



Superior service is a critical factor in defining a company's value proposition to school business officials.

Creating a Long-Term Relationship of Value with School Business Officials

Anyone familiar with NBC's situation comedy "The Office" can attest to the unconventional sales approach of one of Dunder Mifflin's top salesman, the eccentric Dwight Schrute. Dwight's character might best be described as "one part creepy, one part gung ho." During a 2007 episode, Dwight is accompanied by fellow salesman Jim Halpert on a desperate sales call to prevent an existing client from jumping ship to a large office supply store, which has promised lower prices.

Knowing Dunder Mifflin can't compete on price, Jim and Dwight instead focus their approach on Dunder Mifflin's superior client service. In the end, Dwight's tirade-like appeal to service saves the business. Standing above the client, he says in a menacing tone: "Here's my card. It's got my cell number, my pager number, my home number, and my other pager number. I never take vacations. I never get sick. And I don't celebrate any major holidays."

While it generally is not advisable to take this sales approach, in this case Dwight is spot on. Superior service is a critical factor in defining a company's value.

Recently, companies have turned attention to the concept of value proposition—defining the tangible value that clients receive in their relationships. They try to connect with clients *on their terms*. A clearly articulated value proposition, then, isolates the bottom-line benefit a company delivers.

The first step in defining value is to know what's actually important to clients. ASBO members have identified these characteristics as most important in vendor relationships:

- Their products must fill a distinct need,
- They must provide first-class service before and after the sale—reachable immediately problems surface,

- They have true technical expertise to support products,
- They are honest and up-front with pricing, and
- They have relevant experience with school districts.

Vendors As Partners

The best news? School business officials recognize that vendor relationships are key to their own success. "They're important partners with us," said one ASBO member. "We can't have all the expertise on our staff. A sales person for a particular product line, in addition to supplying that product, is going to give some excellent advice to help improve productivity that I haven't thought of."

Experience with other school districts, again, is important, particularly experience within the same state or region. "I need to know some of their clients so I can call them," said another member. "It's always nice when you have other people in your state who have had experiences."

While pricing is important to all, service trumps price every time when you talk to ASBO members. "They have to be competitive, but they have to be willing to take full responsibility of the product and deliver top-notch service," said a different member. And service starts with a knowledgeable sales team. "I don't like a salesman who doesn't know his product. He needs to know what it does and how it will improve our situation."

How well does your company understand the problems and perspectives of clients? Developing such an understanding, and then aligning your sales and service approach with their expectations, is the best way to establish a long-term relationship of value with school business officials.