How to Build Rapport With Customers Online

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Sellers had plenty of opportunities to connect and build relationships with prospects pre-Covid.

Lunches. Dinners. Happy hours. Conferences. Sporting events. Site visits.

But now that the wining and dining is on hold, sellers are struggling to build those relationships online.

And it's not just difficult. It's *very* difficult.

In the RAIN Group Center for Sales Research's recent study on virtual selling, 88 percent of sellers said developing relationships with buyers virtually is challenging and 87 percent claimed that connecting with buyers and building rapport was a top challenge.

We heard from sellers:

"It's hard to make a positive first impression virtually without the power of face-to-face interaction."

"I'm comfortable moving all aspects of the sales cycle virtually, except for the rapport building you get from face-to-face meetings."

"I find it easier to conduct virtual sales meetings with existing clients and people I already know. First-time meetings are very challenging."

Indeed, building relationships and rapport without in-person, physical interaction is different.

In *Virtual Selling: How to Build Relationships, Differentiate, and Win Sales Remotely*, we introduce the Virtual Selling Divergence Scale, a measure of how different a component of selling is when comparing live, face-to-face to virtual selling.

1. Not that much different
2. A little different
3. Somewhat different
4. Different
5. Significantly different

Rapport-building, as it's a key component of relationships, is a 5 out of 5 different. Here's how and what you can do about it.

1. Physical in-room vs. virtual

When you're meeting with buyers live, face-to-face, you're able to read body language. The other people in the room are always within your view and you can adjust your tone, pace and interaction based on the cues you're getting. In general, when you're face-to-face there's a more relaxed and natural feel where time moves slowly, and dead air and pauses feel natural.

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In a virtual environment, you're barely able to read body language. If you see anything at all, it's usually just the buyer's face and it's typically on a small screen. The buyer's video may be on, off, or on and off. The feel is generally more business-like where the time goes by more quickly and dead air and pauses are less tolerated.

2. Time and space for rapport-building at the start of meetings

In face-to-face, there’s generally a time where you’re able to chat with buyers before the meeting starts. This usually happens when you’re walking to the meeting room or when the meeting participants are in the room before the meeting begins. It’s also more natural to check in before the business agenda while everyone stops to shake hands and introduce themselves.

In a virtual setting, these natural occurrences don’t happen. The meeting begins promptly at 9 a.m. and sellers often get right down to business. It’s less natural to check-in and stop for introductions. There’s also no physical connection with handshakes or passing of business cards. You need to be deliberate in creating time and space to build the appropriate level of rapport.

3. Small meetings built for rapport-building

When selling face-to-face, there’s often an opportunity to meet in a coffee shop, grab a meal or connect at entertainment events with buyers.

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In a virtual setting, getting together with buyers in a more casual way is uncommon. The dynamics of connection-focused discussions has completely changed.

4. Industry events and conferences

Live events and conferences offer significant rapport-building

opportunities. Meeting for coffee, running into a buyer or attending a workshop together create a shared experience, one of the 4 principles of rapport. It helps to build trust and a sense of camaraderie.

When selling virtually, and especially during the COVID pandemic when there are no live events to attend, this opportunity for shared experience at large events is absent. Online conferences, while valuable, are wildly different in human interaction than live in all aspects.

5. Rapport building around meetings

Connecting with buyers through email, on LinkedIn and on other social media platforms are all a part of the picture when selling face-to-face.

LinkedIn, email and social presence are much more important and powerful when selling virtually. You must have a strong digital brand that attracts buyers. In our Top Performance in Sales Prospecting study, 82 percent of buyers said they look up providers on LinkedIn before accepting a meeting with them. Optimize your LinkedIn profile so it’s top-notch.

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You also need to show personality in your emails. You can’t rely on your presence ‘in front of the room’. Your digital presence is of the utmost importance.

Tips to build rapport virtually

Finding ways to build rapport in a virtual world where doing so is difficult is crucial. Here are a few tips to do just that.

- Keep your video on. Having your video on so buyers

can see you helps to build rapport. Video makes virtual meetings more personal and helps to build greater trust. Even if the buyer keeps their video off, make sure to keep yours on.

- Start meetings with rapport-building. Many sellers are tempted to jump right into the business agenda at the start of their virtual meetings. Instead, do a quick check-in. Ask something like, “Before we get going, let’s do a brief check-in; what’s going on with everyone?” Many sellers who do this for the first time are surprised by the improved tenor of their meetings.

- End meetings on a personal note. In face-to-face selling, some of the best conversations happen after the meeting has concluded. Give yourself the opportunity to allow that to happen virtually as well. If you have a champion, schedule time for a debrief after a group meeting. Or, after you summarize next steps at the end of the meeting, close up with a personal question. For example: *“I’m glad we’ve agreed on next steps. Now that it’s Friday and the kids and husband are away, I’m going to play 36 holes of golf and drink fruity drinks with umbrellas. You?”*

- Connect for short meetings in between business meetings. It’s especially important to be proactive. Reach out to folks and request brief meetings to connect. Especially in times of economic, health or global crises, you’ll get more yesses on requests for short 15-20-minute meetings than longer ones.

- Build rapport around meetings. Use the tools at

your disposal to strengthen relationships, including email, LinkedIn, text or other messaging media. Be yourself, be real and don’t be afraid to add some personality to your messages.

While building rapport virtually is significantly different than face-to-face, if you adjust your approach, you can overcome this common challenge.

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