

CHAPTER 1

Tool number 1: breaking down the e-wall

Clients are busier than they have ever been before. The easiest way for them to decipher and consider your proposal is when it has been in writing and sent via email. In this way, they are the ones who are in the box seat, able to read and consider the proposal in *their* time. They are able to compare your proposal to other written proposals, shift around the priority of the proposal depending on their workload, and all of this without your being able to exert your power of influence.

This is because the digital age has created a virtual electronic wall, the e-wall, which our clients can now hide behind. The pattern of communication has become less about face-to-face interaction, and it is acceptable to do business via email.

The e-pong timeline

This is a typical interaction for a proposal that is emailed in the new reality. It is a game that I call e-pong! You have researched, found your decision maker and sharpened your angle to win the business.

- » You make a call. The decision maker is pleased to hear from you, but he or she is busy. They ask you to put your proposal in writing and send it to them for review, *via email* (one week).
- » You send your proposal *via email*.
- » The decision maker responds that he or she has received your proposal and will review in due course and respond *via email* (two weeks).
- » You follow up *via email* in a couple of weeks after hearing nothing back (four weeks).
- » Your decision maker is busy and distracted by the day-to-day running of a business. They take four days to respond to your email and say that they are apologetic but will get back to you shortly with a decision after they chat to the relevant people *via email* (five weeks).
- » Based on the reply, you are inclined to give the decision maker another week before hassling them again *via email* for an answer.
- » You send another email to your decision maker asking if a decision has been made (six weeks).
- » Nothing is heard back, and doubts creep in about the priority your proposal is being given.

- » You write *via email* one last time stating that you are just wrapping up the quarter or ticking things off your task list and asking once more whether any decision has been made (seven weeks).
- » You receive an answer *via email* four days later from your decision maker, thanking you for the hard work you put into the proposal, but unfortunately other priorities have arisen in the company and they are unable to proceed with the business at this time (eight weeks).

Eight weeks of e-pong, with no result. This has all happened because you let the decision maker hide behind their e-wall. In fact, this happened because *you* also hid behind the e-wall! It takes courage to break down the wall and be in a position to influence that customer face to face.

It is simply *easier* to have an email relationship with someone. It is *easier* to send your client a monthly update or a quarterly newsletter and consider that the job is done. Most of all, it is certainly *easier* to try to win a sale by sending the client a proposal and play e-pong. It is much harder to pick up the phone and get face to face with our clients to cut through all of the procrastination and time wasting.

Don't get me wrong. There are times that email is the only option. I realise that. All I am trying to do is challenge you to think about how you can create more face-to-face interactions. What can you do to break down the e-wall?

Changing timelines

Let's take sales, for example. Salespeople talk to me all the time about the difficulty in getting face to face with their clients so

they can utilise their skills of influence. They discuss changing trends in technology and adapting to the way business is done. However, the timeline of a sale has barely changed in terms of basic action plan connect points, but the underlying message consistently flowing through is that the amount of time between first contact and closing has significantly increased.

Why has this happened?

It would be easy for salespeople to stand fast, and claim that the e-wall is just another excuse or a trend, and that if you believe in your being personable and having sound communication skills, then nothing should stop you or delay your sales process. My personal favourite excuse dished out by your average motivational speaker is: 'If it's not working, then you must be doing it wrong!' To my way of thinking, this is less than helpful advice, and certainly does not recognise the changing way that business is being conducted in the 21st century. You cannot deny the advances in technology. The statistics tell us that we are more likely to communicate by email or social media than to pick up the phone or meet face to face. We are nearly all capable of conducting business in a completely mobile environment and we are more contactable than ever with our portable devices and Wi-Fi technology, and yet to close a sale is taking longer than ever before.

Five strategies to break down the e-wall

Here are five strategies you can use to help break down the e-wall and stop playing so much e-pong.

1 IDENTIFY THE DECISION MAKERS

At some point, usually before you have the opportunity to meet face to face with the client or send them a proposal, you will have spoken to the client on the telephone to set up everything. One of the biggest mistakes that I see people make is that they send through information without knowing exactly who all the decision makers are. They know the person that they are dealing with, however they have not asked the question in terms of who will *really* be making the call.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: ‘Chris, it doesn’t work that way in my business! We can’t always get to the decision maker right away.’ Okay, fair enough. This book is throwing a whole bunch of spaghetti (ideas) at the refrigerator door. If it sticks, take it. If not, let it fall to the floor. However, in your business, I want you to be clear that the person you are presenting to is *definitely* the person who can get you to the *next level* of your sale.

