

Business Lessons From A Tennis Hall Of Famer

Spending a few hours with Hall of Fame tennis coach Nick Bollettieri will teach you a thing or two about your footwork and follow through--but the lessons are more broadly applicable to sales and marketing.

Nick Bollettieri is one of the greatest tennis coaches in the history of the sport. The list of all time greats that he coached includes Andre Agassi, Maria Sharapova, and Venus and Serena Williams. I crossed something off my bucket list recently when I took a lesson with this great teacher.

Not only did Nick help my tennis, but I was able extract insights from the session that are directly applicable to companies that sell complex B2B offerings. The Holy Grail for B2B salespeople is to become trusted advisors to their customers and prospects. Through his words and actions, Nick immediately became a trusted advisor to me and his other students.

Here are four business lessons from my session with Nick for organizations that sell complex solutions.

1. Conventional wisdom holds that a world class tennis coach would spare no expense when working with his students. And one would think that a great coach like Nick could afford new balls. However, when he teaches, Nick mixes old balls with new balls. Balls of various ages play differently. The reason that the IMG Academy Bollettieri Tennis program in Florida uses a variety of new and used balls is that it forces players to adapt to different bounces.

We just started our session and already he challenged one of our assumptions. Before I met Nick, I used to recycle older tennis balls but now I see them as a tool to help me improve.

Key takeaway: Effective salespeople provide their prospects with new insights and are not afraid to challenge their basic assumptions. The salespersons' marketing organization should constantly deliver to the sales team interesting facts and groundbreaking ideas they can use to challenge their customers' thinking.

- How are you challenging your customers' conventional wisdom?
- How does your marketing team help the sales organization achieve trusted advisor status?

2. Tennis has changed since I learned to play in the 1970s. According to the latest thinking, I should be rotating my grip an extra fraction of an inch when I hit a forehand. For me this small change has been almost impossible to implement.

Nick took the opposite approach from most other coaches. While he shook his head when he saw my old-fashioned grip, he said that it is hard for veteran players to change.

Unlike other coaches I know, he said to keep the older grip. Instead, he introduced other changes to my forehand (such as improving my footwork and my follow through) that are easier to implement. Under Nick's guidance, within minutes I was hitting the ball better than ever.

Key takeaway: In order to get customers to change, it is not enough to offer a better way of doing things. Wise vendors work with the customer's existing systems and processes rather than trying to force them to undertake difficult changes. Failure to take into account what is required to implement change is an effective way to doom good technology.

- Does your marketing and sales approach take into account what is required to get the customer to change?
- Does your organization provide the customer with the easiest path to success?

3. Nick told great stories about the challenges overcome by some of the all time greats such as Andre Agassi. These stories were highly motivating to me and only served to enhance Nick's credibility.

Key takeaway: A good sales person tells stories about how other companies overcame similar challenges. They use these stories to build trust in the eyes of the prospect and motivate the prospect to change. It is the responsibility of marketing to collect these stories and train the sales people on how to use them.

- Do your personal stories resonate with your target customers and convince them to consider doing things differently?
- Or are they just a series of random case studies?

4. When Nick gave me instruction, I hit beautifully. As we were saying goodbye, Nick warned me that it will take hard work to make his suggested changes stick and undo years of muscle memory. Back on my own, not unexpectedly, old habits are reemerging. I have to constantly remind myself to follow Nick's advice. Meeting with Nick on a regular basis would accelerate the process of making the changes stick. (Unfortunately, distance and cost makes that impossible).

If I had professional aspirations, I would make the sacrifices required to work with Nick. However, since all that is stake for me is pride, I will make a go of it on my own.

Key takeaway: Often a company will implement new programs to increase customer focus or sell value, not features. A lot of energy will be devoted to these programs. Things go well for a while but then organizational muscle memory slows the pace of change. Without continued effort and constant reinforcement, old habits take over and things return to the way they were.

- What are you doing to make organizational changes stick and prevent corporate muscle memory from holding you back?
- Are you a professional at what you do and are you willing to invest in the coaching and training required for success?

So how did this session with Nick happen? In exchange for making a donation to Tenacity (a terrific organization that works with underserved youths to impart the skills needed to succeed in school and life), I had the opportunity to take a lesson Nick. To learn more about Tenacity or to donate please visit tenacity.org.

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