based on the mistaken assumptions we make about others. Remember as well that as much as those in sales are struggling to adjust, their customers' organizations are doing so as well. You and your organization, for example, maybe working to understand why one of your veteran salespeople does not connect as well with young customers. At the same time, your customers may be trying to understand why their young purchasing specialists can't seem to connect with the veteran salespeople with whom the company has had long-term relationships. We'll begin with the differences in beliefs about work. From there, we'll address the impacts that this transition will have on sales efforts and what can be done about it. Finally, we'll discuss strategies that veteran salespeople can use to connect with today's emerging business customers.

Beliefs about work

The salespeople who entered the marketplace four and five decades ago came of age in a world of manual recordkeeping, push-button phones and lots of windshield time. They were imbued by a generation of depression-era sales managers with a work ethic that included long hours, hard work and sacrifice for the company. They learned that persistence and personal relationships were the keys to building and maintaining lasting and profitable accounts. If a customer mentioned that he liked baseball, the salesman found him tickets. If he talked about his family, the salesman made sure his wife got a birthday card. In establishing this kind of relationship, the salesman also discovered that he would sometimes get the order even though he wasn't the low bidder or the most timely. He was the guy, however, who had provided six tickets to the amusement park. After developing enough of these relationships and he wound up with a profitable book of business and bonuses at the end of every quarter. (I have been using the male pronoun here because the vast majority of commercial salespeople during this era were men.)

Were the hours long? Yes. Did he miss soccer

It is easy to become distracted by the diversity of individuals entering the marketplace. But it is impossible to be all things to all people.



games and back-to-school nights? Sure. But he was a good provider and the family certainly appreciated those trips to Honolulu and Orlando for the annual sales rallies. Over this time, he developed a set of values and beliefs of which he has become proud – hard work, team-orientation, perseverance, resourcefulness and the skills it takes to succeed in sales.

A salesperson joining the marketplace 25 years ago had a substantially different experience. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed tremendous changes in technology coupled with the beginnings of globalization and the era of the down-sizing, right-sizing and out-sizing. Add to this, the tremendous social and cultural upheaval during this time, and those entering sales developed a considerably different outlook on how to approach their work. With all the chaos, they learned to be survivors. Having come of age as latch-key kids and members of the first day-care generation, they developed a rather skeptical attitude about what comes their way. Hard work was part of the ethic, but so was balance of life. Sure, making money was important, but so were social relationships and having fun. What good was the money if your life was out of whack? If they could find a new way to work smarter, they tried it. If a better job opportunity came along, they took it, even if it meant leaving the current employer after six

months. Besides, new technology eliminated much of the paperwork on which everyone was trained. When the veteran salespeople of that time complained that young salespeople didn't spend enough time on the job, those young salespeople pointed to their sales for the month or quarter. Chances were, they were meeting or exceeding expectations.

E-mail, as a form of communication, became more prevalent along with cellular phones. All this made it easier to respond to questions and solve problems. That said, there was still a protocol that needed to be followed. It involved calling on prospects, phone calls, sales meetings, tradeshow, and social outings with your best customers. Yes, those joining the sales force were always looking for ways to make the process more efficient. But customers still had a pretty consistent set of expectations about how they liked to be sold and the sales collateral they liked to see.

The last decade, however, has seen enormous change in the way that commercial sales are made. With the proliferation of technology that is both ever more convenient and ever more instant, the expectations of most customers

A great way to feel the pulse of customers is to listen to what they say to each other about products they use and the other challenges they face.



have risen to unrealistic levels. Today's veteran buyers may be somewhat understanding of the challenges salespeople are facing, but those who have joined the marketplace in the past few years have little patience for sellers who do not adapt instantaneously to the latest technological wizardry.

Today's young customers expect a menu-driven experience that provides intuitive convenience, 24 hour availability, superior service regardless of the issue and guaranteed lowest prices along with free shipping, all with the click of a mouse or touch of a screen. Why? Because many consumer merchants promise them these very things every day. Young business customers have simply extrapolated their desires to the commercial marketplace.