It happens all the time that people speak to a non-decision maker simply because it was *easier* to send them through the information. Often, you were directed to this person as a gatekeeper. You are spending hours putting together a proposal for your business and this non-decision maker is encouraging you to send it through to them where it really has no chance of getting off the ground.

If you want to make sure that you know who all the decision makers are, here is the *gold*. I’ve tried this question a lot of different ways and this is the way that will give you the best chance to get this information.

Amanda, do you mind if I ask you who, *apart from yourself*, is involved in making the final decision about this?

Great! As it takes a considerable amount of time and research for me to put a proposal together, when could we arrange a meeting where everyone would be present to maximise the use of all of our time?

As simple as that is, so many people ask it the wrong way. I hear people say things like, ‘Do you mind me asking: are *you* the decision maker with this?’

This is so close, but it leaves a lot of loopholes because it is so easy for the non–decision maker to say, ‘Yes, I am the decision maker.’ Then, after you spend two hours putting a proposal together for them, they tell you that they have to run it by the boss or by the HR department. You’ve wasted your time!

The reasons that they say ‘Yes, I am the decision maker’ may just be that they are one of the decision makers, and they may not want to bother the boss until they have all the information. It could be that they are putting you off. It may simply be a case of ego. However, when you use the words ‘*apart from yourself*’, they realise the importance of not wasting everyone’s time and it also flatters their ego. By the way, if they won’t have the meeting with all of the decision makers present, you *may* have just realised that you were going to be put off anyway!

By using these simple words you have increased your ability to know who will be involved in making the final decision.

Give this a try and increase the impact of your time and effectiveness.

2 DICTATE THE BEST METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

It happens all the time that a client will simply say, 'Email your proposal through and we will have a look at it.' It is *easy* for everyone. The first part of the game of e-pong is underway. The question I would ask you is how often does your client dictate how the communication will work through the pitch and decision process? Do you let your client tell you what the best way to contact them is? Can you dictate how it should work?

Ask yourself these three questions:

- » What is their preferred method of communication?
- » Is that going to be the best form of communication to get your proposal approved?
- » What is your strategy to create an environment where you can communicate in the best possible way to get that proposal approved?

Remember, there are times when you are going to have to email the proposal through because that is the method of communication that the client requires. However, let me challenge you: are you hiding behind the e-wall because it is an *easier* option?

Recently, my manager and I put together a sales training proposal for an internet-based company that was using me monthly in different parts of their business. We had sent through an email proposal on how they could save money by buying my time in bulk. If they locked in 15 sessions for the year, they would be able to use me at a better rate than paying one session at a time.

We were playing some e-pong. The email proposal couldn't get approved until the board meeting. The messages from

my manager to the decision maker went unanswered. My manager was becoming frustrated. It was time for a wake-up call. Finally, realising that we were falling into this e-pong trap that I talk about all the time, we answered the three questions:

- » Their preferred method of communication is email.
- » This is *not* going to be the best form of communication to get our proposal approved.
- » The strategy is to get Chris face to face for a 15-minute meeting with the managing director.

That strategy worked. I called the MD directly and explained to him that he was simply paying too much. I got in to see him the next day and we negotiated a deal for the 15 days on the spot. It was time to celebrate because we broke the e-wall!

Once again, there are times when this is not possible. However, in an environment where both salespeople and customers can hide behind a game of e-pong, the question is whether there are other communication methods that would be more effective in getting your proposal approved.

3 MAP OUT YOUR DECISION TIMELINE

Part of breaking down the e-wall is making sure that the client knows your expectations of what is going to happen in this process. Giving a client a deadline ensures they have something to aim for and they won't continually shift the decision because of other priorities.

It is very important in creating a decision timeline that there is either an advantage in making a decision now or, alternatively, a disadvantage in delaying the decision. If you have not created any leverage for the client to make a quick decision, it is even easier for the client to hide behind the e-wall. There is no reason for them to do anything. They can sit on your proposal and wait while you become more anxious. I will explore this further in the next part of this book in the pain–pleasure principle.

