

Thoughts on adjusting your sales approach toward prospective clients with short attention spans.

business issues

I'M SORRY... YOU WERE SAYING?

BY ANNE SCARLETT

RECENTLY, MY FIRM RECEIVED A QUERY from a “hot prospect” through our website. Based on a series of initial conversations, I deduced that the prospect had a notably short attention span.

According to *Archives of General Psychiatry* and the WebMD article “ADHD in the Workplace” (by Laura J. Martin, MD), 4.4% of working adults have been formally diagnosed with ADHD, which accounts for an estimated 10-12 million professionals in the American workplace. I’m not a physician and I’m certainly not diagnosing this prospect with ADHD, but merely stressing the point that short attention spans of varying degrees abound.

At any rate, in crafting my sales strategy, it made sense to adjust my approach in order to best accommodate this prospect. I decided to research adult ADHD-like symptoms. My goal was to formulate best practices around selling (and relationship building) toward professionals fitting this profile.

After conducting my research, I concluded that there was an opportunity to modify my “typical” selling approach. After all, savvy sales professionals aim to make their client look good (and feel good) in their professional role. So, I made some adjustments, with the intention of both maximizing their positive skill sets and assisting in areas they might find challenging.

The first step is to leverage the potential strengths often found in professionals who exhibit ADHD-like behaviors—or at the very least, short attention spans. Those behaviors include the following:

Creative: People with ADHD-like behavior often propose ideas that may or may not seem relevant. To handle that, prepare a mini “parking lot” during the meeting. At the onset of your meeting, walk the prospect through your proposed agenda (you do prepare a meeting agenda, don’t you?) to confirm agreement. Then, let the prospect know that you’ll set aside a blank piece of paper for recording any “ideas or topics worthy of exploration at a different time.” This tactic is very useful in group meetings and can also help capture spin-off ideas, thoughts and comments. Later, one attendee takes responsibility for determining (or delegating) next steps for each.

In short: Explain and use the parking lot practice with applicable clients to record extraneous ideas.

Talkative/communicative: A forthright person is a sales person’s dream, right? Indeed, this behavior may enable you to learn about the prospect’s goals and challenges with minimal probing efforts. That said, you may need to maintain meeting focus on

the intended topics by succinctly summarizing them (even parroting back their words) throughout the entire conversation.

In short: Offer mini oral summaries as you move forward in the meeting.

Curious: Perhaps one of the most beautiful things about someone with ADHD symptoms is their innate sense of curiosity. They may ask something like “How can this be done better?” If you are new to the prospect, then the “What’s better?” attitude can work in your favor, and you will follow your personal approach toward demonstrating value and differentiating your services.

If you are an incumbent but looking to grow your business with an existing client who exhibits these behaviors, then you must realize this question may be top-of-mind for your client. How might you nip their “feeling” in the bud by either a) brainstorming together about how to handle a future project or b) walking them through the post-project outcomes to demonstrate that it was done well? How might you underscore that your firm remains the best fit for their needs?

In short: Remain acutely aware of the “What’s the next big thing?” or “What’s better?” questions. Proactively address it during conversations with the prospect or client.

On the flip side, be aware of potential challenges that professionals with symptoms of ADHD face. Do your best to help them overcome them during your sales process and beyond. Some of those challenges include:

Short attention span: As you always do while selling, take good care to engage with enthusiasm, energy and warmth. Don’t muddle your message with detail. Keep everything concise and be ready to switch on a dime if their eyes glaze over or they seem restless. When offering something new, highly stimulating or intriguing, then you may be able to capture—

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and hold—their attention. Continually ask yourself if there’s a way you can reshape your message so that it feels exciting and new to them.

In short: Deliver with energy, omit the details and emphasize what’s “new.”

Difficulty staying on track and sticking to time commitments: If you want to make sure the meeting starts on time, make it easy by going to them. Meet in their offices, if possible. Once you’ve launched the meeting, try visibly checking off items on the agenda as you go through them. This will give everyone a sense of progress and accomplishment throughout the meeting.

In short: Give the overall sense that things are moving along.

Fidgety, often wants to move around: Business developers within the AEC industry love when a prospect wants to experience our projects firsthand through a site visit. This might be just the type of person who would be willing to trek to the site for a tour. (Ideally, you will provide transport.) Try offering this early in your sales cycle.

In short: Arrange a site visit, suggest a walk-and-talk after your meetings or take a “stretch our legs” coffee break.

Frustrated with their lack of focus: It can be maddening for an adult to strive for career success while tackling their ADHD symptoms. Whenever possible during your sales process, try to subtly demonstrate empathy. Examples might be “Wouldn’t you know it? I completely spaced out at a meeting I had last week.” Or “Boy, I sure am having trouble getting through my action items list for this project.” Whatever you can (honestly) share about yourself that gives them the sense that they are not alone will be appreciated. After all, many of us experience these symptoms. (A personal example: It took me a long time to write this piece; I have acquiesced to many distractions).

In short: Relate to them by sharing your own relevant challenges.

Experience challenges when reviewing detailed written work: Streamline any written documentation, and present content in bullet format. Tighten the language in your fee proposals and, if at all possible, orally walk through them through the proposal.

In short: Keep. It. Short.

Disorganized: Since these folks are often “organizationally challenged,” make sure any experiences they have with

you appear well organized. Ideally, they will associate you with organization.

To do this in a sales meeting, start off by helping them get organized by providing a brief list of what they should bring to the meeting. This can be done in your email confirmation. Perhaps they need to bring a calendar, business cards, other colleagues, specific documentation about their potential project, budget numbers, etc. Also, be very organized yourself when you are conducting the meeting. Present your materials in an even more organized manner than you might otherwise. (One example: Put materials about their project in a three-ring binder with labeled tabs. This radiates a level of competency, and a “we can handle this for you” spirit.)

In short: Demonstrate your own über-organized skills.

Procrastinate: As with any prospective client, you always want to agree upon a “next step.” In these cases, you may want to reiterate scheduled steps/commitments more than once (i.e., orally during the meeting, recap at the close of the meeting and in a follow-up email). Also, try to keep the next steps as close together as possible. While this

is certainly a goal in every sales process, there might be ways to shave off a day here or a day there to help the procrastinator to feel the sense of urgency that he/she might actually thrive within.

In short: Strive to keep the process tight.

Express emotion that may seem intense, short-fused or irrational for the workplace. Help guide them back to a rational, calm and professional state of mind (but try not to squelch any positive passion or personal investment). Suggest win-win alternatives whenever possible. If the discussion is going south with no signs of immediate recovery, then propose a break for 15 minutes before reconvening. This might be more likely to happen if you are up-selling to an existing client rather than working through the sales process with a prospective client.

In short: Aim for win-win; demonstrate a calm, professional demeanor; suggest a break.

These are the adjustments that I’ve used with the prospective client I mentioned earlier. So far, I have managed to get to know her better through a series of fairly successful “touches.” I feel optimistic about turning her company into a client.

To reiterate, I am a complete novice when it comes to adult ADHD. If any of you readers have advice and comments from your experiences in similar situations, I would enthusiastically welcome your feedback. ■

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