It's not that simple, of course. Business-to-business salespeople are dealing with a more complex equation. They are generally selling more specialized products to a more sophisticated customer. They represent a wide variety of specifications for each product

and, of course, are dependent on the support of the manufacturer. On top of all this, their livelihoods depend on long-term customer relationships while battling competitors who are selling probably the same product for a few dollars more or less. Yet many young buyers do not accept the fact that promises made in the consumer market cannot necessarily be fulfilled in a business-to-business environment. So what's the bottom line? Actually, there are several.

The Impact on Your Business and What to Do About It

Most changes in the marketplace take place gradually. There is no announcement that customers have altered their expectations. That's why it can be so deceptive. Emerging customers bring assumptions to the marketplace that may seem foreign and unreasonable to those who have been around for a while. Yet these assumptions are absolutely natural to the people possessing them. Consider the expectations described at the end of the last section. Distributors and dealers must adapt their practices to these changing expectations while maintaining revenues and customer

Off-hand reference
to a movie,
television show or
website may be
lost on someone
twice your age, just
as theirs may be
lost on you.



base and, of course, traditional practices for the veteran customers. Downward pressure on pricing, coupled with demands for more customized and instantaneous service can threaten anyone's bottom line unless you work to stay ahead of these changing demands. So here are some strategies to remain ahead of this curve:

Increase customer education – It goes without saying that many customers, especially those new to the field, possess little knowledge of the costs and processes associated with the design, production, delivery and use of the products they purchase. Providing them with insights into these elements accomplishes two objectives. First, they become better informed customers. Second, it provides you with ongoing opportunities to maintain contact without being perceived as a nuisance. Of course, this has to be accomplished on their terms. This means product forums, helpful articles, podcasts, RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds, and instructional collateral that they can share

with their end users. If this information can be tailored to the customer, all the better. A good portion of this collateral should be provided by the manufacturers you represent, which brings up the second point.

Demand stronger manufacturer support – Firms that rely on a dealer network for distribution, can sometimes find themselves out of touch with the evolving expectations of their end users. Informing them of these changing desires, along with demanding sales support that matches these expectations, will allow you to provide the best support to your customers and prospects. Something as simple as interviewing a few of your important customers and sharing these insights with manufacturers can address two issues at the same time: 1) It provides you with a legitimate reason to contact busy customers and 2) It provides manufacturers with

When the opportunity presents itself, take time to ask for advice, insights and resources. There's a fine line between the need to appear competent and the chance to build a relationship by asking for help.



continuous real-time information. Using today's technology, such as the camera embedded with every smart phone, you can even provide an even more powerful message.

Some manufacturers have developed downloadable "apps" which can be accessed on mobile devices. Introduce these to customers who are unaware. Augment your sales approach with those who use them. If the manufacturer does not provide this kind of support, suggest they do. Offer to work with them to provide content that your customers will find most helpful. When a salesperson is able to walk a customer through the customization of a purchase on a laptop in real time, the opportunity for real dollars goes through the roof.

Develop and implement a clear technology strategy – It can feel like a constant struggle to ahead of the curve because of technology. With the plethora of available platforms, it is easy to feel overwhelmed trying to be all

things to all customers. As the number of these offerings continue to expand, it will become downright impossible. Rather than succumbing to all of these conflicting options, take the time to develop a clear strategy for meeting these demands. Survey your customers about their preferences in the use of technology when communicating with you. You'll probably find that these preferences trend toward a small number of platforms. Just as much as there are numerous social networking sites from which to choose, for example, chances are your customers have clustered around one or two. Rather than taking time to maintain your presence on all sites, build a solid presence on one platform to which all customers and prospects can turn.

You must commit, however, to consistent maintenance and updates of the information you provide. If you create a blog, post to it at least once a week. If you have established yourself on LinkedIn™, seek to connect with your customers, prospects, manufacturers and industry colleagues and accept their invitations as well. If you have established a Twitter™ account, be prepared to follow these same individuals and to have them follow you, including your competitors.

To some, all of this technology may seem overwhelming. To others, it has become an integral part of maintaining contact within the industry. It remains to be seen, of course, which of these technologies will sustain themselves in the marketplace. In the meantime, it is best to connect with those to whom you sell and those you sell to and find out their preferences and practices.

