Are you Column Fodder?

If you are a Seller, how do you determine whether the Buyer views you as Column A - the preferred Vendor?

By Henry Ching, Sales Trainer & Coach @ Progress-U Limited

It may be nice being green, but it’s not that nice being fodder...
Are you Column Fodder?

Where did the term fodder come from?

fod·der (fdˈar)  
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n.

1. Feed for livestock, especially coarsely chopped hay or straw.  
2. Raw material, as for artistic creation.  
3. A consumable, often inferior item or resource that is in demand and usually abundant supply

In warfare, the term ‘cannon fodder’ was used for troops that were dispensable and invariably got mowed down by cannon fire.

Let’s acknowledge a fact in the sales game. There are no silver medals. Coming a very close second with a lot of effort and time invested is actually worse than losing early. The opportunity cost is significant. Sellers must avoid being Column Fodder, i.e. being mowed down by the cannon fire of the winning vendor. This is the challenge all sellers face.

So how do we apply the Concept of Column Fodder to selling and buying? We will get to that but please allow me a diversion.

To be a good seller it is not a bad idea to try to be a good buyer. Why? It is about putting yourself in the situation of the other party and trying to work out why and how buyers buy.

But the reality is that a lot of sellers are not particularly good buyers. My theory for why is that sellers spend so much time selling and since selling is deliberate work, they simply don’t have the stomach to make buying complicated too. So sellers try to make buying easier for themselves. Easier doesn’t mean better.

However, clever buyers can be very sophisticated and demanding in the way they buy. Even less sophisticated buyers go through a process that is intuitive.

Now let’s look at a real life example of Column A, B or C ‘Buying’ and we will see what Column Fodder really is.

These days almost everyone has a mobile phone and if the industry figures are correct, we seem to changing these devices at regular intervals and buying newer, more functional phones almost annually (some even more frequently).
When a customer goes through the process of choosing a new mobile phone, typically he or she looks at a number of vendors (A, B and C and sometimes D too). Vendor A is the previous supplier and will probably get the new business if the past buying experience was reasonably positive and the service is good. But not always. The buyer will buy from Vendor A provided another Vendor - say B - does not have a much better offering. For buyers this thinking may not be a formal process but it does happen.

So the buyer then spends time analysing Vendor A’s offering and uses this a benchmark against the other offerings. Vendor A has a number of things in her/his favour:

- Firstly, the buyer already has a relationship with the incumbent and all things being equal, this makes the buyer feel more comfortable. “Better the devil you know...” as the old saying goes.
- Vendor A would have a fairly good understanding of the needs and requirements of the buyer based on this relationship.
- Vendor A tends to have an understanding of the spending pattern or budget of the buyer based on previous usage.

All these things mean that Vendor A’s chances of winning are considerably higher. The real competition is usually ‘No decision’. The other vendors are all Column Fodder at this point in time as they will not get the deal but may invest time and money on this new prospect.

Vendors who are Column Fodder must try to minimize this investment of selling time and effort or better still - win the business by re-engineering the buyer’s perception. This means convincing the buyer that firstly their offer is not only ‘equal’ but also different and better. They must offer compelling differences to win over the buyer otherwise they will be fodder. They are losing so it may be better to walk away now unless they can work out how to get into Column A.

Of course, there are no ‘hard and fast’ rules in these situations. The client may be so attractive that you feel the investment has to be made. But it is very important that this decision is made with some conscious thinking as well as using your intuition. The more tools and methods you have at your disposal to assess the sales situation the better.

If you are in Column A, then great! It means you are about to win. In this case, you must protect your (winning) position. Keep qualifying. If you are Column B to Z then it is imperative to work out what you are going to do to convince the Buyer that you have a better solution. What is your winning strategy to get the deal?
But that is for next the article...

Henry Ching is a Sales Trainer and Coach at Progress-U Limited. Henry works with sales managers, salespeople, entrepreneurs and anyone else who want to further develop their sales skills and methods using Best Practice thinking.

Today, even top sales performers face ever-increasing challenges in:

- How to shorten the sales cycles;
- How to avoid being drawn into a margin destroying price war;
- How to qualify better so they work on higher quality deals;
- How to close effectively and
- How to maximize the return on investment on the sales efforts made.

Henry assists his clients in tackling these challenges through Progress-U’s innovative and unique “Stop Selling!” approach and by sharing his extensive experience gathered during his corporate career.

Henry is known for his creativity and humour when it comes to tackling difficult sales situations or working on complex deals. He has developed sales strategies and training that have helped many clients address their sales challenges.

During his corporate sales career at IBM Australia, Fujitsu and Information Builders, Henry has worked with Blue Chip clients like Mercedes Benz, HJ Heinz, Dun & Bradstreet and the Australian Defence Force. He succeeded in highly competitive sales environments that required thinking ‘outside the box’.