

**W**hat does civility have to do with marketing and sales? As I somewhat skeptically sat at the foot of the master on “civility,” two weeks ago on a visit to Johns Hopkins University, I found myself asking this question. After all, isn’t the word civility kind of loaded?

In his book, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, Dr. P.M. Forni makes a case for civility, calling it a form of attention, awareness and consideration. The examples of incivility sound like the poster child for the Salesperson from Hell: self-absorption, being late, interrupting, bad-mouthing, taking credit but not blame, hindering access to information, constant negativity, using insider language.

Forni told us that civility involves “transcending one’s immediate needs and desires to pay attention to another’s.” Okay, now *that’s* a basic principle of marketing and sales success. If you can suspend your own agenda to plug into your buyer’s needs and desires, that’s half the battle.

**Is choosing civility the high road to the bottom line?** In taking a closer look at 7 of his 25 rules, I’d say he’s onto something...

**Pay attention.** Without attention, no meaningful interaction is possible. Without attention, how will you know what your buyer needs most? How will you know where to start, in a way that attracts and sustains your buyer’s attention? In Forni’s words, civility is “the victory of attention over carelessness, indifference and inertia.”

**Acknowledge others.** From its simplest form (making eye contact, using someone’s name, a nod or smile in passing) to something deeper (giving voice to your buyer’s fears, frustrations or objections), people need to feel seen and heard. When that happens, buyers are more inclined to join you in a 2-way conversation. And when that happens, you start to move deeper into the [Funnel of Love](#).

**Listen.** When we’re focused on what we want to sell, we’re eager to share our ideas. Often, we’re

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so eager and confident in our solution, that we interrupt others. It’s hard to pay attention when we don’t suspend talking about ourselves. But if we listen actively, by asking clarifying questions along the way, we’re being smart, strategic and civil. Enter *every* buyer or customer conversation with a list of relevant questions. This sets you up to listen more than talk.

**Be inclusive.** How many times have you been in a meeting and either used or had used “on” you words or acronyms that are jargon-laden and understood by only some of the people in the room? The same thing can happen when an insider joke is told. At best, people feel left out (of the sales conversation, your meeting, your website, or your article or talk). At worst, it’s a form of intimidation, is careless and disengaging.

**Don’t speak ill.** Boy, this one can do a lot of damage. And yet it’s often a popular tactic for dethroning the competition. There are many ways that speaking ill of others damages the relationship with your buyer...but perhaps most damaging is that your buyer then cannot trust *you*. If you’re talking about someone behind their back, what happens when your buyer’s not in the room – what are you saying about him or her? You know that you’d never bad-mouth a buyer, but you’ve planted the shadow of a doubt in *their* mind, simply because of your actions.

**Respect even a subtle “no.”** This one’s tricky in sales. Isn’t your job as a good sales

# Your TurningPointe

## Can Sales Be Civil?

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person to go for the close? To convince your buyer by overcoming objections? Not if you're [respecting the laws](#) that make the Funnel of Love work: Attraction, Permission, Trust, Commitment.

As your buyer progresses through each stage in their decision making process, they're doing so on *their* terms, not yours. So if your buyer says "no," you respect that. You step back. You give them time and space to regroup. This requires time, patience and a long-term view. *How* you do that is what smart marketing and sales are all about.

**Assert yourself.** As a seller, you too have needs. That's a good thing. It's absolutely appropriate for you to politely, yet firmly expect...

- your buyer to respect your time (if he or she is running more than 15 minutes for your appointment, politely suggest that you reschedule – if I can't reschedule through their assistant, I leave a note saying that I'd waited and need to reschedule...the buyer almost always scrambles to apologize and contacts me quickly – and if they don't, then it opens up a real conversation about what they really do or don't want). Acting like a doormat will not gain you their respect.
- timely information from a buyer or client that will materially impact your work together (e.g., key players are changing, there's a spending freeze, priorities have changed). Clarify these expectations early on in your relationship and build them into your proposal, contract, kick-off and status checks along the way.
- to know whom – in addition to your current contact – is involved in the buying process (e.g., others who hold purse strings, influencers and potential blockers or saboteurs). Ask sooner, rather than later. Ask gently yet firmly...who else, beside yourself, is typically involved in a purchase of this nature? That way, you don't insult your contact – yet you put them on notice that you're not naïve and that you expect to be involved in further conversations.

- to know about your buyer's buying process (by committee? with board approval? within certain times of the year only? through their procurement office?), and what the "rules" are (competed? proposal? sole source? hourly vs. fixed fee? through resellers?).
- a clear yes or no, resulting from your conversation or interaction – it may not be a "yes, we'll buy from you," but it could be a "yes, we'll set up a next meeting with our Decision Maker." Likewise, getting a "no, we don't see ourselves moving forward at this point," is worth a lot.

What's been working very well for me as a salesperson is to pause before *every* customer or buyer interaction and ask myself, "What's the next right thing to do that will help this person?" When I remember to do that, it almost always progresses our relationship – either closer to the next sale, or closer to the truth about what they really want.

It's interesting to note that Dr. Forni does not see civility as a form of "rolling over" but rather the state of being "strong, smart and nice." My interpretation is that this applies not only in your approach toward your buyer, but also in how you treat yourself as a salesperson.

A high standard to live by? Yes. And I'd venture to say that it's the civil thing to do.

For the rest of his rules and more information on Dr. Forni's work on civility, visit <http://web.jhu.edu/civility>

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