Clarify your customer strategy and reinforce it with your salespeople – With the diversity of individuals entering the marketplace, it is easy to become distracted by their many, and conflicting needs. But it is impossible to be all things to all people. Which is more important for instance, spending hours each week maintaining relationships with veteran customers who insist on paper catalogs and telephone calls and represent 15% of your business or spending that



same time establishing a presence within social networking that will attract young customers who may represent larger and more long-term accounts? The choices are not always clear. It is critical that time be taken to examine your present customer practices to verify that everyone understands your sales priorities. Is it difficult to release loyal customers who refuse to grow with the times? Absolutely. But these same customers can also become an anchor on your bottom line, over time.

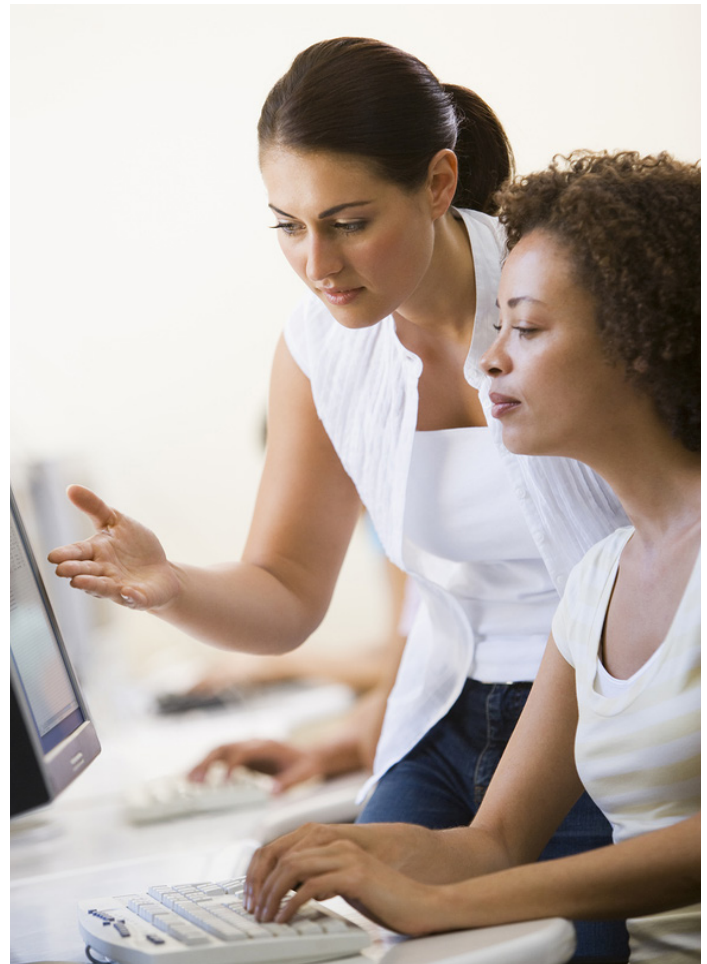
Stick to your pricing and provide increased value – Today's technology allows customers and prospects to compare pricing with the click of a mouse. With the emphasis on turning products and services into commodities these days, many sales organizations feel they have to compete on price alone just to maintain sales. But this can become a death spiral that, over time, squeezes manufacturers and their suppliers as well. Many customers fail to acknowledge this, in part because there is always pressure on them to get the best prices possible. This

behavior can be especially prevalent among those in the emerging generations who have grown up looking for every solution on a screen and seeing free shipping everywhere. As mentioned earlier, many customers lack a clear understanding of the costs that go into designing, producing and supporting the specialized products you sell. Empowering them with this knowledge will breed understanding and acceptance of reasonable pricing.

One of the best ways to deal successfully with this pressure is to diffuse the focus on pricing by including services and features within the product package. While this may be a long established practice within your industry, it is important to recognize that young customers may not be familiar with the support necessary for your products' installation, use and maintenance. Obviously, some organizations have chosen to identify these services as separate revenue streams. In either case, those who have recently joined the marketplace need to be educated on all the costs associated with producing and supporting the products you provide.

