

What the Music Business Taught Me about Selling

By Justin Locke
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Clients need and want more stuff than you can possibly imagine, but you can't wait for them to tell you what those things are. You have to ask – and when you do, be ready to expect the unexpected! If you're willing to keep your ears open and make a few adjustments here and there, you will find a lot more opportunities than just selling what you think people ought to buy.



I learned that lesson through my part-time business of selling musical scores, but the insights are applicable in any customer service environment – especially in providing financial planning and investment advice. After all, you provide a service to each of your clients, some of whom may have similar needs but all of whom are unique. Asking your clients what more you could be doing for them is the only way to make sure you're offering the advice they truly want.

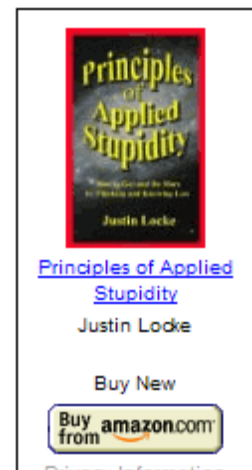
A recent example from my own career: One of my publishing customers had done my shows so often I decided to create for him his own "conductor's score" so he wouldn't have to use my rental copies any more. After sending the score to him, I realized that the paper I used wasn't as heavy as it should have been, so after his latest performance, I sent him a little follow-up e-mail, asking him if the paper was thick enough to not bleed through.

He wrote me back and said, "The paper is fine ... but the text is too small."

Wow. I had been renting copies of this score all over the world for 25 years, but I had never used it myself in a performance or noticed the woefully small and impractical point size of the text.

I quickly learned two things from this experience:

1. It's very easy to be mistaken about what is important and valuable to a client, and
2. Most of the time, your clients will not tell you what you're doing wrong. They will just assume that you are doing your best work, or that you don't care, or they can't get





better service out of you. After all, they don't know what is possible and what isn't.

When was the last time you went into a restaurant, handed the waiter a recipe, and said, "Can you have the chef make this for me? It's not on the menu but this is what I really want." Your clients are in this position more often than you think: They know that they want something else, but they don't know if they are allowed to ask for it, and if they can, how to do it without looking foolish or demanding.

A similar lack of communication happened when I was a classical double bass player. The world of professional musicians is often very lofty and restrictive, and my orchestra had its own severe standards for what made a "good performance." We placed tremendous emphasis upon precision and accuracy. We never actually asked our customers, i.e., those strangers sitting in the audience in the semi-darkness, what they felt was valuable in their concert going-experience.

When the numbers of ticket buyers started to shrink, we would recite the universal rationalization mantra, "well, audiences have changed." This was pure baloney. We lost customers because we stopped listening to them. We spent most of our energy meeting the strict standards of colleagues. All too often, we convinced ourselves that we knew more than our customers, so there was no point in asking for their uninformed opinion. .

I have since discovered that the majority of our customers wanted something entirely different from what we thought they did. They generally sought connection, not precision. They wanted to have a fun, elegant event. Given how focused we were on mechanical, disciplined precision, it's no wonder they stopped buying our product.

A related lesson is that, no matter what product or service you provide, it is very easy to get a skewed sense of what is the most important and valuable part of your service. It is easy and common, for example, to think that the part of your job that is the most difficult provides the most value. For me, as a young musician, learning how to very precisely put my fingers on the 45 different notes of the double bass took an enormous amount of practice. I just assumed that, since it was difficult and time-consuming, it must be valuable to other people. It never occurred to me to simply ask what people they thought was valuable or that the answer might not be exact perfection of the notes.

Your clients are likely no different – you may be the most technically proficient advisor in town, but if they don't feel a connection with you, they may turn elsewhere.

The people who provide us with our professional skills exacerbate this unconscious bias. They are in a position of having to make sales themselves, so they emphasize and possibly exaggerate the ultimate "value" of the technical skills they are peddling. To emphasize the need for their products, they exaggerate the fervor and pickiness of our would-be clients.



Of course, it's not that easy to ask for customer input. In doing so, one faces the potential of hearing blunt, and occasionally horrifying, criticism. So it takes courage.

We all have memories of being embarrassed by not knowing the answer when called upon in class. Well, that was then, this is now. You do not have to automatically associate unexpected new information with shame or embarrassment. Doing so will make it hard for you to hear your customer's plaintive cries for new and expanded products and/or services. No matter how hard I work at making my product "perfect," I cannot know what my customer's priorities are unless I ask them, and I am always surprised at their answers.

My sheet music experience was a humbling experience, but the negative feeling was momentary. I have since managed to slough it off, and I'm feeling pretty good now. Instead of guessing, or taking someone else's word for it, I now *know* what it is that my customer wants and needs. I made the original product as best I could, and now I know how to make it better.

When you hesitate before asking for feedback, remember that most clients only become irate if they find they are not being listened to. They are so happy that I care about their opinions and respect them that they don't care about the mistakes I sometimes make, and they appreciate my asking for their thoughts. And when I open the door for customers to give feedback on my products and services, I consistently get fabulous advice and suggestions on how I can offer more value to other customers.

Dealing with clients can be daunting. It can be vexing when they value things that are easy and don't appreciate the things that are so hard. On the other hand, their wants, needs, and desires are infinite. Though that means you must accept that your clients may never be satisfied, I hope you can also see that an endless need implies an infinite market.

Justin Locke is an entertaining speaker and the author of two books: Real Men Don't Rehearse and Principles of Applied Stupidity. Principles is currently sold out (again) but the new 4th edition will be available by December 20. Visit his website [here](#).

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