



RICHARDSON


THE POWER TO SELL

BUILD TRUST

A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED SELLING APPROACH

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The left side of the image features a light gray background with several abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in a slightly darker shade of gray. These shapes include a large, rounded rectangle, a curved, teardrop-like shape, and a triangular shape, all arranged in a way that suggests movement and depth.

Selling is a people-oriented business. Sales are made in the dialogue, person-to-person. The interaction may be face-to-face or over the phone, but the very essence of a successful outcome is based on trust between seller and buyer.

This means salespeople must be at their very best, bringing value to the table and to their customers. If, instead, they just push products, they sacrifice goodwill and trust. Their sales success is likely to be short-lived, not the basis of a long and mutually productive relationship.

Many articles have been written about the parade of scandals in the financial industry: overly aggressive sales goals leading to the unauthorized opening of accounts; funneling billions of wealthy customer accounts offshore; manipulating global interest rates; the whole subprime mortgage crisis. And such bad behavior extends beyond banking into other industries and the political environment, where instability and uncertainty are causing greater distrust among customers, who are increasingly wary of salespeople and selling tactics.



According to an independent study commissioned by SAP, respondents revealed “trust” as the single most important factor when purchasing products and services from vendors, even ahead of experience and cost.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS

Building and maintaining trust across the full lifespan of a customer relationship takes attention and focus in the following areas:

1

PREPARE WITH THE CUSTOMER IN MIND.

If, when you prepare, you find yourself spending more time preparing your solution or positioning points than you spend thinking about your customer and their issues and challenges, then you need to rethink your preparation strategy. You should begin and end with your customer in mind. If you prepare for your meeting by thinking about what they might want to get out of your time together, then not only will you build trust, you will also create more value in the meeting.

2

ASK GREAT QUESTIONS, NOT BAD ONES.

There is no such thing as a bad question, right? Wrong. We've seen bad questions asked time and time again. A bad question is one you should already know the answer to if you had done just a little bit of homework. Not doing your homework and asking questions about something you should already know not only destroys your credibility, but it also signals to the customer that they aren't worth your effort in being well prepared to meet with them. If, as your potential customer, I am not worth your preparation, then why would I trust you to act in my best interests when you do have my business?

Instead of undermining your trust with bad question, you can actually build trust with great questions. Imagine doing your homework on an industry issue facing your customer and asking how that issue might be impacting them. That question demonstrates an interest in their business and begins to build credibility and trust. Asking about risks and rewards, strategic drivers, and emerging initiatives are all great question topics to show that you are thinking about the customer's business as a whole — not just the immediate opportunity for you to make a sale.

Remember, sometimes the best questions can actually do more to demonstrate your credibility and trustworthiness than positioning a great solution.

3

CREATE VALUE PROACTIVELY, NOT REACTIVELY.

Even if you respond to customer needs in a timely and well-rounded fashion, you could very well be in what we refer to as the “Respond” mode. Sure, you met the customer’s stated needs, but how well are you getting ahead of the curve? The best trusted advisors are always thinking about their customer’s business and looking for ways to add value proactively — even if it doesn’t mean an immediate sale. They know that trust and value built over time will lead to a stronger relationship. There is a balance, of course. But the more you do to bring insight and value to your customer before they ask for it, the more you will earn their trust and demonstrate that you are someone who can help solve their business issues as a partner.



Only **27%** of buyers found that salespeople are knowledgeable about the buyer’s specific business, meaning an astounding **73%** of buyers do not think salespeople understand their company’s needs.

- Forrester Research

4

BE HONEST ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN AND CAN'T DO.

Just because you are asked to bid on a piece of business or asked for your capabilities in a certain area, you don't have to swing at the pitch. Being honest about your capabilities and core competency is important. That doesn't mean you can't stretch your capabilities — but be careful and honest. The fastest way to destroy trust is to take on a piece of business on which you know you cannot deliver. Your personal brand and reputation are on the line when you say you and your team can deliver.

5

MAKE YOUR VALUE EXPLICIT, NOT IMPLICIT.

You know that your solution is the right fit. You know you add value. But, unless you make it explicitly clear how each part of your solution fits exactly to your customer's needs, you are asking your customer to connect the dots. When I am a customer, I have no desire to do the work. I expect a partner to clearly link their solution to my needs and in the exact order that I care about them. Leave out the extraneous information, and make it easy to understand how you are addressing my needs. I need to trust that everything that I might pay for has specific value to me. And I need to trust that you diligently assessed and captured everything I must have and are addressing them all to drive value for me.

6

ALWAYS MAINTAIN A COLLABORATIVE TONE, EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T SEE EYE-TO-EYE.

