

AGENT'S SALES

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The How-To Resource for Insurance Producers

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10 1/2 Mistakes to Avoid When Selling to Seniors

By Kyal Moody

Selling insurance, financial products, or other intangibles to seniors requires considerably more finesse than it does in other market segments. Years of experience in telephone-based sales of Medicare Advantage and other products for the 65+ market have taught many cross-licensed agents some important lessons on behaviors to avoid when selling to seniors. Here is their top 10 1/2 list of “don’ts.”

1. **Don’t assume they have no knowledge of your product.**

Through television, radio, direct mail, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and word of mouth, most seniors have been exposed to detailed information on every product and service known to mankind. Some of them may know as much as, or even more than, you know about what you are selling. A good place to start with seniors is by asking them what they know or would like to know about specific types of coverage or investments.

2. **Don’t jump to quick conclusions regarding their needs.**

Asking a few basic questions, or even running through a formal needs analysis, often only provides a superficial insight into a senior’s situation. Some seniors may purposely withhold critical pieces

of information or will supply incorrect information in an effort to be helpful or not to appear uninformed. A dialogue is the most effective way to understand their needs. Stop selling and listen to what they are looking for in your offering. It’s important to dig deeply, and if all of the pieces don’t seem to fit, politely ask your questions again.

3. **Don’t talk to them in broad strokes, avoiding details.**

Broad strokes are certainly an important part of any initial sales approach. But don’t skip the details with seniors based on the assumption that they don’t have the interest or capacity to understand such details. Full disclosure provides the basis for informed decision-making, regardless of a prospect’s age. Details also avoid later surprises. A well-informed decision will result in greater customer satisfaction and retention.

4. **Don’t forget to follow up with them.**

An old sales adage particularly applies to seniors: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” If you fail to deliver the information they request, do not make follow-up calls in a timely fashion, or do not convey a sense of concern for their welfare rather than simply making the sale, you are unlikely to succeed in the senior marketplace. Most seniors want more personalized and attentive service. A brief follow-up call after the sale often improves satisfaction and can be a great source of customer referrals.

5. **Don’t scare them into making a**

decision today. Seniors generally have more time to think about things, as many are retired or semi-retired. But time availability aside, they do not like to be pressured into making quick decisions, as this is typically associated with scams and hucksters. The most effective sales technique with seniors is to tell them at the outset of the sales process that they should take the time they need to make an informed decision. If there is a legitimate deadline, however — perhaps involving a Medicare coverage enrollment period — it’s important to let the senior know exactly how much time they have to make a decision. Set expectations on when you will follow up, and encourage them to seek advice and write down their questions for your next discussion with them.

6. **Don’t forget to supply credentials or endorsements.**

Ed McMahon, Pat Summerall, Mickey Rooney, and Jack Nicklaus are all used as advertising pitchmen in commercials directed at seniors because they are well-known and trusted sources. The more comfort you can provide to seniors by supplying information about your company, your background, your professional licenses and experience, and the names of other satisfied senior clients, the greater your success will be with this demographic segment.

7. **Don’t think of them as “old people.”** Regardless of chronological age or physical condition, seniors do not

makes them feel less capable or intelligent than any other adult is. Always use a tone of voice and line of reasoning that reflects an underlying respect for them as equals. Talking down to a senior will always kill a sale.

8. Don't address them by their first name. There is no quicker way to lose a sale with seniors than to use their first name in an initial sales call. Seniors nearly always view this practice as disrespectful. Also, never ask their permission to address them on a first-name basis. When you've established trust and rapport, they may invite you to call them by their first name, which is the only basis on which it should be used.

9. Don't expect them all to act in a similar fashion. In fact, you can only count on one common characteristic in seniors: diversity. Some will be very skeptical and fearful of being victimized; others will be open and trusting. Some will have a great sense of humor; others will be unpleasant.

Some will make quick decisions; others will deliberately prolong the sales process. Some will be brand loyal; others are eager to try new things. Some only want the facts; others want to hear the stories. There is no "typical" senior.

10. Don't fail to offer no guarantees or safety nets. One of the greatest sales obstacles involving seniors is the fear of making an irreversible mistake, which they believe may subject them to ridicule by their families or friends. Their drive to feel and appear independent is always a primary motivator. To address this concern, and if product features allow, let seniors know at the outset that there is a way to reverse or cancel a transaction — perhaps involving a decision grace period, or the option to switch plans or terms if their circumstances change or if they are unhappy with their decision.

101/2. Don't be a bully. This is easy to do with some seniors, but the approach usually backfires. Instead, act as their protector by telling them when your

product is not appropriate for their situation.

This may lose the sale, but your honesty entitles you to ask them for referrals and perhaps opens the door to new sales. Seniors are usually happy to support and recommend someone who has demonstrated a genuine concern for their long-term interest.

Seniors undoubtedly require a more measured approach than any other market demographic. An appreciation of this segment's behavioral landscape and willingness on your part to adapt to those differences are prerequisites for sales success — regardless of the product.

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