How to overcome the 3 challenges of Group Selling?

Can you answer these three questions?

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a salesperson meeting with several people at Customer place simultaneously?
2. What is meant by 'Role Expectation' in a group meeting?
3. What can cause/ influence formal setting or an informal setting for a group sales meeting?

Can you solve the following three problems?

1. "The idea of group meeting may be quite interesting," admits an experienced salesperson – "but my case is different". My Customers are Heads of purchase from big industrial companies. Just trying to contact other people in the company annoys them. As far as possible I would rather talk to one person at a time which is much easier than meeting all of them in a group.' He is right in some respects and wrong in some. Can you make it out?

2. Martin was successful in persuading Manufacturing Head to allow him to meet two machine operators for trials with the new tooling he is selling to the company. The company is the regular buyer of his line of tooling and he knows the purchase, stores and finance people as also the senior managers from shop floor very well. Usually resistance to a new idea of tooling comes from machine operators as per his experience.

   He could convince the two machine operators about the advantages of this new tooling. The Head of Purchase had taken a benevolent neutral position during these shop floor trials and decided to have a meeting to take a decision on the new tooling. He invited the two machine operators under information to the Head Manufacturing, and also called the lead engineers of Quality Control and Industrial Engineering and also the Management Accountant for this meeting.

   Martin had impressed upon the machine operators their support role and they had promised to express a favourable opinion. But to his surprise, at the meeting they were extremely reserved, almost afraid to speak up and of no help. Can you explain why?

3. Peter is Technical Manager of a chemical company and is very senior in hierarchy. He is accompanying the salesperson Stefan on a joint visit to the Customer. Present from Customer's side are: Head Commercial and his assistant; Head Technical and his two assistants. Peter and Stefan are at the head of table.

'How about a little break?' suggests Peter. Everyone welcomes it. During the break, Peter meets the two technical assistants and gently guides them to Stefan. He starts a general conversation and excuses himself to discuss about an upcoming association seminar with the Head Technical.

When the meeting is resumed, Peter takes a seat between Head Technical and his two assistants and leaves Stefan alone at the head of table. What is Peter trying to do? If you were in Stefan's position, what would you do now?

Why Group selling?

One to one dialogues get replaced with 'multilogues' in a complex purchasing function we see in organizational selling context. Salesperson however has a natural tendency to meet Customer people one by one. It is so much easier! But the question is will it achieve the desired result?

Salesperson needs to understand why he/she is uncomfortable to meet Customer people in a group so that he/she can work against the negative elements of group selling. *The source of discomfort lies in three challenges:*

1. *Isolation (one against several)*
2. *Lack of feedback (people respond little, or respond in non-genuine way when in a group)*
3. *Constant risk of losing the initiative*

What can a salesperson do?

While there are many tips that a good training programme will give you, here is the essence of it:

➢ Lot of planning is required for the meeting, but during the meeting one must be flexible.
➢ Work towards changing the formal meeting atmosphere - which is characterized by formal seating, strictly controlled way for discussions and one way speeches – into an informal atmosphere.
➢ Salesperson can reduce isolation by integrating into the group before meeting and during.
➢ 'Problem solving' approach rather than a 'sales meeting' approach helps 'outsider' to become 'insider'.
➢ Try to assume a leading role.
➢ Use of allies must be carefully planned.

Planning should cover two angles – Related to objective of the meeting, and analysis of participants.

i) Questions related to objective of meeting

- What arguments and appeals will help?
- How should these be used?
- What are the key questions to be prepared in advance?
- What support material should you prepare and use?
- What references, case histories, tests etc do you need to carry and produce if needed?

ii)   **Questions related to analysis of participants**

- Who will take part?
- Who could be influenced to participate? (Or stay away?)
- What do these people think?
- What do they know?
- What do they expect?
- What is their attitude?
- What are their interest/ motivation?
- Who is likely to be an ally? Opponent? Neutral or indifferent?
- How can these people be led, influenced or guided? (Common methods – Seating, AV design, questions, samples, references).
- Who should be there from our side?

'As is' part of this analysis tells you the "role expectations" that participants may have. Everyone by virtue of status, position, competence or personality expects to be playing a certain role or part at the meeting. It is very important to be aware of these role expectations.

Stand-up presentation

Every major group sales meeting is likely to require a stand-up presentation.

Delivering a successful presentation involves mastering the 9 skills below:

i)   Position and movement.
ii)   Voice modulation.
iii)   Speed and pace of your speech.
iv)   Use of pause.
v)   Clarity of speech.
vi)   Eye contact.
vii)   How you use the AV medium.
viii) Gestures.
ix)   Structure of the presentation.

Structure for your presentation

While the structure has to suit your objective, following general structure may be helpful.

- Your brief (Or situation as understood by us)
- Your needs (Or how is it in your view?)
- Our proposal to address the situation and needs.
- Why …? (Your company name)
- Your questions.
- Action ahead

It is advisable to tell this sequence upfront while starting your presentation. People will then hold their questions till the appropriate stage and not lose your control in between...

Can you now go back to the questions in the beginning of this document? Would your answers change?