Maintain a clear understanding of customer purchasing behavior – Sure, the most important task of every day is to contact customers. But how much do you really know about them? In many organizations, the position of “buyer” disappeared with phone books and paper catalogs. Today's customer is juggling purchasing along with other duties. In fact, purchasing may almost be an afterthought in the midst primary duties. Understanding and empathizing with this will help foster a lasting relationship. You'll develop more patience for the time challenges that person is facing. He or she will appreciate the patience and perseverance you display in nurturing the sale.

Take the time to interview emerging customers to find out how they do their jobs. Not every young customer will be willing to do this. But all it takes is three or four conversations to get a feel for this generation's approach. Some questions you might ask are:



- ***How do you spend your day?***
- ***How do you prioritize your time?***
- ***What are your preferred methods of communicating with salespeople?***
- ***How do you go about searching for information on a new item that has been requisitioned?***
- ***What information can we provide that you generally don't receive without asking?***
- ***What can we do you make your life easier?***
- ***What is the one thing that drives you nuts about salespeople?***
- ***What is the one thing that drives you nuts about sales organizations?***

This practice, more than any other, demonstrates for them that you are paying attention to their needs. Collect the information from a number of these conversations. Then meet with your colleagues and develop a clear picture of how emerging customers and buyers differ in their practices from those who have been around for a long time.

Develop an intimate knowledge of your products' specs and manufacturers' reputations – As much as you need to continually learn about the changes in consumer behavior, the same is true for the products and services you represent. As the number of items available in most industries continues to expand exponentially, a certain amount of time must be devoted to remaining up-to-date. In some ways, those in the emerging generations have a distinct advantage due to their seemingly innate understanding of Internet search and computer software. That said, veteran salespeople possess a depth of product knowledge having spent years dealing with their industry as it has evolved. The young person may be able to get the specs and reviews of an item faster, for instance, but the veteran may recognize that a better solution might be found by taking time to ask the customer or the end user a few clarifying questions.

Using today's technology, sales organizations can set a series of electronic alerts to inform them when new information, reviews and other resources are available. Using social networking, they can communicate with industry colleagues regarding product issues. In working with manufacturers, they can set up automatic updates and support functions that can also be passed along to customers by placing links on the firm's website.

Maintain constant awareness of your company's online reputation – In these times of instant and worldwide communication, an angry e-mail, blog post or even tweet can have a material impact on an organization's ability to do business. Most industries are relatively small communities that depend heavily on reputation and referrals to make decisions. Where, in the past, an unhappy customer might spread the word thru everyday contacts, we now see regular evidence of angry users or mischief makers attacking someone or some organization with little regard to the larger ramifications.

The last thing in the world you want is to be surprised by a customer or prospect who asks about a negative comment made in the blogosphere about your company with which



you are unaware. Simply establishing alerts on the major search engines will make you aware of any comments or posts made publicly about your organization, the products you sell, the manufacturers you represent, and the general concerns within the industry. While one must be careful not to obsess on this information, taking time to review these alerts once a week is certainly appropriate.

Remaining aware of the fast-changing landscape within any industry has become a crucial part of remaining competitive. While young professionals are driving much of this change, it is being embraced by everyone who has access to a screen and a mouse. But what you say to those who work for you? How can they best connect with the emerging generation of customers on their terms while still maintaining productive relationships with their long-term buyers? The ability to balance these two is fast-becoming the top priority for those who intend to thrive in the business over time.

Navigating the Evolving World of Cross-Generational Sales

From a practical standpoint, there are a number of ways for veteran salespeople to connect with today's emerging business-to-business customers:

Ask customers about their preferred ways to communicate. As much as one might assume that all young customers are overly reliant on their smart phones, this is not necessarily true. The focus, above all else, is efficiency. After all, balance of life can trump technology. This does not, however, allow you to simply stick to the traditional methods of communicating. Observe their behavior. If you leave a voice message, do they respond by e-mail? If you mail product up-dates, do they ask for the information in .pdf format? Being sensitive the individual preferences of each customer represents the majority of the effort in establishing strong customer relationships.