A salesperson's ability to establish and maintain an environment of openness, collaboration, and mutual respect is central to navigating the customer dialogue effectively. The seller has to continually build credibility and earn the right to the customer's time and attention in the dialogue. So, how do they do that?

It is a combination of things that we do — and frankly, things we don't do — that helps us to manage the emotional tone of the meeting. The ability to manage the emotional tone of the dialogue begins first and foremost with self-awareness. That's why, at Richardson, we have the saying that "feedback is a gift." Self-awareness is the ability to understand your own emotions and the impact that they have on your decisions and actions. We have to have self-awareness around the impact of our actions on the customer — how we phrase a question or statement can elicit a more positive or negative emotional response from the customer.

We have to be able to anticipate, look for, and accurately read the customer's emotions so that we can be sensitive to the potential emotional response in preparing for the dialogue and in navigating the dialogue in the moment.

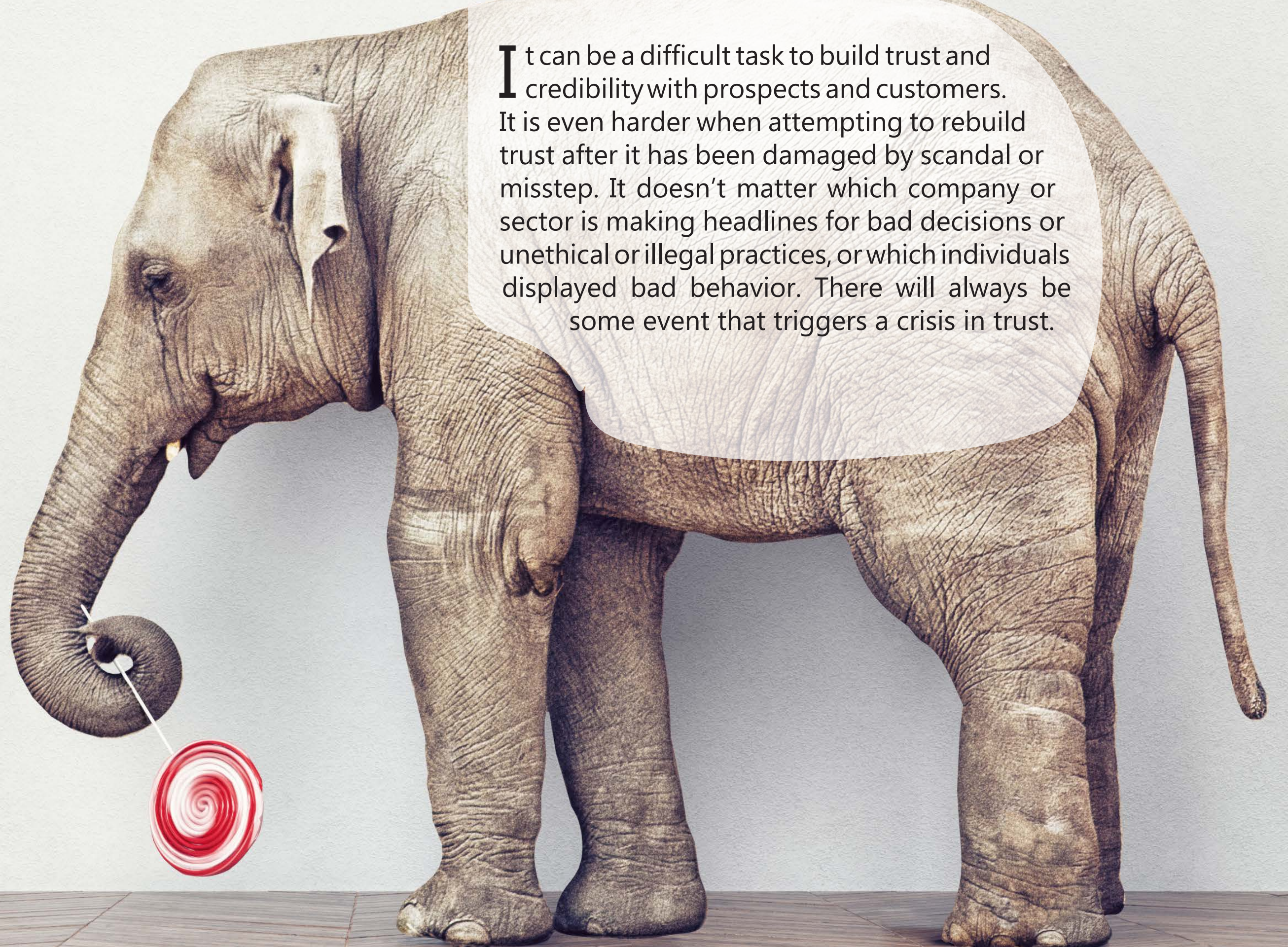
We must remember that while we are reading the customer's emotions, they are also reading us and making assumptions about our intent. Any behavior that evokes a feeling within the customer that we are being self-serving and trying to control, manipulate, or push our viewpoint on the customer will immediately trigger a negative emotional reaction from the customer. Sometimes, they let this visibly show, and other times, they try to mask their true feelings. We're at a disadvantage because our role is to "sell," and the customer knows it. From a self-awareness standpoint, we have to be ultra-sensitive to this dynamic. Customers are very savvy about being "sold to" and have little tolerance for it today. Our behaviors have to clearly show our openness and collaboration, without necessarily agreeing with the customer.

