

LAER: The Bonding Process®

Carew International



All our needs are being met at the present time.

Your price is too high.
I don't want to do business with your organization because you let me down in the past.

I need to talk this over with my associates.

Objections such as these are a common denominator of the selling profession, and handling objections is perhaps the most difficult part of selling. Objections are unpopular with salespeople because the slightest negative feedback or reluctance on the part of the customer can be perceived as a rejection. As a result, many salespeople look upon objections as undesirable customer behavior. Objections, however, may actually be an indication of interest and an opportunity for further exploration of the customer's needs.

Reactions first seen as "negative" and "blocking behavior" are not necessarily rejection. These reactions could mean that the customer needs more information, wants assurance, or is nervous about making a buying decision even though it is beneficial. The objection could also stem from an unrelated problem, such as a disappointment, the pressure of work, frequent and unwanted interruptions, a personal difficulty, or even the irritating behavior of the salesperson who made the preceding sales call can give rise to the temporary frustration the customer discharges on the succeeding salesperson.

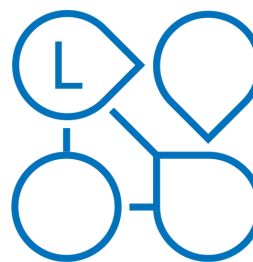
Handling objections requires a great deal of emotional stamina, especially if the salesperson has his or her heart and soul invested in the relationship. Unfortunately, there are times when

the salesperson succumbs to using dysfunctional and unproductive, hostile behaviors that cost the salesperson loss of the order and ultimately, the relationship. In order to avoid short-circuiting the sales transaction, salespeople can make conscious choices regarding how they will handle objections.

When confronted with anger and resistance, there is a method that will enable the salesperson to handle objections in a helpful and beneficial way. The method, known as LAER: The Bonding Process, involves four steps—**Listen, Acknowledge, Explore, and Respond**—and is a caring, sensitive means of productively dealing with objections.

Listen

The first step in LAER: The Bonding Process is empathic, attentive, non-judgmental listening. **When a person encounters or is confronted with a customer objection, the first requirement is to listen to the objection.** "Just listening" demonstrates interest, sensitivity, and care.



When listening, it is important to try to relax and refrain from being critical, evaluative, or de-moralizing. Understanding, acceptance, and warmth can create

a safe climate in which the customer can express his or her feelings. The customer must be allowed sufficient time to express his or her thoughts without interruption. A pause doesn't always mean the customer is finished talking. Careful listening requires concentration and an honest attempt to understand the customer's concern. Silence and patience allow the customer time to express thoughts and feelings without pressure.

order to listen attentively one must focus on what is being said. Unwarranted assumptions about what the customer is going to say can contaminate what the salesperson hears. Also, prematurely building a reply severely hampers listening. If a salesperson is preoccupied or distracted, it is very difficult to accurately perceive the customer's data. The salesperson may miss important points or vital pieces of information. Listening represents the salesperson putting aside ego or excitement about his or her product or program to pay attention to the customer's concerns. It is being open to the customer without distorting the listening process with preconceived notions about what is being said and how what is being said is going to impact the sales transaction.

It is safe to say that conflict will eventually result when the salesperson chooses not to hear the customer's message before making his or her sales presentation. Non-judgmental listening demonstrates concern for the customer's objection, without preconceived judgments or overreaction. When confronted with an objection, it is important to remain calm. Anger can immobilize and consequently detract from one's ability to think clearly and understand the full meaning of an objection. It is possible to become so sensitive to one portion of an objection that the salesperson does not hear the entire message being communicated. Salespeople need to maintain a non-judgmental posture, however difficult, before they decide upon a response to an objection. Otherwise, they are dealing with contaminated data.

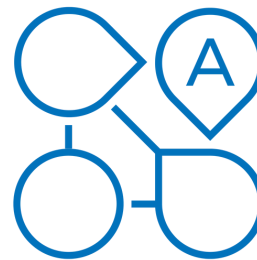
Listening is the best way to show caring for a customer's objection. Listening tells the customer that his or her concern is more important than the salesperson's. Empathic listening is the salesperson's attempt to internally experience the customer's total range of personal and professional needs. Listening with empathy shows interest, sensitivity, and care. The buying influential who feels listened to and understood is more likely to listen in return. In many instances, warm and attentive listening is all that is

needed to defuse the objection and improve the sales situation.