Develop a regimen of providing customer specific tips and resources as a means of keeping yourself front-of-mind. If you take a few minutes to think about it, you'll discover lots of ways to provide helpful information to busy customers without appearing to be a nuisance. As we have discussed, many emerging customers are focused on balance of life. Therefore efficiency on the job is of paramount importance. While they are less likely to accept "keeping-in-touch" phone calls, they will review information you pass along, provided that information is relevant to their concerns. There are varying degrees of this strategy, of course. The most simplistic is a monthly mailing or newsletter. But that can become predictable and ignored over time. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the clipped article or analysis with the handwritten note pertinent to something you and the customer have discussed in the past. If you have a large number of customers, however, this can become burdensome. Commit yourself to a bit of time each week for searching the web and elsewhere for insights and information that you know your customers will find helpful. You might also drill down into the



information your suppliers provide, looking for the most relevant information. Your experience dealing with the nuances of your products over a long time can supply the novice customer with little secrets that save time and money.

Consider the platform as well. Time is money, but so is information that enables them to do their job more effectively. While a simple e-mail might be nice, a short video clip that illustrates a process, for instance, might be even better. This does not have to be elaborate. For illustrations of this, simply search for your area of expertise on YouTube.com and you'll find a number of examples.

This effort is all about impressions, on two levels. Level one is the number of times you contact the customer. Even if the customer sees the message and deletes it without review, you have still made a slight impression. Level two is the impression you make on him or her through what you send and how timely it might be. You'll know you've got someone hooked, when he or

she sends you an e-mail looking for a particular piece of information or insight, because you always seem to provide interesting and helpful tidbits.

How to Remain Connected with Emerging Customers

Here is a brief list of ideas for maintaining contact with emerging B2B customers:

Publish a short e-zine or newsletter that provides industry intelligence, news of your firm, product insights, interviews with industry leaders, links and referrals to helpful resources, and other ideas gleaned from your day-to-day interactions. Brevity is a key here.

Publish a blog that comments on products or provides user tips and links to what others have written. The younger generations are much more likely to read messages sent digitally. Better still create 2-3 minute videos that explain a tip, update or even caution of something they should be aware of. New posts should be added at least once every couple of weeks. Text should be limited to 300 words. Include photos and illustrations where possible.

Provide links to product updates, user tips and other information. You might even include a page on the firm's website devoted entirely to these resources with an e-mail sent to all customers every time something new is added. Becoming the comprehensive repository for this kind of information will serve as an effective means for keeping in front of your customers.

Organize or participate in user forums on the product lines you represent. A great way to feel the pulse of customers is to listen to what they say to each other about products they use and the other challenges they face. There may already be a user forum that has been established about one or more of the product lines you represent. If so, join them and send links to all your customers inviting them as well. If one does not exist, organize one. (Check for related groups on Linked-In. Connect with the person running it and help keep it active.)



Some may argue that inviting customers into a public forum is an open invitation to competing distributors. The savvy customers will do this anyway. Most will remember who brought them to the “party.”

Participate in social networking. As mentioned earlier, the emerging generations have embraced LinkedIn™, MySpace™, Facebook™ and other sites for both socializing and networking. Joining these sites is easy and is another way to connect with prospects and customers in these groups. Set up your own profile and post regular updates. Even better, comment on their posts and offer ideas and resources where appropriate.

Establish an account on Twitter™ and follow your customers and others within the industry. Using the Twitter-related applications now available, it is easy to locate and connect with users of similar interests. This should not be treated as a sales forum. But providing insightful information and thought-provoking ideas is a

great way to establish you and your firm as one of the places to go to discuss industry issues.