REBUILDING TRUST:

What do you do when you have damaged trust?

Getting past the elephant in the room

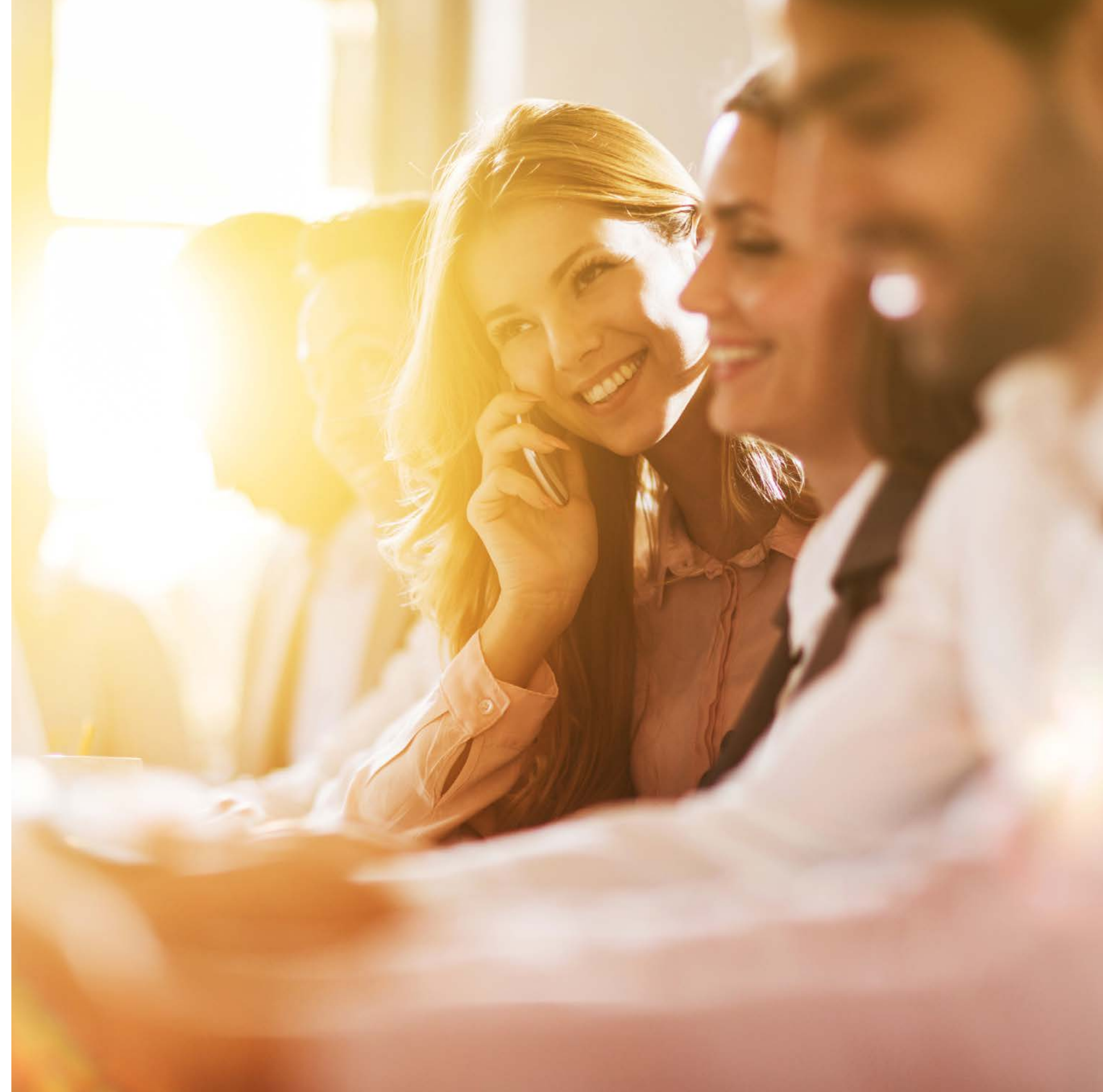
It can be a difficult task to build trust and credibility with prospects and customers. It is even harder when attempting to rebuild trust after it has been damaged by scandal or misstep. It doesn't matter which company or sector is making headlines for bad decisions or unethical or illegal practices, or which individuals displayed bad behavior. There will always be some event that triggers a crisis in trust.



