

Just shut up once in a while

BY PHIL SASSO

In selling, sometimes silence really is golden

Many years back, I sat in on a business presentation and watched, painfully, my client teeter on the edge of losing a sale by talking too much. It felt like I was watching a drowning man flailing about within reach of a life preserver but not taking the initiative to grab it.

I'd been asked to arrange this introductory meeting between my client, the developer of an innovative technology (who I'll call "the salesman"), and the president of a leading automotive service equipment maker (who I'll call "the prospect"). I knew both men, so I was the natural conduit between them. I believed a partnership

would be a win-win for everyone.

After the normal formalities and small talk, the salesman launched into his three-minute sales pitch, as I'd advised. Then he paused and looked at his prospect. I could see the prospect was interested, but deep in thought.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Missi...

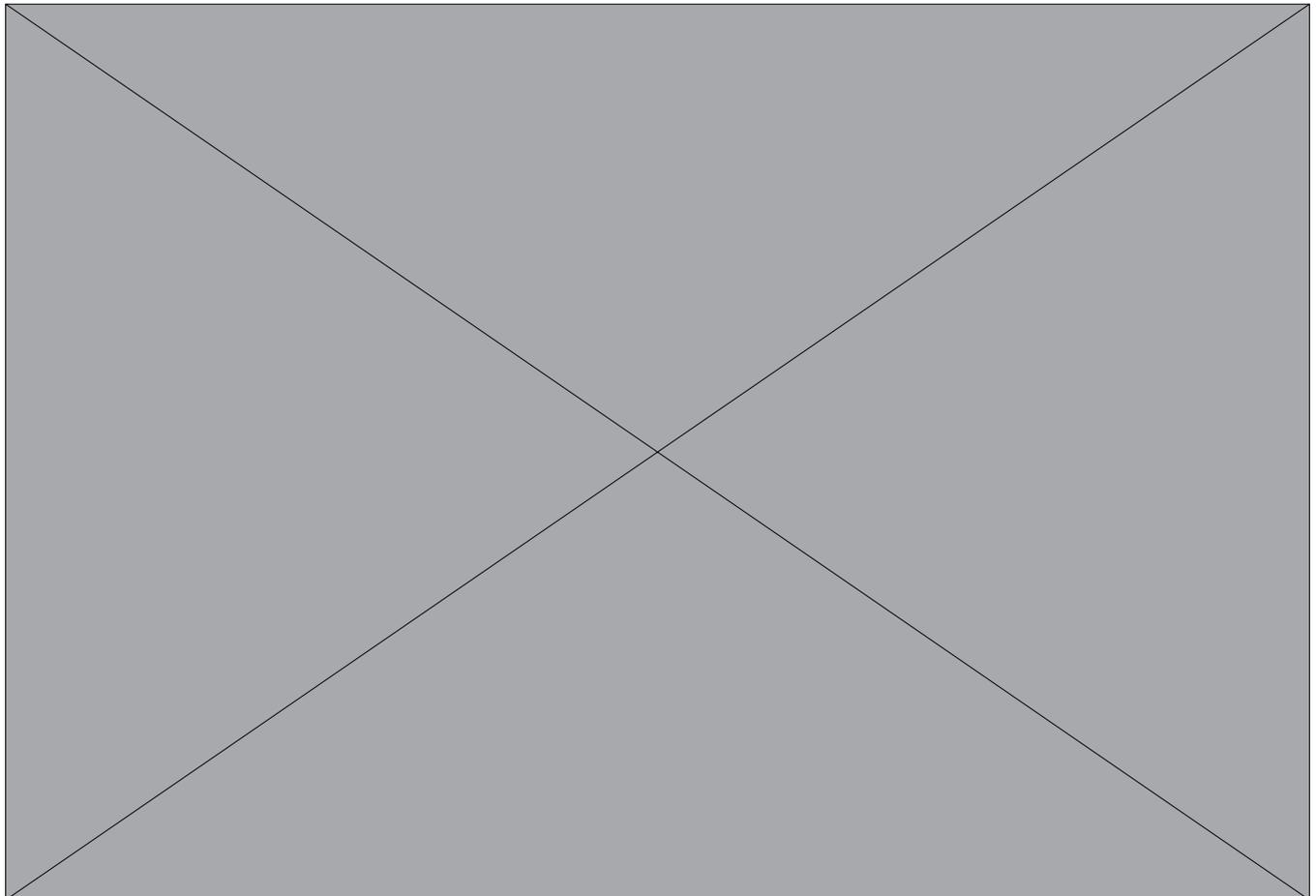
Before even three seconds passed, the salesman launched into a longer, follow-up pitch with a lot of overwhelming details, facts and figures. As the salesman droned on and on, the prospect's eyes began to show signs he was losing interest and focus. After what seemed an eternity, the salesman concluded his second pitch and looked at the prospect.

One Mississippi, two Miss...

Giving even less time for the prospect to respond, the salesman nervously began what seemed his last ditch effort to save what he perceived as a failing sale. Twice he hadn't given the prospect the time he needed to digest the information and respond. The



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SALES & MARKETING 101

salesman's lack of confidence was now obvious. The prospect sensed this and began to doubt the value of the partnership. Soon, the prospect's eyes began to glaze over. Finally, the salesman asked for the order and paused long enough to get a response.