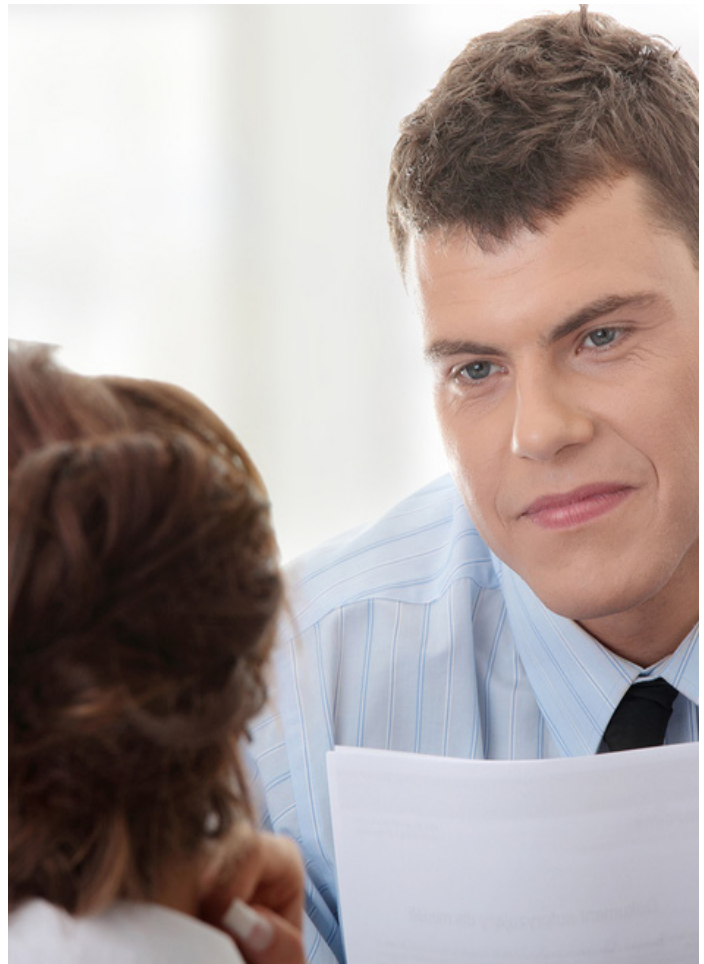
Webinars and tele-seminars are the emerging generations' preferred ways to learn current information. These do not have to be elaborate, but they do have to have substance. Offer a presentation by a product engineer on a particularly hot issue. Interview an official from one of the major shipping companies. Conduct a session on a widely-used industry software. You can also record these sessions and post them on the firm's website. Then you can pass them along to customers and prospects where appropriate along with building a repository of information that will draw people to your site.

Short audio or video podcasts that provide practical instruction or education can be a hit with newcomers to the industry. Sure the veteran buyers may not have an interest, but five minutes of insights on some industry practice may be just what a 20-something professional needs to develop a critical understanding.

Record and send customize video e-mails. Software applications such as Bomb Bomb™ and Eyejot™ make it easy to send a follow-up message after a meeting or call. They're also a great way to let someone know you're thinking of them or will be in the area.

Meaningful SWAG is still legitimate way to keep yourself front-of-mind among busy young customers. The key word here is meaningful – flash drives rather than golf-balls, smart-phone or iPad™ covers rather than letter openers. Look outside the specialty advertising catalogs and find something unusual.

Know your products' specs and reputations cold. This should go without saying. But with the number of variations available on most products these days, it is easy to find yourself quickly out of date. Customers conduct product research on the Internet before approaching salespeople these days. For this reason alone, it is critical that you are aware of current data along with what is being said about the product. Search out



electronic forums, chat rooms, blogs and other sites that may shed some light on how your customers perceive the items you represent and their manufacturers' reputations for quality and service. If you come across negative comments that need to be addressed, do so, or at least pass the information along to those who can respond. Emerging buyers have less tolerance for mediocrity in sales and service having come of age hearing that the customer should expect superb service and quality products at low prices with instantaneous response times. Meeting these expectations begins with knowing your products' specs and reputations cold.

