

## What is selling and why is it important?

Simply put, selling is about everything that your organisation does to convince potential customers of the benefits of your product or service and how it meets their needs. A successful sale is concluded at the point where a customer or organisation has accepted to give you an agreed amount in exchange for your product or service.

Most social entrepreneurs understand that sales are an essential part of business, but many people also assume that you have to be born a sales person to do it successfully. If you feel that you are not a natural sales person, sales can feel like a big hurdle to overcome.

Many people with a great idea or solution to a problem give up because they lack confidence in telling people about it and fear it will be rejected. But selling needn't be difficult - selling your social enterprise idea, your products, or your services is a skill like any other and it permeates every aspect of a social enterprise's operations.

Some people also mistakenly believe that their idea will simply sell itself. The passion that you have for your social enterprise idea, no matter how great, innovating or impactful it is, is not enough to sell products and services. Your customers won't just 'get it' - they have to 'buy it' and you have to 'sell it' to them.

One of the reasons so many social entrepreneurs are put off believing that they can sell is simply that they don't know how to, and that they are not prepared enough. It is worth thinking about how you sell and how this impacts your networking, marketing material and packaging, as well as your team and your ability to generate income.

## How does selling work?

Before you even consider selling your products and services, make sure you have carried out a few essential steps to understand what you are selling, to whom and why they should buy from you.

This includes:

- **Completing your market research** – this involves proving that there is a market for your products and services and finding out more about what your customers want and how much they are willing to pay for it.
- **Identifying your stakeholders**, and in particular your customers, beneficiaries and key influencers.
- **Defining the products and services** you plan to sell clearly.
- **Identifying how you are going to make your products or services accessible** to customers (i.e identify your routes to market). This can include online sales, retailers, wholesalers, or through contracts or sales to other businesses.
- **Developing an effective marketing strategy** and a marketing and communications plan.
- **Costing and pricing** your products and services.

Once you are familiar with the above, you will have everything that you need to be able to approach sales successfully. Whether this is at an event, during a meeting or cold calling a potential customer, the more familiar you are with your market, your product and the benefits, the more confident you will be.

## The fundamentals of selling

The section below will give you some tips about how to sell. It can be applied to face-to-face sales (whether a meeting was planned or impromptu) as well as over the phone (directly to a customer or possibly a local authority contact that may consider contracting your services). Bear in mind that the

fundamentals of selling also apply when speaking to people that contact you directly, or when potential customers are trying to get more information about your products and services online or via email.

Successful sales is about understanding a customer's needs or wants and effectively presenting a product or service that meets those needs. There are no 'right' ways to do this, but personal style and the social and environmental impacts of your social enterprise can go a long way towards success.

Below are some common techniques used by sales people to produce positive results:

### **Introduction**

The first of these is quite simply your introduction, the purpose of which is to create a rapport with your potential customer. It may be tempting to rush this part, especially if you are nervous and want to get the sales pitch over with. Yet if you are able to get your potential customer to relate to you, you will find the rest of the pitch much easier. Try to start with a 'hook' or a question - something that will be relevant and interesting to your potential customer - this will help get their attention.

It may also be useful to tell them something about yourself that they are likely to remember. They may not want to buy your product or service this time, but if they change their mind in the future it is useful to have provided them with a memorable introduction.

No matter what you say, always be friendly and smile if appropriate, even on the telephone.

### **Understanding need**

People buy from individuals and organisations they trust and this trust is born out of good customer service. Therefore, you have to let people know that you care about them, and one of the best ways to do this is by asking questions about them and what they are looking for. In order to do this well, real focus must be given to your potential customer. If you are saying one thing but focusing on yourself and what you want the outcome to be, your potential customer will know it.

Take care not to ask any personal questions without first easing your potential customer into the conversation. Again, this is about establishing rapport first to build trust. Once you feel comfortable that the conversation is going well, you may wish to probe a little more deeply with sensitivity. Social enterprises in particular may need to ask about personal needs and it is ok to do so as long as you are sure you will not offend or frighten off the person you are talking to.