When this happens, the impact on even your longest and strongest customer relationships can be profound. Something wedges between you and your customer. It becomes the elephant in the room that can feel uncomfortable to talk about, but is impossible to ignore. Yet, ignoring it is exactly what will ensure that elephant remains a fixture in your sales meetings, because getting past that elephant is necessary to regain customer trust and advance the relationship.

During difficult periods, especially when daily headlines keep bad news front and center, you may find yourself spending more time explaining, defending, and deflecting. Most people think of “fight or flight” reactions when faced with stressful situations. Actually, there are three types of reactions: fight, flight, or freeze. Depending on the situation, the people, or even the moment, you may go into battle mode, duck and hide, or get stuck. These natural reactions protected your ancestors back in the day, when conflict meant life or death, but all are ineffective for regaining the trust, respect, and confidence of customers.

So, what does work? How can you get past the elephant in the room to get back to selling? The following four-step process is straightforward and effective, if executed with authenticity, patience, and skill.



1

EMPATHIZE

Empathizing is more than hearing your customers' words; it is recognizing the meaning and emotion behind their words. Some customers will force recognition of both the issue and their feelings. Some won't talk about what's really bothering them, keeping it hidden below the surface. Expressing empathy will help you to coax out and reduce negative emotions. This is not a "soft" skill; empathy is essential to getting past the elephant. It shows your serious intent to repair the breach of customer trust — and that you truly care about your customer's feelings.

2

QUESTION

After empathy comes deep questioning. You may feel reluctant to ask many (or any) questions about the impact to customers of the bad behavior discussed above. You may be afraid to hear the response, or you might assume you know the answer. Open-ended questions and effective listening take courage and a strong stomach when trying to rebuild fractured trust. The payoff: the customer is allowed to vent and feels heard, while you show depth of caring and a greater understanding of the customer's perspective on the issue. By probing and using engaged listening and follow-up questions, you are able to gain a more complete picture. Only then can your plan begin to emerge for how to get past the elephant in the room.

3

POSITION

If you're like most competitive salespeople, your first reaction when presented with customer anger may be to explain and defend. While accurate, your comments will not be persuasive and may sound defensive, triggering in customers their own fight, flight, or freeze reactions. Instead, after empathizing and questioning, your solutions or ideas should be linked to what you learned from the customer's responses to your questions. Customers become more engaged when ideas are well-organized and directly address their issues. To position ideas effectively, you must know — not assume — three things: 1) the customer's concerns; 2) what solutions will address those concerns; and 3) how those solutions will positively impact their concerns.

4

ELICIT FEEDBACK

It's easy to mistake customer silence for agreement. At best, silence signals that the customer is thinking about the solution proposed. At worst, the customer has disengaged. Only by checking, using open-ended questions, can you elicit sufficient feedback to know if the proposed ideas hit or missed their marks. "How well does this address your concerns about our dependability as a partner?" Asking for feedback engages the customer and allows you to plan next steps. A positive response can lead to a discussion of actions, responsibilities, and time frames for implementation. A negative or neutral response can signal that you need to restart the process, beginning with empathy or questioning, to see where the solution fell short.

Trust is a fragile thing — slow to gain, quick to lose, and even slower to regain. Customers want a consistent commitment to them and their issues. Depending on the size of the elephant, you may have to engage the process multiple times over multiple sales meetings. Your sustained effort, combined with executing successfully on small actions developed in concert with the customer, will enable you to begin rebuilding trust and credibility.

It takes courage to face tough issues with customers. Sadly, wishing them away is never a winning strategy. Leveraging empathy, understanding, relevant ideas, and feedback will help you advance the difficult task of removing the elephant and regaining the trust of valued customers and prospects.

ONE FINAL NOTE ABOUT THE ROLE THAT ETHICS PLAYS IN SELLING

Consider these questions:

What makes someone an ethical person? An ethical leader? An ethical salesperson? There are two primary things an ethical person displays: character and competence.

[CLICK HERE](#)

to learn more about how Richardson's solutions can help your sales organization build trust with your customers.

Buyers know when salespeople are being duplicitous, manipulative, or shortsighted. Their character speaks louder than words. So, while salespeople can't claim trusted advisor status, they can be trustworthy people. And they can show their competence through preparation and due diligence to not only understand their customer's goals, but to show they truly care about their customer's business.

By showing the strength of their character and the depth of their confidence, salespeople can bury the stereotype that taints their profession — an unethical con artist focused on making the sale no matter what it takes. Doing so is essential to succeeding with customers in today's increasingly skeptical business environment.

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