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Section: VIEW POINT

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS ON 'ROCC' OF **TRUST**

Zig Ziglar put it best: "The primary reason people will choose not to buy from you is lack of *trust*."

So often, we in business-to-business marketing assume that it is our superior product, excellent service, or technological innovation that will earn us new business. An in-depth survey of customer and suppliers in the automotive industry, however, confirms Ziglar's pronouncement: The presence of mutual *trust* in a customer-supplier relationship is the defining factor in determining who will win business.

The obvious question, then, is "What is *trust*?"

We use that word so often, yet are not able to define clearly what it means or how it makes a difference. This automotive industry survey asked more than 90 customer-supplier teams how they did or did not trust each other. Their answers comprised four distinct areas: reliability, openness, concern and competence. I like to call *trust* the ROCC that supports excellent customer-supplier relationships.

Reliability: We all know what it means, but do we really put it into practice? Reliability means doing what you say you will do, following through as promised, delivering as scheduled. Reliability is an aspect that we can demonstrate even before we have gained a customer's business. It is our first step toward demonstrating our trustworthiness.

After I sent a proposal to a prospective client, he asked me to call him weekly to keep track of his progress in obtaining internal approval. After three or four weeks of phone calls, he chuckled as I said hello. When I asked if everything was OK, he replied, "Yes. I think it is great that you follow up when you say you will." To me, this was not rocket science, but he implied that this type of reliability is rare.

Openness: As my favorite boss once said, "You don't have to tell everything you know, but you do need to be honest in what you do tell a customer." Customers want truthful, candid answers to all of their questions. When we are the customer, we want the same thing.

I learned about the dire consequences of not being open when a former boss sat in the room with my customer and me and denied that we were building a new plant within miles of the customer's existing one. She wanted to surprise the customer once we had broken ground to show what a great supplier we were by moving closer to the plant. The problem was in the interpretation. My customer interpreted the boss's deceitfulness as arrogance, assuming that we would have the business just because we were building a plant close by. The result was that my former company did not get the major share of that customer's business, and today has none. A

little up-start competitor with a quiet, yet honest sales manager (formerly with my company) won that business.

Concern: This means asking enough questions about your customer, his business, and his career so that he knows that even if your prices are higher than your competitors, you genuinely care about his well-being and his company's success.

Too often we think that business-to-business marketing is all about "the money," but our customers want to know that we have a long-term interest in their businesses and lives. I ask customers how their new product line is doing and what I could do to make sure they receive their bonuses this year. I make it my business to remember birthdays and anniversaries and ask about a grandchild's recent surgery.

We build relationships by gathering information of importance to our customers and then recalling that information to let them know that we asked, we heard, and we cared.

Competence: The products or services we provide must perform as expected. Customers will not buy from us just because we are nice people or because our company is socially conscious. We prove our competence by becoming an expert in our customer's industry and by demonstrating our ability to give advice that improves our customer's bottom line. After several years of advising a financial services firm in sales and marketing strategies, I was recently asked to join as a partner. I had not thought about a career in financial services but had obviously established my credibility in the field.

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