



4 Steps - Selling with Facts

The Message of the Egg

By Jean Van Rensselar

Because the facts are on your side, you don't need to spend hours strategizing the best way to sell your products and services. Instead, spend that time gathering all of the relevant facts from all of the credible sources you can find. Even the biggest organizations – at their peril - neglect to do this.

Consider the egg. Remember when every time you ate an egg you felt like you were taking your life in your hands? That was last year – the culmination of 50 years of negative media attention resulting from a single study on dried egg yolks funded by the Cereal Institute of America. The study concluded that eggs were a heart attack in a shell.

None of this is very remarkable except that the United Egg Producers basically rolled over and played dead. In fact, they never even bothered to conduct a study of their own. Eggs were finally vindicated through studies funded by the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association.

The lesson here is: Don't be afraid of facts, facts are your friends (and if they aren't your friends you need to take a serious look at what you're selling).

Most attorneys are experts at persuading with facts during closing arguments. Marketers and salespeople would do well to take a page from their playbook, which boils down to this formula:

1. Establish Credibility
2. Establish Common Ground
3. Present the Facts
4. Reframe the Facts

If you start by spewing facts, no one will listen. So first you need to be sure others know you're an expert and that you understand their position. Then you need to restate the facts as – in the case of sales and marketing – benefits. What follows is geared toward in-person sales presentations, but you can interpret it for calls, emails, and marketing collateral as well.

1. Establish Credibility

Be upfront about your experience and expertise. Tell people how many years you've been in the industry. Mention classes and seminars you've taken recently. Talk about conversations you've had with manufacturers. Talk about hot industry issues. In order for you to get anywhere with the facts, people need to see you as an expert, not only about your products and services, but about their industry.

Let them know that you know how much expertise they have on the topic and you plan to provide more. This is one place where common industry jargon is not only acceptable – it's preferable because it lets people know that you're both on the same level.

You also establish credibility over time by showing emotional character – a stable mood and consistent performance. People who are perceived as honest, steady, and reliable have an edge in every situation that involves persuasion.

2. Establish Common Ground

Even if you have high credibility, you still need to establish rapport with the people you're trying to persuade. You do this by letting them know that you understand their position. Be careful about saying "I know how you feel" unless you're sure that you do. If, for example, you're trying to sell someone an office condo and say, "I know how you feel, money is tight right now." and, in fact, money isn't the problem, you've instantly driven a wedge between you and the prospect.

If you're not sure that you understand someone's position, there's nothing wrong with saying something like, "It's important to me that I understand your situation – do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" The fact that you bothered to ask sends a message that the other person's position is important.

Another good way to establish rapport is to ask for a tour. You'll find that the conversation will be more relaxed and you'll have natural opportunities to ask about needs and concerns. Everything that comes out of your mouth (and your head) should be framed as a shared benefit.

3. Present the Facts

Even though you've established credibility and common ground, don't expect people to believe the facts that you're about to present without evidence. If you've ever written a thesis or term paper, the process is very much the same. Everything you state as fact must be backed by a citation (a credible source).

First off, the facts need be relevant and organized. Decide what facts will help you make your case and organize them into a logical order – much like an attorney would organize facts for a closing argument. The last thing you want to do is create confusion.

Then credibly present those facts. Skip PowerPoint and flip charts – connect at eye level instead. Find studies conducted by unbiased organizations (not the Cereal Institute of America), make copies and highlight the relevant findings. Go the extra mile on this, it will be well worth your effort. Keep in mind that a fact without evidence is just an opinion.

Another way (though less credible) is to present facts through a case study that contains results of real world implementation of your product or service. Hopefully the case study will include before and after statistics.

Finally, the facts need to be believable. This means that no matter how much evidence you provide for the veracity of your facts, they need to contain some element of commonsense. For example, back to the office condo, if I said that despite the slow housing market, the Commercial Real Estate Association recently reported that office condos are still selling well and values are soaring – you wouldn't believe me because...well...you have eyes and ears.

In addition, facts need to seem like something people could easily verify if they wanted to. For example, there's a big difference between saying the office condo is *spacious* and saying that it's 1,075 square feet.

To reinforce your points and make the facts more meaningful, include examples, stories, analogies, and metaphors.

4. Reframe the Facts

Once you've done a thorough job of presenting precise, verifiable, and believable facts, you're ready to wrap up with a creative, powerful, and convincing conclusion by reframing facts into benefits. This is also where you cement your connection by demonstrating your conviction.

You don't have to wave your arms wildly to convey passion and conviction (actually that's not hugely helpful). Instead, put away all of your props, straighten your spine, look directly into the other person's eyes, don't fidget, and state your final case with a series of impressive benefits. (If you're writing marketing material, forego words like "fabulous" and "fantastic" - the equivalent of arm waving - and opt for strong, straightforward language instead.)

Regarding the office condo, the benefit-filled conclusion might include language such as: *When the market bounces back – that 5-year guarantee on association fees is going to be a real bonus. or Because the demographic of the drive-by traffic is nearly identical to the demographic of your core prospect, you'll get more walk-in business.*

Revisiting the eggs, things would have been so different if the Egg Producers Association had countered with facts right away – if they'd exposed the original study sponsors and worked with a major university on a second, more credible study. Instead of 50 years of poor egg sales, they would have been looking at the same upward trajectory other food staples enjoyed over the same period.

Effective persuasion isn't about convincing and selling; rather it's about educating, learning, and negotiating. The bottom line is that strategies, tactics, and marketing theories come and go, but facts will always be your friends.

About the Author

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