Do not allow yourself to be intimidated by the transactional communication mannerisms that many emerging customers bring to the relationships. Most veteran salespeople have developed a communication rhythm over the years. With the advent of evermore impersonal means of sending messages however, this rhythm is being disrupted. While the first reaction may be frustration at "these

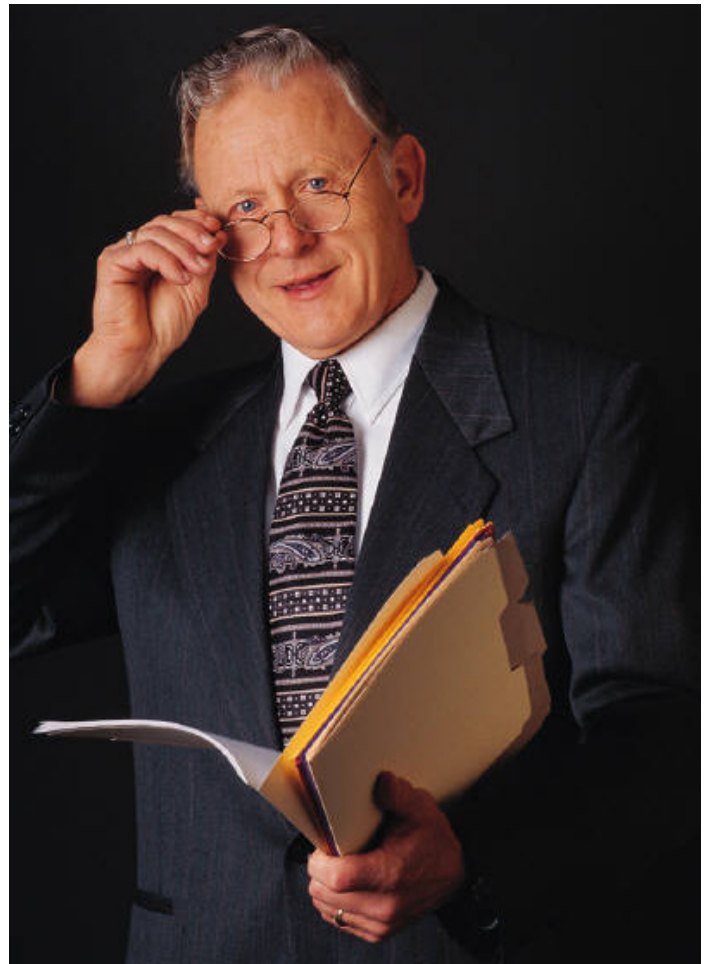
technological twits,” we have to remember that they have simply adapted to the times in which they have come of age. Even joking about “all the damn e-mails” or something similar might be interpreted as being resistant to technology. New technology is always a mixed blessing and it is best to learn your options before making a decision to resist them.

How to Remain Connected with Long-time Customers

Now that we have explored how veteran salespeople can connect with their younger customers, let’s turn the tables and discuss some ideas for how the emerging generation of salespeople can connect with veteran customers:

Invest the time up front to build relationships. It has been said that while many of those in today’s younger generations work to live, many in our older generations have lived to work. There is certainly nothing wrong with either approach, but this illustrates one of the many differences that require consideration when connecting with older customers. Baby Boomers (those primarily in their 50s and 60s at this point) have used the workplace as a place of both employment and a forum for social connections. Many have build lasting friendships with co-workers, vendors and other colleagues. It is only natural, therefore that they may be curious about your background, interests, family and tid-bits that you may consider irrelevant in a business setting.

While you may initially perceive this kind of relationship building as a waste of time, it is considered social currency by many Baby Boomers. The first 30 minutes you spend in getting-to-know-you mode may be the last time it ever happens. After all, they have their jobs to do as well. If the questions and small talk persist, you’ll be able to find a way around them. Remember, having spent most of their adult lives without the existence of digital communication, many Boomers long for a bit of conversation every once in a while. Besides, the intelligence you gather may help your tailor your



sales approach over time.

Be prepared to assist in the digital realm. For most young sales professionals, it is second nature to send links, texts, podcasts, tweets and other information with little or no explanation. While this will work for many veteran customers, others find it bewildering. Imagine receiving the product specifications you requested in a compressed file, for instance, and being ask to download a new software application in order to open the document. Do you or don’t you? What happens if you click to accept the application and your company’s security protocol blocks it? What if you get it open and don’t know how to use the new software? How likely are you to continue the relationship with someone who seems unable to put him or herself in your shoes?

