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# THE PRIOR COMMITMENT EFFECT

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In sales, you are unknowingly competing against an unimaginable force. What is it? It is the influence of past commitments as determined by your prospects. What I am about to share with you is an insight into one of the most influential theories related to the buying decision. You might think that this sounds complicated, but sometimes the difference between being a good salesperson and a great one is in the details.

Most salespeople are not even aware that they are contending with the pull of their prospect's consistent commitments when they attempt to make a sale. Perhaps you have been engaged in a sales situation with a prospect, and it is evident that they are not buying from you, but you can't determine why. One reason could be a personally held allegiance that does not go along with what you are selling. How can you recognize what commitments your prospect may have? How can you use this knowledge to persuade more of them to buy what you are selling?

Before we get too far into this discussion, let's spend a few minutes and review

the "consistent commitment" concept and how it relates to your prospect's previous consistencies. A few months ago, I wrote the article, "Decisions, Decision, Decisions" where I introduced this concept, referencing the book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, by Robert Cialdini Ph.D. In his book, Cialdini explains the definition of consistency of commitment as follows: "Once we have taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment." In other words, when a person makes a specific decision, it

is tougher to convince the individual to change course because they are committed to their decision-making. The person is consistent - not just with the choice, but also the commitment to the decision that led the individual to reach that conclusion.

Keep in mind; these commitments are made before you meet with the prospect and influence their decision making regarding making a purchase. Therefore, in the sales situation, you have one of two choices to increase sales. One, you can work along with the prospect's prior



consistent commitments, or two, you will have to convince the prospect to break specific prior commitments. As we will discuss, it is always better to work along with someone's commitments, but many products or services do not lend themselves to that option. Yes, the salesperson is required to persuade the prospect to break a prior commitment to make the sale. Admittedly, persuading someone to change their prior commitments is very challenging. In fact, in some cases, a salesperson will need to put an end to several consistent commitments to make a sale. So, the question is, how can a salesperson be prepared to execute a plan to contend with this issue?

To begin with, the salesperson will need to identify the prospect's consistent commitments and their basis. Next, he will need to develop a series of "reasoning" strategies as social proof or convincing evidence to support making a change. These reasoning points will differ considerably, depending on the specific situation. If the salesperson finds that his product or service corresponds with the prospect's consistent commitment, it is a much easier sale and requires a lot less persuading. During the presentation, he could validate the prospect's commitments. After that, the salesperson can use a "foundational reasoning statement" introducing the company's mission and explaining to the prospect that the product or service is aligned with the prospect's prior commitments. Again, it is a much more manageable situation if your product or service lines up with the prospect's commitments.

Here is an example of selling along with a consistent commitment:

Let's say you sell replacement windows, and you determine that your prospect has a consistent commitment to an extraordinary level of home maintenance. You might say, "It seems, based on the appearance, that you are committed to keeping your home in tip-top shape. Is that true?" No doubt, the prospect agrees with that statement. The salesperson continues, saying, "Our company's goal is to assist customers in keeping their windows in good repair

and at the same time, making them easy to clean and maintain in the future. What do you think about that?" The prospect acknowledges that he has the same commitment. This is a compelling and convincing statement.

Now let's consider the opposite situation – selling where there is a need to break the prospect's previous commitments.

Let's assume that this next prospect has a commitment to a course of action that is contrary to what the salesperson is selling. The prospect's house was built in the late 1880s. His commitment is to keep the exterior looking as close to the original as possible. However, the salesperson is selling vinyl replacement windows. Yes, a white vinyl window. He doesn't have any wood replacement windows to sell. Now the salesperson is going to have to change the prospect's previous commitment during the sales presentation using several reasoning points as to why the prospect should change his mind, and let his company replace the old wood windows with his new vinyl windows. This is a much harder task compared to the first scenario, no doubt you would agree that without significant reasoning, this prospect will not move forward with a purchase of vinyl windows for his old house.

Here are some ideas that the salesperson might use as reasoning points. He might say something like "one benefit of vinyl windows is that you will never have to paint, putty, or stain them again." The presentation could include statistical support. "Research has shown that vinyl windows can last nearly fifty years without maintenance or needing to be replaced." Another line of reasoning may be "some homeowners have had concerns about the look of vinyl windows versus the original wood windows styles. In our experience, due to the clean white appearance of the windows, most people never even notice the difference - they assume they are wood windows painted white." He could also say, "Lastly, the cost to replace the windows is about half that of the wood replacement window. I believe these reasons make my vinyl windows the right choice." This salesperson used every reasoning point he could conceive

of to break the prior commitment to wood windows, didn't he?

The prospect in the second situation may change his consistent commitment to wood windows and move forward, or he may continue to stick with his original allegiance. However, if no attempt is made to persuade the prospect through a series of reasoning arguments, the salesperson probably has zero chance of making a sale. If the window salesperson regularly encounters similar prospects on his previous sales calls, he would want to include these "reasoning" presentations as part of his regular sales process - even if the prospect never brings up this issue. Why? The salesperson should assume that many of his prospects have the same consistent commitment but may not be expressing their opinions. It could be an unspoken objection.

