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# Take a Sales Rep to Lunch

I took Evan Robinson, a former sales rep with National Instruments, to lunch last Monday. Evan was full of insights about selling technology products, having working in the field for several years. What sets Evan apart is that he has deep technical knowledge about the products he is selling. This helps him build a relationship with the engineers of the company he is trying to sell to. He even has helped them fix bugs with their code. This creates a deep, reciprocal relationship with the customer. The customer knows that if they buy from Evan, he will help them integrate and install his products. This leads to a good repeat business. Evan had about a $4 million quota for his territory; however, the average order size was about $10,000. This meant it was critical to build up a relationship for repeat business.

Evan originally wanted to program video games, but he soon grew tired of sitting in front of a computer every day. He joined National Instruments because he used their products as an end user and liked the tech support when he called. At National Instruments, new engineers must spend some time in tech support to learn about the needs of the customer. Evan soon moved into the leadership program and became a product manager, but Evan wanted more interaction with the customer and more money.

Evan’s typical week consisted of an office day and a goal of 16 site visits. On the office day, he would plan his schedule and make cold calls. His leads came from customers browsing the company’s website and using the online quote tools. He worked with 2 “inside” people who would write quotes and do background research. When cold calling, Evan would phone first and then immediately follow up in an email where he would reference the phone call.

On a sales call, Evan would spend most of his time listening to his customers’ need and then build a solution for them from the company’s products. Because of Evan’s engineering background, he might even code up a quick prototype to use on a sales call for an important customer.

Evan spent most of his time on the top 10 companies in his region, however he might spend a little time on smaller firms, although they would have to be planning to order >$20,000 in products. However, Evan was paid for any products shipped into his region, even if another sales rep handled the order or the order was placed on the self-service online store. Many of National Instruments’ products did not have direct competition, and none could match the brand name and support of National Instruments. Thus, Evan was not pressured much on price. However he did have a quantity discount schedule. This allowed him to handle people asking for a discount by telling them they could order more at a discount. When people promised to order more in the future in exchange for a discount now, he asked them to fill out the purchase orders for a year from now. In addition, the company did have some pre-set discounts for big national customers.

Evan recommended two books: Selling the Wheel and Influence: the Science of Persuasion. Selling the Wheel splits customers into multiple groups and then suggests a selling strategy or personality that best fits that customer. I think that this is an idea worth exploring, rather than the one size fits all strategy covered in class so far.

In summary, talking to Evan taught me a lot about the sales process and his personal work as a technical sales person. I have a technical background, and if I would go into sales, I would use more of a technical approach that Evan uses rather than the general-purpose approach taught in class.