But it was too late. The salesman had talked himself into and out of a sale.

After the meeting, I asked the salesman to describe how the meeting looked from his perspective. To him the pauses weren't a few seconds, but much longer, which is understandable. A few seconds of silence can seem like a few minutes when we're trying to make a big sale. I think we all know how that feels. But we can't let that overwhelm us.

If I was in that meeting today, I would have jumped in to try and save the salesman from himself. But I had fewer gray hairs then and lacked the skill or confidence to speak up.

Perhaps you've been in the salesman's shoes and let a long pause force you into saying more than you should have. Maybe you realized what happened as soon as the prospect walked away. Or maybe you've never thought about it until now. The key is recognizing the positive side of silence and being careful not to let it pressure you.

One sign of growth as a salesperson is knowing that silence can be your friend.

Probably the most common "deafening silence" you face as a mobile dealer is an awkward silence just after you give a customer your price — especially on a big ticket item. It can be easy to take a slow response as a price objection. But a slow response might not mean anything more than your customer is thinking about buying from you. Try to avoid the temptation to answer objections that were never voiced. If the customer doesn't say anything, you don't need to say anything either.

I admit, it can be a lot harder than it sounds. I've fallen prey to responding to an unasked question, so I know how easily it can happen. One time, I gave a client a price of a somewhat large project and I wasn't sure he had the budget for it. He paused a very long time. Since I was dealing with him by phone, I couldn't see his facial expression, which can make silence even more uncomfortable.

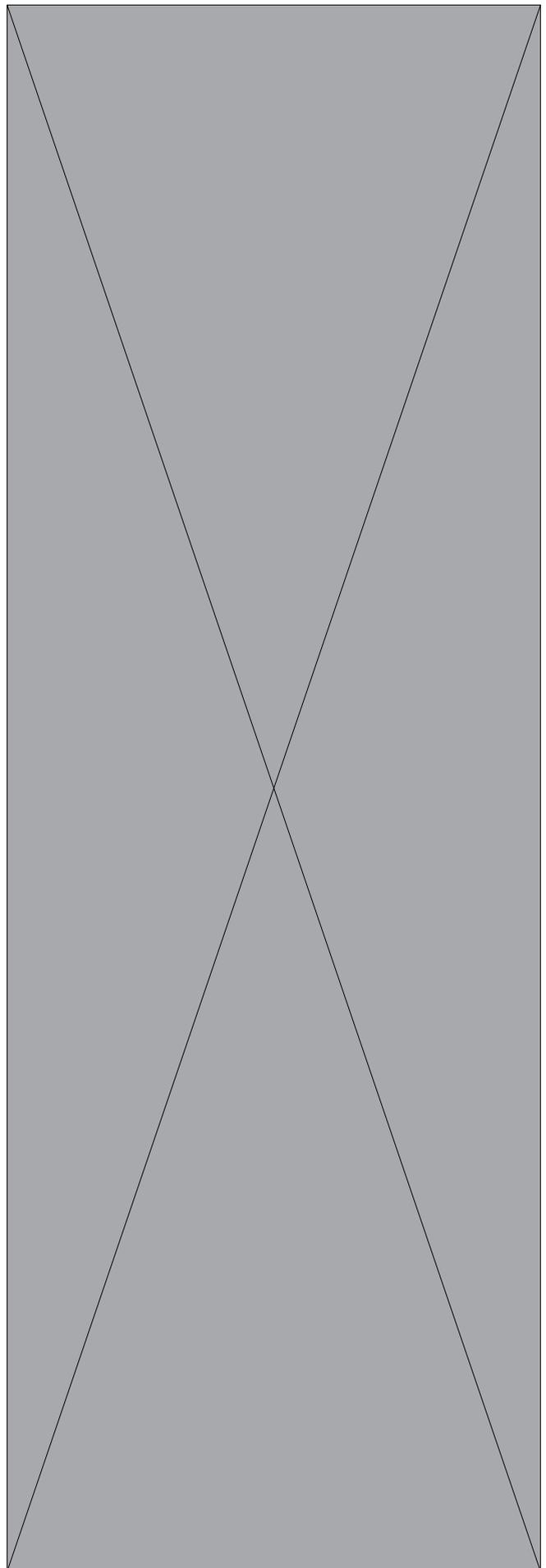
The client began to ask a question. But it was too late. I was stepping on his words and suggesting he drop Part B of the project to save money. Ouch! I wanted to grab the words and shove them back in my mouth. But it was too late. Here he was ready to buy and asking about terms and I was nervously cutting back the project.

Fortunately, the client did want Part B. But if I was a mobile dealer cutting my price to save the sale, I would have left money on the table and set a bad precedent.

Some customers will knowingly use silence as a weapon against you. They realize people are uncomfortable with long pauses and use it as a bargaining tactic. I've read negotiating books where the author suggests waiting a full minute after a salesman gives you a price. The goal is to get the salesperson to cave under the pressure of silence. Don't let it happen to you.

And remember, silence is a two-way street. It can be used to pull your customer out. He'll want to fill a long pause, too. In which case, he may give you the information you need to close the deal. Wait and listen carefully to any questions he may have. Then answer ... and pause again for his response.

A little bit of silence can speak volumes. ■



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