Ask yourself these questions:

- » When do you want the decision to be made?
- » What is the advantage for them in making a decision before this deadline?
- » What is their disadvantage if they do not make a decision before this deadline?
- » Will getting face to face expedite the decision-making process?

Sometimes this process will be out of your control. The question, however, is whether you have mapped out an expectation for the client to make a decision.

You need to make sure that you put forward a reason for the client to make a decision in an appropriate timeframe. Otherwise, there is no reason for them to prioritise you. Some examples of this may include:

- » In the speaking industry, the client has to make a decision to lock in the date because otherwise the speaker may no longer be available.
- » In the real estate industry, the buyer has to make a decision to offer now because if they wait for Saturday afternoon, after the open house, there may be a new buyer who is interested in offering as well. This will create competition and drive up the price.
- » In the landscaping industry, the client has to make a decision to get started with the project now if they want to have their pool in by the summer holidays.

By the same token, make sure that, at the end of every communication, you begin putting into practice a habit that I call next steps. In the decision timeline, what do you want the next step in the process to be?

Tip

Here's how to get to next steps by email:

'The next step would be for me to meet all the decision makers face to face and present the proposal. Is there a time that all the decision makers come together and I would be able to meet them?'

Here's how to get to next steps by phone:

'After you've had a chance to read the proposal, the next step would be for us to meet again next week to look at moving forward. What time will suit you next week?'

To execute this most effectively, it is important to nail the client down for the next steps while you have them on the line and while their interest is still piqued.

4 LEAVE SOMETHING IN THE CHAMBER

Without underselling your product or service, can you get the client's attention in the written proposal, but leave some information out which is best presented face to face?

People frequently put their heart and soul into their proposal and then leave no other reason to actually meet the client face

to face. The customer then has all the power and can very easily email and say, 'I have all the information. I will read through it and get back to you.'

What is unique about your product or service that would drive the *need* for a face-to-face meeting with all the decision makers? Is there something that you can leave up your sleeve that would be particularly compelling to your customer? For example, a salesperson may ask for a 30-minute meeting and explain that if the client will meet with them, there will be something that can be *added* for them in the negotiation. This could be things like:

- » free delivery
- » extra services
- » priority customer service
- » benefits
- » better price.

This will give you more power in closing. If you have additional information ready to pull out, you can use it at a critical point in the presentation or negotiation.

5 CAST OFF DEAD WOOD

It is important to back yourself to stick to the decision timeline deadlines. Let me ask you a question. How much time do you waste by chasing business that will never happen? Sometimes it takes nerves of steel, but it is important to maintain your value and credibility in the marketplace. There are times it is better to recognise are you better off chasing a new client than someone who is only going to waste your time.

I come across this at conferences where an organisation will say to me that their salespeople are great at having conversations, but are not getting the deals done. Remember, there is a big difference between a great conversationalist and a great salesperson! The great salespeople are good at recognising that long conversations or extended e-pong is simply going nowhere. There is a time and a place to cut the cord.

Chapter 1 summary

The new reality is that the majority of people would rather communicate via email, text message and social media than face to face. We all have the ability to communicate with more people in less time than ever before. That has made the world an exciting, smaller place, and information accessible and virtually instant.

That being said, there is a growing frustration as customers are often playing a game of e-pong and hiding behind the e-wall. This means that while it is easier to get them the information, in some ways it is harder for you to get them to make a decision. I challenge you to make a conscious effort to workshop what needs to happen in your business to break the e-wall and create more direct communication opportunities which lead to greater results.

Quick questions

- » Can you do a better job at finding out who all the decision makers are?
- » Are you consistent at discovering preferred methods of communication with your customers?
- » If so, is the client's preferred method also the most effective?
- » Do you lay out a decision timeline with your customers and establish clear expectations?
- » Are you in the habit of laying out Next Steps at every contact point in the decision cycle with your clients?
- » Do you leave something in the chamber for face-to-face meetings? Do you leave clients with a reason to need to meet with you?
- » Are some customers simply wasting your time? Are there clients in your business that are simply taking too much time for no reward?

**The digital age has
created a virtual
electronic wall,
the e-wall, which
our clients can
now hide behind.**