The issue of breaking a prospect's consistent commitment is complicated. Why? Because there could be more than just one commitment. Here is an interesting example where a prospect has multiple prior commitments that conflict with what the salesperson is selling.

In the article "Decisions, Decision, Decisions," I wrote about the senior housing industry, and one of the most entrenched consistent commitment scenarios. This, of course, is that the aged senior does not want to leave their beloved home as well as other consistent commitments that seniors foster. What are they? The elderly senior may have a commitment to solitude, and late in life, many do not want to play by anyone else's rules. The preference is to be alone in their homes, where they can spend quiet time by themselves, and do what they want to do when they want to do it. They do not want to have to be compliant with anyone for any reason; they have disengaged from social conformity. In the book, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*, by Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry, the theory of disengagement was presented, with the thought that a withdrawal from society allows a senior greater freedom from the pressure to conform. Disengagement, therefore, can be a strongly entrenched commitment

of many elderly individuals. Typically, in senior housing sales, the salesperson must overcome several previous commitments, not just one. No doubt, you can see why it is imperative that a salesperson understand the reason behind his prospect's commitments.

In this scenario, we will use the example of an elderly lady since women statistically live longer than men. This woman was raised in a family where she was expected to follow the rules of her parents. Next, she attended school following the rules and regulations of the school and directions from teachers. Following her school years, perhaps she worked a job for the next several decades taking direction from her employer, the company and an immediate supervisor. Alternatively, maybe she was a stay-at-home mom, constantly tending to her husband and children. Later in life she retired with her husband, and it was just the two of them for the next fifteen plus years and during that time she continued to go along with her husband's plans most of the time (since as you know marriage is all about compromise - and she was the one who did all of it). Now her husband has died, and she is alone, and for the first time in her life, she feels free to do what she wants to do when she wants to do it - free from the yoke of doing what others want her to do. She has gained this new freedom! A year or so after her husband dies, as she approaches her mid-eighties, her daughter shows up at her house one day and starts talking about moving her to a retirement community. What! She now realizes that her daughter is telling her what to do.

She imagines what living in a retirement community will be like and how many rules this is going to involve. "You mean that I must get dressed and go to a dining room and eat with other people?" "You mean that I have to sign-up to ride a bus if I want to go shopping or to my doctor's appointment?" "They have exercise classes early in the morning, and I am not even out of bed by 9 a.m." She is not liking this idea at all. She has waited her whole life to do whatever she wants whenever she wants to, and she does not want to change that now.

With these points in mind, you might

start to think that it would be impossible to convince this individual to leave her home, giving up her solitude, and living with many rules. You are right. As a result, the senior housing industry has one of the lowest sales closing percentages compared to other sectors, because they are attempting to break multiple prior commitments simultaneously and, in most cases, the salesperson is not even aware that these consistent commitments need to be broken. Consequently, if the salesperson does not present compelling reasons for this lady to move out of her house, most likely, it will never happen. (Although there are many practical reasons why she should move, that might not matter to her.)

In this situation, an effective presentation preemptively addresses all the prior commitments the senior values. The salesperson will need to offer evidence to persuade the individual that she will be much better off in the long run if she moves into the retirement community.

Additionally, the salesperson must explain that typically, the residents of the retirement community can do pretty much whatever they want to, when they want to - or say goodbye to this lady. Hopefully, making these reasoning points the objective is to persuade the elderly senior that her commitment to her long-term welfare far exceeds her prior commitments to her home, to her solitude, and perceived restrictions to following rules. Think about it - in this sales situation, the salesperson must break at least three firm commitments of one prospect. If the elderly senior is the decision-maker, he must persuade her to see things his way. The reality is that she cannot take care of her house any longer. Additionally, it is not healthy late in life to spend too much time alone. She needs social engagement with other individuals close to her age. Lastly, she might have to accept a few small rules to have a better outcome.

Keep in mind; prior commitments are typically unspoken objections - the elderly senior citizen will never usually express these objections about moving into the retirement community to anyone, not even her daughter.

Now that we have considered how you need to either work with or break, your prospect's previous commitments, there is a secret you must know to use this concept effectively. You must do both at the same time. To master this skill, you will determine which commitments harmonize with what you are selling, and you will develop specific presentations to confirm those prior commitments. At the same time, you will need to determine which commitments your prospect has that may not correspond with what you are selling and "break" those, persuading the prospect to move forward with your solution. Yes, you will be doing both aligning and breaking, in the same presentation.

Most professional salespeople are unconsciously carrying out some of these processes to convince their prospect to buy their product or service. However, the benefit of knowingly understanding consistent commitments and why potential customers adhere to them, cannot be overstated. Why? Because once you are aware of your prospect's prior commitments, you can dial into these issues with a purposeful approach and develop a successful presentation that can be used again and again.

I think you can now see how important it is to master the skill of aligning with or breaking the prior consistent commitments of your core prospect. The specific industry does not matter. I used two examples, one with home improvement and the other in senior housing. But if you think about it, you can come up with other examples, such as "I only buy used cars, never new cars due to the depreciation." The point is that you must spend some time to analyze what might be happening based on your experience and develop a series of reasoning arguments to work in harmony with these commitments or putting an end to them. It is not an easy task, and it requires compelling evidence in favor of your solution to prove how your customers have far better outcomes if they are willing to change course.