

FORETHOUGHT SALES

What B2B Customers Really Expect

by Philip Kreindler and Gopal Rajguru

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Most vendors carefully research what customers expect of their products and services, but few, if any, ask customers what they expect of their salespeople. That's a mistake.

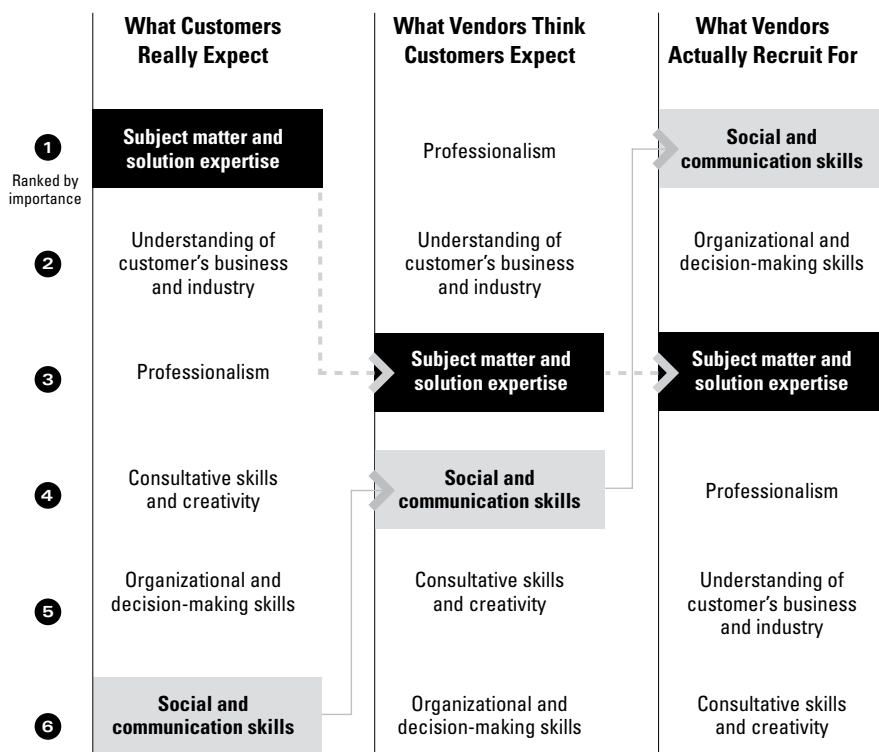
We interviewed 120 sales leaders in vendor organizations across a wide variety of industries, from pharmaceuticals and financial services to telecommunications and software. We asked those leaders what they thought customers expected of their salespeople and determined whether they incorporated those expectations into recruitment. We then interviewed 200 of these vendors' customers to see what they really expected when evaluating potential suppliers and where they saw the greatest need for improvement. The exhibit "Customer Expectations Revealed" presents a snapshot of our key findings.

As the exhibit shows, customers put salespeople's subject matter and solution expertise at the top of their list of important qualities. Vendors, however, underestimate its value, ranking it third among qualities they believe customers want most—the same level at which they rank subject matter and solution expertise when recruiting new salespeople.

From the customer's point of view, the greatest need for improvement is in salespeople's knowledge of the customer's business and industry (39% of customers expressed dissatisfaction in this area). Vendors are aware of the importance of industry expertise, but less than 25% specifically evaluate customer industry knowledge when recruiting salespeople. This may be because customer industry knowledge is difficult to assess during a recruitment inter-

Customer Expectations Revealed

Vendors not only misunderstand what customers want from salespeople but often recruit for attributes that aren't customers' top priorities.



view or from employer references. Yet, as with subject matter expertise, salespeople shouldn't acquire their industry knowledge on the job; they should bring it with them.

Vendors rank professionalism—flexibility, integrity, reliability, responsiveness, respectfulness, fairness, and understatement—first among the qualities that they believe customers expect of their salespeople. It is ranked much lower in vendor recruitment criteria, however, because (as with industry knowledge) it is difficult to evaluate during the hiring process. Professionalism is a critical attribute; customers appreciate it, too. But customers rank it third behind comprehensive industry knowledge and subject matter expertise. It's a difference in priorities to which vendors should pay close attention.

Social and communication skills such as sensitivity, empathy, willingness to listen, and presentation ability rank last on the customer's wish list but are first among vendor recruitment criteria, illustrating the common belief among sales managers that social skills are more important than other qualities and need

to be present from the start, while industry knowledge can be gained later. Our survey suggests that vendors would be wise to put industry and subject matter expertise ahead of social skills when it comes to recruitment.

Vendors shouldn't assume they know what customers want. We recommend that vendors interview their customers to determine which skills and expertise they expect, assess their salespeople's current performance against the desired skills, and develop recruitment procedures and training programs to address the gaps. Vendors should incorporate subject matter and industry expertise into customer satisfaction surveys and performance reviews.

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