Acknowledge

Listening demonstrates interest and care; acknowledgement demonstrates understanding and concern. The second step in LAER: The Bonding Process is acknowledging. Acknowledging moves beyond listening to replying in supportive, summarizing, and validating ways.

Acknowledging is when the salesperson takes credit for the listening they are doing at any given moment.



Acknowledging takes the form of a supportive statement, a restatement of the issue, or some positive nonverbal gesture, such as a nod of the head or a concerned facial expression.

The acknowledgement is a way of reaching out and showing sensitivity to the other person. It demonstrates an attempt to experience the customer's feelings inside oneself.

The oral acknowledgement is the first verbal reflection of concern for whatever is disturbing the customer. Some examples of such an acknowledgement might include:

- I am concerned you feel this way.
- I agree with you. Price is an important consideration.
- I can understand your reluctance to get involved with an organization that has let you down in the past.
- It is perfectly understandable to want to be certain of a company's ability to produce before you give them the business.

The verbal acknowledgement could also take the form of a brief utterance, such as,

- I understand.
- Of course!
- That makes sense.

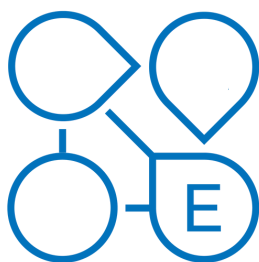
The non-verbal acknowledgement can be any appropriate and supportive gesture, such as leaning slightly forward, good eye contact, or a facial expression that denotes interest.

Caring in many cases leads to restraint, and a sincere, authentic acknowledgment can circumvent an argument and elicit such restraint acknowledging, especially when dealing with a stressful situation, has a calming effect.

Every objection does not require an answer. Sometimes all that is necessary is to let the customer know that the salesperson has heard and is concerned. Acknowledging demonstrates understanding and involvement in an authentic way. In addition, the acknowledgement helps the salesperson collect his or her thoughts and provides momentum and flow into the third step of LAER: The Bonding Process — Exploration.

Explore

The exploratory step generates new information surrounding the objection. After acknowledging the customer's objection, the salesperson can begin to explore the concerns underlying the objection. It is a sincere effort by the salesperson to identify and understand the specific issues underlying the customer's resistance, lack of understanding, or reluctance to make a buying decision in the salesperson's favor. Before the salesperson responds to what he or she thinks the customer said, he or she must be sure to understand exactly what the customer meant.



In addition to helping gather critical information, exploring demonstrates interest and a desire to understand the complexity of the problem and also to

understand the problem accurately. The exploratory step is expressed through behaviors such as questioning, restating, clarifying, or checking out observations or assumptions. One of the keys to effective objection handling is the ability to

identify and deal with the real objection, which may or may not be the stated objection.

Experience shows us that salespeople typically have to deal with price objections more frequently in the early stages of selling than later in the relationship. In fact, we firmly believe that the first law of sales states, "Price becomes important to the extent the relationship is not." Often, early in the sales relationship, the customer will offer price as a reason for not considering a supplier, when the real reason is the customer likes the competition's salesperson and enjoys the attention and entertainment provided by them. In such cases, the price objection is often used, because the customer does not feel comfortable disclosing the real objection. Since it is essential to determine the real reason for the customer's reluctance, the exploratory step could be used, in this case, to discover whether price is, or is not, the real objection.

"I agree with you that price is an important consideration. Do I understand you correctly that if my price had been the same or lower than my competitor's, I would have earned the right to your business?" This statement and question acknowledges the fact that price is an important consideration when making a decision to buy, and questions whether price is the real reason the customer is resistant.

Exploring must be balanced by an appropriate proportion of acknowledging in order to avoid being perceived as interrogating. Frequently, the customer will evade the question by saying, "Well, I'm not sure. There are other considerations, but price is an important consideration when you're trying to break into this account."

In attempting to discover the real objection, it is necessary to clarify once again. In this case: "It appears that in addition to price there are some other factors preventing you from making a buying decision in our favor. Because you are going to be making a decision soon, would you share those reasons with me?"

Another example of the exploratory step can be heard in a response to the “I have to talk it over” objection. This objection is often used when the customer is reluctant to act on a salesperson’s presentation. The customer may say, “I have to talk this over with some other people. I’m not the only one involved in the buying decision, and I’d like my associates to review this proposal and give me their ideas on how they feel it will work.”