The young salespeople who take a few extra minutes to anticipate these challenges will endear themselves to older customers who may be struggling with the digital age and are

frustrated or embarrassed about it. Simply placing your cell number in every message and being prepared to walk someone thru questions like this on the spot may save the sale and the relationship.

Consider your examples and vernacular.

Your off-hand reference to a movie, television show or website may be lost on someone twice your age just as theirs may be lost on you. Your references to pop icons, popular shows and digital gadgets may telegraph a degree of immaturity to an older customer who then begins to see you in the light of a son or daughter.

The advent of digital communication has taken a toll on the English language. This, coupled with pressures to do more with less in a shorter period of time, has combined to teach most in the emerging generations to communicate in a short hand that many of those in older generations find puzzling and disconcerting. More than one manager has complained about the texting abbreviations that now seem to be found in letters, e-mails and even promotional brochures. While those in the emerging generations may find it perfectly acceptable, many veteran customers are apt to be frustrated with it and they, of course, make the purchasing decisions. While it is not necessary to speak and write in the King's English, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that many of those in the older generations tend to edit all written documentation out of habit. After all, proper spelling and grammar was hammered into most of them. Reading a sales letter that contains errors may doom a proposal before it gets off the ground. It is not enough to run correspondence and e-mails thru SpellCheck™ and GrammarCheck™. The time taken to proof work is critical to the sales process with older customers.

Seek their counsel. Many of the veteran customers you inherit will have spent years, maybe decades, in the industry. While they may use storytelling as a mainstay of their communication pattern, they also bring a nuance to the table that young salespeople



have not had a chance to acquire. In a number of cases, these stories are nothing more than personal recollections. Yet sometimes there is wisdom to be gained. Sure the story seems to drag on, for instance, but the five people mentioned during the story are all present leaders. Maybe this person is better connected than you thought. When the opportunity presents itself, take the time to ask for advice, insights and resources. There is sometimes a fine line between the need to appear competent and the chance to build a relationship by asking for help.

See the value in their connections. It is easy to assume that anybody who is anybody is on the World Wide Web. This is grossly untrue. While all veteran customers and industry leaders use e-mail, most have still not gotten around to posting a profile on Facebook, nor might they ever. That said, their networks still hold sway over a great deal of power within any industry and will continue to do so for some time to come. By actively building a relationship with

these individuals, you can be a beneficiary of this influence. But that means building relationships on their terms – volunteering at association functions, making yourself visible within their circles, and assisting them to connect with emerging leaders within the industry. You may think of this as time. They view it as investment.

The next decade will see tremendous changes in business-to-business sales because of technology, the global marketplace and the generational transition that is continuing to evolve. With the largest generation in U.S. history entering the marketplace as both buyers and sellers, we face enormous opportunities as well as challenges. But this all comes down to knowledge – knowledge of the customer; knowledge of the product; and knowledge of the industry. Those who thrive in the coming years will be those who embrace this technology and work to understand the diversity of approaches that all generations bring to the business-to-business sales relationship.

About the Author

Robert W. Wendover has been researching and writing about workforce trends for more than 25 years. He currently serves as Principal of Common Sense Enterprises. He is the award-winning author of ten books including *Smart Hiring*, *Two Minute Motivation* and *Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World*. He is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. He has served as a special advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) and on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix for more than ten years.

Common Sense Enterprises, Inc.

Common Sense Enterprises assists employers with the challenges of leading and managing the continually evolving workforce. We specifically focus on the topics of cross-generational teams and supervision, the recruitment and retention of top performing talent, and improving daily

decisions within the workplace.

We deliver our services through a combination of live presentations, webinars, print and electronic publications, curriculums delivered through learning management platforms, and a limited amount of consulting.

We have a passion for measureable results so that our clients receive maximum value for their investment. We accomplish this through initial assessments, interviews, on-going client consultations, surveys, and measurement tools delivered through our learning management system. We pride ourselves on providing cutting-edge and customized content and insights that are easy to understand and reasonable to implement.