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Posted 12.15.2010

Improv your way to a sale Whose line is it, anyway?

By Julie Hansen

(Editor's note: This is the second of two parts. Read [part one](#).)

"Improvisation is too good to leave to chance."

Paul Simon

I began studying improv to sharpen my acting skills, but I quickly recognized that this "in the moment" discipline could be applied to many of the challenges I faced as a salesperson. "Think fast" is the rule rather than the exception. Following are three more key rules that helped me become a better scene partner on-stage and a better business partner of

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Whose line is it, anyway?

1. Say, "Yes and..."

No matter what your partner gives you, in improv you must always reply with "Yes, and" to keep the action moving forward. Improv performers know that their scene partner's contribution is critical to a successful scene and they secure this by making their partner look good, acknowledging and being open to his perspective.

"Yes and" demonstrates an attitude of acceptance that is as helpful in improv as it is in business. Here's how it works: Suppose your prospect tells you that they never buy anything but Product X, and you're defending your competitor, you reply: "Yes, and that's why you don't yet have anything better." You have acknowledged their point as well as offered your perspective without getting their defenses up. "Yes, and" allows you to build on your prospect's view and keep the lines of communication flowing.

2. Don't block

Unlike "Yes and," blocking brings forward progress to a dead stop or worse, negates the performer's perspective. Consider the following improv scene:

Player 1: "What do you think of my gorilla?"

Player 2: "I don't like gorillas." Or: "What gorilla?"

Blocking is a way of minimizing the impact of new information. In sales, blocking might look like:
Prospect: "I'm happy with my current supplier."

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Seller: "But they don't provide the most cost-effective solution to your problem."

The "Yes and" response: "Yes, and I'm sure you wouldn't work with anyone who didn't need. We just happen to have a solution that gets better results."

3. Cut to the chase.

Most improv scenes start in the middle. Where the interesting stuff happens. If performers setting up the scene audiences get bored. If you take too long getting to your point, the prospect. With attention spans growing increasingly shorter, if you don't get to the point, you may lose your window of opportunity. Which of the following two improv scenes would you watch:

Scene One:

--Hello, I'm Chuck.
--Hi, I'm Jan.
--Nice to meet you.
--You also.
--How are you?
--Great.
--How are you?
--I just got mugged.

Scene Two:

--Can you help me? I just got mugged.
--Stay here while I call the police.
--No police! I'm wanted in four states.

Scene two cuts to the chase, doesn't it? Not that we shouldn't be pleasant and courteous. Many sales calls do you suppose busy executives receive every day? Five? Ten? Ten minutes of face-to-face time, jump in and get to the interesting stuff before it's too late. Improv requires a certain amount of vulnerability and a willingness to occasionally lose. If performers are focused on protecting themselves and saving face, the scene will be played safe in sales and you risk the same outcome. Great improv players are in the accepting, daring and therefore memorable. Qualities we could all use a little more of.

While these rules may not lead you to the stage of your local comedy club, they can help you navigate the maze of unknowns in this new economy and make you a better business partner. So think fast! And whose line is it anyway?

Julie Hansen is a Sales Consultant, Speaker and Professional Actor who shows salespeople how to use proven acting techniques to get in front of key decision makers, communicate more effectively and dramatically increase sales. Look for her new book "ACT Like a Sales Pro" in 2011. For tips or information on having Julie speak or work with your group go to: <http://www.actingforsales.com> or email: Julie@actingforsales.com

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Last updated on Dec 14, 2010 at 09:51 AM



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