

Occupational Health ManagementTM

A monthly advisory for hospital-based occupational health programs

GUEST COLUMN

Be prepared for surprises when making sales pitch

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The first time you encounter a prospective client who raises a seemingly insurmountable objection to signing with your occupational health program, you can be forgiven for responding with a blank stare.

But only once. After that, you should go back to your office and develop a strategy for responding when prospective clients tell you why your program isn't right for them.

Prospects should be expected to raise objections and cite reasons they should not use your program. Ideally, your sales interaction would have been so skillful that the prospect couldn't possibly find any reason not to use your program, but that is not always a reasonable expectation. The key is to be prepared for the prospect's objections and not see them as a conversation stopper.

If you're prepared for the objection — even if you can't predict what the objection will be — you're less likely to respond with a blank stare and assume that's the end of the conversation. Indeed, sometimes the objection will be so concrete that there is no way to overcome it, but that is the rare situation.

In most cases, you can change the prospect's perspective by listening attentively, asking more questions, and deflecting attention from the supposed flaw in your program to your program's strong points, as perceived by the prospect.

When responding to a prospect's objections, remember one of the main rules that applies in any stage of a sales presentation: Don't run in to fix something without understanding what is broken. When the prospect cites a reason your program isn't a good match with his needs, don't respond immediately with a defense of

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your program. Take a moment to be sure you truly understand what the prospect is saying. The best way is to ask a question that elicits a more complete explanation.

Follow these other rules when responding to a prospect who says "I'm afraid your program just isn't right for us":

1. Establish value for your service.

Employers almost always will be interested in free, value-added services vs. solely what comes with a fee schedule. Provide appropriate "freebie" services to maintain good customer relations, but be careful to establish a value for those services. People see fees as a measure of value, so make sure the prospect understands the value of the services you will be offering at no additional cost. "Did I make clear that the telephone consultation is provided free?" you might ask. "An occupational health program typically would charge \$50 for that service, but we will be providing it at no charge, considering it an investment in a long-term relationship with your company."

Don't just mention such a service and assume that the prospect will understand its value. Specify the value.

2. Showcase your medical professionals whenever possible.

By emphasizing the high quality of your staff and medical services, you avoid having the prospect see the relationship as simply between the employer's decision maker and the salesperson. Your chances improve if the prospect focuses more on the hospital and company, rather than on you and him or her.

It is easier for the decision maker to say, "No, I don't think *your* program is what *I'm* looking for," than it is for him or her to say, "No, *our* employees won't benefit from a relationship with ABC Hospital's occupational health staff."

3. When you offer a favor, ask for something in return.

That may feel uncomfortable, but it further helps establish value for your time and service. If you offer a favor such as discounted fees for a particular service, that is the correct time to secure an exclusive provider relationship. If you don't ask then, the prospect may later forget the value of the favor you granted.

4. Never take a defensive posture regarding your program's supposed weaknesses.

Remember that the prospect won't have any confidence in your program if you seem to have doubts yourself. Even if the prospect cites an objection that hits right on what you (secretly)

know is your program's weak point, don't let on to the prospect. In prospects' eyes, you should have complete confidence in the program you represent, leaving prospects with a nagging doubt that maybe you're right and they're wrong.

Of course, that doesn't mean that you just keep insisting the weak point isn't a weak point. Instead, you can steer the conversation away from that area toward a strong point.

5. Don't give up so easily.

Don't give up when the prospect says there is a mismatch. Work to understand the mismatch. Even if it seems you shouldn't argue the point, offer to help the prospect learn more about your program. "I'm sorry you feel that's such a problem, but I'm confident that you would be happy with our overall program," you might say. "Perhaps you would like to visit our clinic for a tour or call a few of our references."

Maybe they will say no, but if they say yes, you're a step closer to overcoming the objection.

Another tip: If the prospect seems convinced that you're hopelessly mismatched, ask for advice. "Well, now that our discussion is over, what could we have done differently?" Chances are good that such an approach will put the prospect more at ease, feeling that the actual business negotiation is over. Once at ease, the prospect may tell you the real truth about why your program doesn't seem right.

If so, you may suddenly find that the discussion isn't over at all. For instance, the prospect may admit that the real problem was that your occupational health physician is not board certified. He may have been reluctant to criticize your physician's credentials.

Then you can point out that the physician is board eligible and will be board certified within a matter of months. "Would that make a difference?" you ask. When the prospect says yes, you're back in business.

Maintain composure in face of objections

Those strategies are effective, but only if you remain cool and calm in the face of a prospect's objections. If you respond to a prospect's objection with anger, disbelief, or a face that makes you look like your puppy just died, you will have a much more difficult time responding effectively.

To maintain a confident, professional appearance when you're on the hot seat, try these tips:

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Take notes.

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- Maintain a relaxed but professional posture. Don't slouch, but also avoid becoming rigid and stiff — the sign of someone who is uncomfortable and nervous.

- Assume the role of diagnostician. Don't feel that it is *you* the prospect has found fault with, but rather the program itself. Avoid taking it personally and just do your best to understand the prospect's concerns, and respond to those in a positive way.

Some objections are unique to the employer, but there are many routine objections that you can expect to encounter frequently. Any occupational health program has weaknesses, and those weaknesses can be spotted by the more experienced corporate purchasers.

They may object to price, location, reputation, hours of service, accessibility, customer service orientation, medical staff, support staff, user-friendliness, prompt written and phone communication, billing, and injury tracking.

The fact that those objections are common does not mean you should rely on one stock response. Integrate active listening skills before responding. Asking a few questions can help you better understand the objection, as well as give you a few minutes to formulate the correct response.

To see how all of that advice can be put to use, consider this example of a prospect-salesperson interaction:

Prospect: Your price for drug screening is so high!

Salesperson: Hmmm. That's an interesting comment. What do you mean exactly?

Prospect: Your price is a good \$5 higher than the other clinic we talked to.

Salesperson: Well, I certainly can understand that price is important. Is price the only concern? What are other important considerations for your company regarding drug screening?

Prospect: Price isn't the only factor, of course. We expect quality and good customer service, too.

Salesperson: Could you tell me how your company defines quality and good customer service?

Prospect: Being able to handle our volume, one-stop shopping. You know, the standard stuff.

Salesperson: Earlier, you mentioned that most of your drug screening volume is on your second and third shifts, after 5 p.m. How important is it for a provider to accommodate your employees at that hour?

Prospect: Very important. Probably the most important factor.

Salesperson: What's the second most important?

Prospect: Quality.

Salesperson: And how would you determine if a provider offered quality service?

Prospect: Oh, I guess I'd want to see the place, meet the professionals, and talk to references.

Salesperson: Okay, so we've established that your top three concerns are service after 5 p.m., quality, and price. Since evening service is so important, are you aware that our facility is the only provider within a 30-mile radius that can provide round-the-clock service?

Prospect: No, I wasn't.

Salesperson: Well, maybe we're at the point where we need to show you what sort of quality service we can provide. Should I schedule a tour of the facility and provide our references?

Prospect: Yes.

[Editor's note: What are the objections that provide the biggest challenges to you or your salespeople? Let us know, and Occupational Health Management will provide advice on the best response. You can send in your comments anonymously if you wish. Send your comments to Occupational Health Management, P.O. Box 740056, Atlanta, GA 30374. Or call Kathy Cline, managing editor, at (404) 262-7759, ext. 173.] ■