

# Premium sales skills for premium services at Oxford Innovation



Change Behaviour. Change Results.

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**Selling is no easy task at the best of times, but securing a price premium for value-added products or services in a tough economic climate puts real pressure on any business aiming to achieve its sales objectives and maintain profitability.**

This was precisely the situation facing Huthwaite client, Oxford Innovation, one of the UK's leading service and consultancy providers to start-up and SME businesses, as it looked to improve conversion rates for its Innovation Centres Division.

*“Someone looking at our business for the first time might be forgiven for thinking that we compete directly with standard service office providers,”* confirms sales and marketing director, Jo Willett. *“However, we actually offer our clients a much broader range of services, which includes expert advice and consultancy support.”*

*“And there is another important difference. Many of our customers are high-growth start-up businesses, perhaps in their second or third year of operation, looking to move out of domestic premises and into a professional workshop or office for the first time. They will almost certainly be working on very tight budgets*

*and this means we have to work even harder to demonstrate how what we offer is going to be the best way to help them grow successfully.”*

## Learning lessons

In responding to this challenge, the company recognised that it would need to improve its sales approach, but like many other companies – it had experienced poor support from a third-party training provider. *“In the past, the training was totally generic and did not relate to the real world in which our sales people operate,”* says Jo. *“It’s no surprise then that this left a negative legacy within the business.”*

*“We also learned some valuable lessons. In looking at what external support was available, we were determined that any training company must be able to put together and deliver a fully-tailored programme designed to our exact requirements.”*

After a thorough examination of the options available, Oxford Innovation selected Huthwaite International. *“Our objective was simple,”* she says. *“We needed to find a way to convert more prospects into customers and the Huthwaite team reacted positively to this by showing a real willingness to get under the skin of our business. This was essential in order to create a sales improvement programme that mirrored the practical*

*problems our sales people were facing every day in the field.”*

The result was a series of intensive training days, followed up by an on-going coaching programme, designed to reinforce the new skills learned.

For Jo Willett, the impact of this dedicated approach has exceeded all expectations and early indications are that the sales improvement goals set by the company will be met and, more importantly, will be long-lasting. *“The Huthwaite approach is outstanding,”* she confirms, *“and the sales training programme is the best I have ever taken part in by far.”*

## Finding the skills gaps

For Oxford Innovation, step one of any improvement programme is to identify the gaps in current skills levels. Recognising the importance of getting full buy-in from the start, the Group HR department worked with the sales team to identify and agree which skills should be measured and benchmarked.

Following individual performance assessments, Jo Willett undertook an analysis of common weaknesses which any training would have to address. *“The picture was very clear,”* she recalls. *“As a premium provider, our business is essentially based on value rather than price.”*

*“The Huthwaite approach is outstanding... and the sales training programme is the best I have ever taken part in by far.”*



*“However, as the economy started to bite, our sales team found it increasingly difficult to differentiate what we had to offer. They also had problems explaining the benefits in a way which would justify a higher price than that of our competitors.”*

## More than a one-off training event

Oxford Innovation’s commitment to a full needs analysis, combined with pre-course work and post-course coaching, was fundamental to the success of the programme. *“Like us, Oxford Innovation understood that face-to face training must be designed to meet properly identified needs and reinforced by follow-up field support if the new skills are to stick,”* confirms business development manager, Mark Taylor.

At the outset, Huthwaite undertook field sales visits to better understand current skill levels and met with senior management to design an appropriate solution based around the PITCH selling programme.

Before attending face-to-face training, each of the sales and marketing managers and Innovation Centre managers received pre-work booklets designed to ensure an understanding of sales concepts such as the Buying Cycle and the buyer’s decision-making process.

Following this, the highly-concentrated training included specially-created role plays designed to show how these best-practice models related to the attendees’ everyday experiences.

With Huthwaite’s support, a structured coaching and reinforcement programme immediately following the training was also put in place. This includes regular monthly coaching sessions for all sales staff, as well as quarterly meetings for the internal coaches to share learning and best practice.

## Questions answered

Though too early to identify a measurable improvement in conversion rates as a result of the Huthwaite training, Jo Willett is in no doubt as to the benefits already achieved. *“Even at this early stage, for each of our 15 Innovation Centres there is clear evidence that the skills are becoming ingrained as a new way of working,”* she confirms.

Having bespoke role-plays has meant that the Innovation Centres Management Team has been able to put new techniques into practice from day one back in the field. These have then been further refined and developed with regular coaching support. Individuals using their newly-acquired skills are sharing success stories with

their colleagues across the business via email. And, last but not least, training individuals as coaches is proving a valuable new personal development tool.

At the heart of Oxford Innovation’s success in embedding Huthwaite’s training approach has been the increase in importance of asking questions as part of the sales person’s armoury. *“If we want to justify a price premium, we need to really understand our customers’ needs, to show that we can meet their requirements,”* says Jo Willett.

*“Some of our sales staff have been surprised at how easy it is to ask questions and how engaged customers become. They are more confident in knowing which questions to ask and how to convert the answers into meaningful needs.”*

As a business, over its 20 year history, Oxford Innovation has always prided itself on building strong relationships with customers. *“Building relationships has been the basis of our success,”* believes Jo Willett. *“Our new questioning techniques are putting our customers and their requirements at the heart of the relationship from the very first meeting.”*





## The Huthwaite International sales process for short cycle sales

### PITCH:

- P** Presenting yourself: Preparing for the customer; how to open calls/meetings.
- I** Investigating needs: Asking questions to uncover needs and buying criteria; listening to the customer and clarifying needs.
- T** Tempting customers: Presenting options to the customer; demonstrating how the options meet customer needs; seeking customer reactions.
- C** Commitment gaining: Getting the customer to say yes; handling objections.
- H** Handing over: Ensuring the customer has all the information they need; leaving the customer with a positive experience.