Sailing close to the wind

If you are familiar with sailing, you know that you can’t sail into the wind. You can sail at angles to the wind, and you can sail with the wind behind you, but it’s physically impossible to sail directly into the wind. If you try to sail too close to the wind, the boat will go “into irons.” Your forward progress will stop, the sails will flap loudly, and the boat may even move backwards.

Experienced sailors have been in irons enough times to know how to avoid it – and how to get going again, after stalling on the water. They can tell by the feel of the boat when to make adjustments in rudder and the sail. It’s all part of sailing.

Sailing and selling have a lot in common. In a sales presentation, it’s also impossible to sail directly into the wind. If your prospect is countering what you are trying to communicate, you have to adjust to the situation and change direction.

While some resistance comes in the form of clearly stated objections ("The price is too high."), other negative reactions can be expressed in non-verbal terms (such as frowns or closed body language) or general disagreement. Here are some steps to keep in mind, as you adjust your sails:

1. **Acknowledge the issue.** This brings to mind the standard Feel-Felt-Found formula ("I understand how you feel. Many others felt the same way, until they found..."). While this three-step formula can be effective in addressing specific objections, it has been around for so long that many prospects have heard it hundreds of times.

   Even so, the formula emphasizes the importance of getting in step with your prospect. Instead of saying "I understand how you feel," say something like, "I understand completely that this issue is important to you."

2. **Say why you understand.** This goes beyond Feel-Felt-Found – and adds depth to your response. For example, you can say, "This issue is important to you, because you want to make the best use of your budget (or another stated issue). It’s serious business to consider the possibility of re-allocating those funds."

3. **Ask for clarification.** Encourage him or her to expand on the issue. Say something like, "If you don’t mind, help me better understand your ideas on this." You can even restate the other person’s concern and ask if your impression is correct.

4. **Listen carefully.** This is crucial. For years, sales people have been programmed to talk. But in this case, talking is equivalent to aiming into the face of the wind. You’ll go into irons, for certain.

   Drill down. Without pushing, keep probing for clarification. Sometimes, you can simply say "Hmmm" in a curious, non-threatening tone of voice.

5. **Look for points of agreement.** As you listen and learn, you may find that the other person’s resistance is not as much of a deal breaker as you initially thought.

   By taking a non-confrontational approach, you’ll put some wind back into your sails.

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**John Foust has conducted training programs for thousands of newspaper advertising professionals. Many ad departments are using his training videos to save time and get quick results from in-house training. E-mail for information: jfoust@mindspring.com.**