One way of approaching this is to ask lots of 'small' questions. Small questions can help you pick out the detail of what you are being told by applying active listening techniques. Active listening requires the listener to reflect back what they have heard. If you ask enough questions, you may only have to present your solution by saying, 'based on what you have told me...' before they accept it.

### **Features and benefits**

Anything to do with your product is a feature and anything to do with the customer is a benefit. Benefits are the reason that customers buy, because that is how a product relates to them emotionally. Therefore, you can state the features of your service or product as long as you also state the benefits of it to the customer. Otherwise, you may bore your potential client with technical jargon.

An example of a feature would be 'we provide business support' whereas the benefit would be 'you will get help to write your business plan' (also see our guide on developing an effective marketing strategy for more information on this topic).

Learning to express the benefits of your product or service will help you enormously when selling. Review all of the benefits that you have identified with regards to your customers and/or beneficiaries and make sure you know which features match which benefits.

### **Close**

This is where you ask the potential customer for some kind of a decision. It could be directly related to the purchase of a product or service or it could be quite simply to meet again. Whichever it is, make sure you don't give them too many options, because that will make the decision hard for them. For example, instead of asking:

'When would you like to meet again?'

Ask:

'Which would be better, Monday or Tuesday?'

Asking questions that begin with 'which' are an easy way to reduce the options for people to guide them gently into a decision. You may find however that you meet with objections. Don't be afraid of these, they are really just opportunities for you to provide more information.

Clarify the objection if you need to by asking for a clearer reason. Empathise and relate to the objection genuinely – you may learn a lot from it! Tell them you understand how they feel or that you felt the same way once, but then give some new information, for example, by telling them what you discovered that changed your mind.

For instance, if someone says they don't have the time to come along to the management training you offer, consider asking them what they feel is preventing them from having the time. Empathise with what they say and then offer some new information, such as how you found the course saved time in the longer term by improving your staff turnover rate.

A useful exercise is to think of all the objections you expect to come up against and prepare your responses in advance. Remember to focus on the benefits of any new information you give too!

Each time you overcome an objection, you need to remember to ask a closing question again until you reach a point where the potential customer either accepts or declines. Take care not to speak after asking your closing questions because silence indicates contemplation on the part of the person you have been speaking to. If you talk over that contemplation, you are likely to lose a sale.

Finally, accept a decline gracefully but add that you will welcome acceptance in the future if they change their mind. Always remember to give out your business card!

## Things to look out for with selling

### The elevator pitch

You never know when you might bump into a potential customer or a key contact in your sector. You may only have a few minutes so make sure you have prepared and practiced your elevator pitch. Combine passion and logic and stay focused on the aim of your conversation - to be able to secure another meeting.

### Your team

Ensure that the rest of your team is selling a consistent message and that they are confident in selling your product or service. This includes making sure they understand the pricing strategy, the benefits to the customer and/or beneficiary and its social and environmental impact. Many organisations are harming their own sales by communicating conflicting messages, or by having a team that is not confident enough in their understanding of the product or the enterprise.

Ensure that all your team members involved in sales or marketing (even if they are temporary staff, interns or volunteers) are trained and that they have had a chance to practice their sales pitch and respond to potential objections. Examples of objections include: 'It's too expensive', 'I'll think about it', 'Happy with current provider' or 'I have spent my budget'.

What not to do:

- Do not argue.
- Never insult the customer's opinion or contradict them.
- Do not avoid the issue.
- Do not shift responsibility.
- Do not dwell on objections.
- Do not talk to the wrong person.
- Never guess.
- Do not forget to get feedback.

## Further information

Read our guide to Identifying your stakeholders

<http://www.blondon.com/socialenterprise/Identifying-your-stakeholders.html>

Read our guides on Marketing:

[www.businesslink.gov.uk/london/socialenterprise/Marketing.html](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/london/socialenterprise/Marketing.html)

Read our guide on Customers, beneficiaries and key influencers:

[www.businesslink.gov.uk/london/socialenterprise/Customers-beneficiaries-influencers.html](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/london/socialenterprise/Customers-beneficiaries-influencers.html)