An appropriate way of exploring this objection would be: “I can understand your desire to want to talk this over with your associates. It makes good business sense. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, yours will be the buying decision. On the basis of what you’ve just seen, how do you feel about this program? Will you recommend its adoption to your associates?”

The key to using the exploratory step is to precede the exploration with an acknowledgement. The sincere, authentic acknowledgement makes it much easier for the customer to respond to questioning efforts. Nothing is more damaging to the objection-handling process than the overuse of punitive probes and leading, manipulative questions. Unfortunately, when it comes to exploring, some salespeople use the hammer and chisel approach; they open the clam, but destroy it in the process. Similarly, persistent probing and leading questions may produce the information wanted, but may destroy the chances for further productive interactions.

Sometimes more specific information must be sought in order to further explore an objection. For example, the customer may raise the poor quality objection: “We’ve heard your company is having problems with poor quality, and I don’t want to get involved with an organization I can’t consistently depend upon for good quality.” The salesperson can profit here from additional information before responding to the objection more directly: “I can understand your concern about poor quality, and just like you, I would not

want to get involved with an organization that was producing inferior quality. It would help me to know where you got this information and specifically in what area this poor quality was reported.”

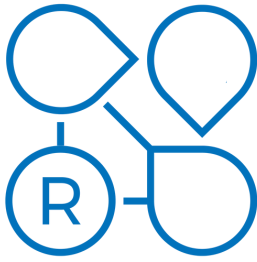
Having obtained valid knowledge of where this poor quality originates, the salesperson can follow the first exploratory step with a second: “Poor quality was a problem in the past. However, if I can demonstrate to you that what was the case two years ago is no longer the case today, would you be willing to consider us more seriously as a supplier?”

The key here is to acknowledge the objection, inform the customer of the current improved situation, and get a commitment from the customer to consider their company more seriously now that the situation has changed for the better.

The exploratory step is an attempt to identify, clarify, and verify the issues underlying the customer’s reluctance to make a decision. It is a sensitive exploration of the customer’s resistances, needs, wants, and motivations. Exploring guarantees an accurate and thorough understanding of the situation, demonstrates involvement, assures an appropriate sales presentation, and prepares the customer to receive the presentation in a positive way.

Respond

The final step in the objection-handling sequence is the response. The response is the logical conclusion to the interplay of the **listen**, **acknowledge**, and **explore** behaviors. In LAER: The Bonding Process the response is an appropriate answer to the customer’s objection: a recommendation, an alternative, a solution, or a next step designed to address the customer’s concerns and close the transaction.



In the case of the price objection, responding may mean explaining how the value of a program, service, or product is more important than a lower price. In the case of

late delivery or poor quality, responding might mean detailing all corrective action steps to be taken to resolve the problem and prevent any recurrence. When the customer raises the delay objection—"I have to talk it over with my associates"—the response could be asking the customer to recommend the program to his or her associates.

In responding, it is important to share information or propose an action step that is accurate, appropriate, and specific. The response should take into account all information received during the three preceding steps of LAER: The Bonding Process, and should speak directly to the objection which has been raised.

The response is the step in LAER: The Bonding Process that concludes objection handling. The **response** follows as much **listening**, **acknowledging**, and **exploring** as is necessary to bring finality to the objection-handling situation. It is the natural outcome of the dynamics created through the use of the **listen**, **acknowledge**, and **explore** steps. The response step is an effort by the salesperson to substantiate the value of his or her program. In responding, the salesperson furnishes information to answer the customer's questions, explains the reasons for problems, corrects problem situations, shares thoughts on what the next step should be, and seeks approval for the proposed program.

Summary

Objection handling does not have to be a painful activity for the sales professional. An objection is a natural occurrence whenever someone is considering a decision. Objections are also opportunities and when handled professionally, represent an investment in the relationship.

LAER: The Bonding Process, of **listening**, **acknowledging**, **exploring**, and **responding** (LAER) creates a positive, two-way transaction and a sincere attempt by the sales professional to understand the customer's point-of-view.

It represents an effort on the salesperson's part to model and practice the behaviors that the sales professional wants the customer to reciprocate in the transaction. LAER: The Bonding Process, is an expression of combined sensitivity and emotional control and can diffuse tension and anger. LAER: The Bonding Process is a deposit in the relationship bank.

