Don’t Handle Objections like Snakes

By Charles H. Green

I googled “sales objections,” and got 43,000 hits. Amazon yields 80 references. It’s a popular topic--objections are what we fear most when we think of “selling.”

The titles indicate how “objection-handling” is viewed. 90% of the verbs that go with “objection” are either “handling” or “overcoming.” (Occasional mention: “eliminating,” “crushing”). And why not? How dare those clients “object” to our wonderful propositions!

All those verbs ooze negativity. The very language we use suggests that “objections” are the enemy—something nasty to be overcome, gotten rid of, dealt with—better yet, conquered, crushed or destroyed.

The way most of us would view having to handle snakes.

Negativity

Here are some typical negative quotes from various selling book. (Note they almost all are based on tangible products businesses, rather than professional services—which makes them sound all the more jarring to a services client’s ear).

On the role of objections:

> An objection from a customer can and should be overcome by the closer. There should be no excuse for not overcoming a legitimate, honest objection from the customer. This is the closer’s job: to provide answers, get an agreement, and conquer (close).

A typical logic structure of an objection-handling session:

> Salesperson: "What is the reason you are not buying?"
> Client: [states his objection].
> Salesperson: "Is that the only reason?"
> Client: "Yes."
> Salesperson: "Then, if…[eliminates objection]...would you buy?"
> Client: "Yes."

Several elected objection-handling techniques:

> The Boomerang: *yes, it is expensive, but I don't think you would want to buy your wife a cheap present.*
>
> The Conditional Close: *you say you want a red one. If I can phone up and get you one, will you take it today?*
>
> The Deflection: *Yes, I see what you mean...mmm...Now let me show you the range of finishes you can have...*

The Feel/felt/found Model: *I understand you feel about that. Many others have felt the same way. And what they have found is that....*

These are manipulative, yes—but that's not the point. They all place us in opposition to the client. They cast the client either as the enemy, or as a hill to be taken.

From this standpoint, "objections" are bound to feel like handling snakes.

The usual, negative, approach to objections is part of a wrong set of beliefs, including:

The purpose of business is to make a profit

The purpose of selling is to get the revenue

The purpose of closing is to get the sale

The purpose of objection-handling is to get the close.

You can't get rid of the snake-handling feel without getting rid of this snakes' nest of bad thinking.

Here's an alternative, positive set of ideas:

The purpose of business is to add value where none existed

The purpose of selling is to jointly articulate and point the way to greater value

Closing reflects agreement on a common view of the greater value to be created

Objections vaguely indicate lack of agreement on a view of a greater value to be created.

Rethinking Objections

At the outset of a professional relationship, we bring some strong ideas about how to add value. So do our clients. This is as it should be. Working collaboratively with the client to take the best of both perspectives creates the maximum value.

But the concept of "objections" undermines that potential synergy. It suggests that selling is a struggle of ideas, a contest of wills, and that our job is to persuade the client of the superiority of ours. Hence we get objection-"handling." Like snake-"handling", it has overtones of danger—if we don't know the tricks of savvy handlers, we're likely to get bitten.

But we don't need to go there. If we can approach the client with an open-minded, curiosity-driven, adventuresome, mutual attitude of discovery—then "objections" no longer look like snakes. They are simply emotional statements about the buyer's readiness. They are information, not attacks.

Of course, there will always be issues of timing, budget, politics and alignment. We need to proactively identify them along with the client. To do any less is unprofessional.

Then there are the issues your tummy tells you are emotional, not rational. Price is a common one, but any objection can be nominally about one thing, and in fact about something else. Most objections have multiple layers.

The temptation is to treat every "objection" as being about what it claims to be. But people buy for emotional reasons, then justify it later in rational terms. We must deal with the emotional underlying the rational.

Sometimes this is best done overtly ("I get the feeling you're not happy about this; can you say more about it?") Other times, it is enough to tacitly acknowledge the feelings. The point is to deal with the underlying reality.

Speaking the New Language

We and our clients get stuck in the old language of "objection-handling" and "closing." We need new language to communicate new approaches, but also to signal ourselves and others that something fundamental has shifted.

Here are some phrases to get rid of, and some new ones to add.

1. Get rid of the word "objections" itself. The term suggests a negative reaction to something we proposed—but this shouldn't be about us! Let's start with the client, not with us. Start with the idea of a client's concerns—not ours.
2. Every client is concerned about change itself. They simply want to know that they have covered all the bases, that they haven't left anything out. Our role is to help them make sure they <u>have</u> thought of everything—and, where there are answers, to articulate them. And where there are not, to articulate that too.

   Your client does not want an advocate, but a trusted advisor. Help them by uncovering all their concerns, not by "handling" their "objections."
3. Get rid of—completely—the old "if I could meet this objection, then would you buy?" language. It is manipulative, but more importantly, it is all about you and your objectives--not about the client.
4. In initial conversations, start a joint running list of issues and concerns that the client has. Share that list at all times—and work on in it jointly. Introduce issues with the phrase, "If I were in your shoes, I imagine I'd be concerned about…" Make sure that you include some emotional and political issues on

your list, e.g. "I would imagine you'd be concerned about how your internal clients will perceive the price you end up paying; is that right?"

5. At several points—particularly after resolving some concerns—look jointly at the list and say, "How are we coming along here? Is this process helping the decision? Are we meeting your time schedule? Are there any concerns that have emerged since we last talked that we need to get onto the list?"
6. If at any point you sense hesitation, say, "I sense that you've got some other concern here that we haven't written down. Is that right? Is it the process itself? Tell me how you're feeling." You need to use direct, honest talk here, otherwise the client can withdraw—in which case the trusted relationship you're working to cultivate can fall down. Honest, unselfish concern is the antidote.

Your objective is not to handle the objection, or close the deal, or get the sale. Those things happen naturally, as outcomes—as long as you don't make them goals. Making them goals turns your client into objects, and you end up handling them like snakes.

Don't handle objections; help define and solve client concerns. Let go your concern about the outcome—paradoxically, that willingness the outcome go will improve your outcomes.