

Avoid objection overload

By Mike Werling
Red Ink

Objections make for dramatic courtroom moments on television and in movies. A prosecuting attorney grinds down the accused, peppering him with questions, insinuating his guilt and questioning his credibility until the suspect yells something along the lines of, "That low-life snake deserved it." The defense attorney, realizing this is a bad moment for his client but a great moment for the viewer, stands up and yells, "I object."

The prosecutor is left staring at the jury to make sure they heard everything. The accused is hunched in his chair, his face buried in his hands. The defense attorney moves his glare back and forth between the prosecutor and his client; he knows if his performance is good enough the producers may ask him back to defend another murder suspect. The judge knows anything he says at this point is moot, so he lets the tension hang there and waits to see who flinches first. Sales professionals watch jealously, because they know the judge can answer that objection with one of two words: sustained or overruled.

Financial advisors don't have it that simple when it comes to answering life insurance objections from their senior prospects. If a prospect says, "That is too expensive," and an advisor proceeds to say, "Overruled," chances are better than average that the meeting would be over, prospect out the door, referral chances nil. No, senior advisors work in the real world, a place where objections proliferate and the people who raise them are not bound by the penal code to one man's ruling.

All advisors have heard them, the objections that get brought up over and over:

- *I want to think about it.*
- *I don't have the money.*
- *I don't need life insurance anymore.*
- *I'm just looking.*
- *I have plenty of life insurance.*

No matter the language of the myriad objections that get tossed around, they all fall into four categories, according to John Boe, a sales trainer and president of Kettering, Ohio-based John Boe International (www.iohnboe.com). He says the four categories are no money, no hurry, no perceived need and no trust. And the most important of these is trust. Without trust, prospects are not going to move forward, and other objections are just ways around the trust issue. It is easier for one human being to tell another he doesn't need life insurance than it is to say he doesn't trust the advisor.

First, earn confidence

Establishing trust doesn't happen by chance and it doesn't normally happen quickly. Transaction-based sellers will find it difficult to gain a person's trust. Advisors today want to establish relationships and solve problems for people, not just walk in to sell life insurance. That is the basis for trust. Bill Edelson says he often sells life insurance when the product isn't even the thrust of the conversation: people see its value when talking about an overall financial plan and realize life insurance serves many purposes they didn't know about.

"You really need to be more on a mission to help people," says Edelson, J.D., CLU, ChFC, CFP, a White Plains, N.Y.-based MetLife financial planner. "Advisors have a lot to offer, but people say no to what they're unaware of. Part of the advisor's job is to make them aware, to give them a chance to make decisions based on more understanding of more things. There may be a solution to their situation they aren't aware of. The relationship should be more like a partnership than an antagonistic one."

The methods for gaining trust and establishing rapport could fill an entire issue of this magazine and still leave important things unsaid. No matter the means for attaining it, trust is the building block for the entire process of avoiding and dealing with objections.

No cash flow or no need

Advisors who do a little homework before a meeting with a prospect can be confident one objection won't, or at least shouldn't, come up: lack of money. That homework can be as simple as dialing the phone. A pre-qualification phone call serves a couple of purposes. First, it reinforces the time and date for the meeting. In addition, a tentative agenda can be formulated so that everything that needs to be accomplished is accomplished in the time allotted. Second, the

advisor can ask some questions that give him an idea of the prospect's financial situation. One sales coach sees the pre-appointment call as vital to the process, helping advisors avoid any number of objections upfront.

"During the call, the advisor can confirm the appointment and ask some questions," says Rochelle Togo-Figa, president of RTF Professional Coaching (www.salesbreakthroughs.com) in Ossining, N.Y. "[The advisor can say], 'We're going to meet at such and such time and place, and I want to use the time wisely. Can you answer a couple of questions?' This helps determine issues ahead of time. The advisor gets a sense for the money the prospect has to spend."

Togo-Figa is quick to point out there is a difference between talking about money and scaring away prospects by talking about pricing. The first tack gives advisors a more complete picture of the prospect's situation; the second tack moves the advisor closer to the transaction-based category. The first makes life insurance part of a financial plan or solution; the second makes life insurance a product the advisor needs to sell.

Prequalification, whether accomplished through a phone call or some other method, also can serve to head off the no-perceived-need objection. An advisor who asks about a prospect's other coverage ahead of time knows where the coverage gaps are, where the prospect may be susceptible to taxes, how taxes and the current coverage will affect beneficiaries, and what can be done to improve the current plan. Boe says many advisors get in front of too many poor prospects because they don't know who they're going to see, echoing Togo-Figa's sentiment.

"Most salespeople don't prequalify well," Boe says. "Because of a lack of prospecting ability, they try to make the dead come alive."

A simple phone call or other fact-finding procedure can alleviate a couple of the strongest objections before the meeting even takes place. No matter how well advisors take care of prequalification, however, some people are still going to toss out objections; it's part of the sales game advisors will never completely avoid. They shouldn't take it personally. They also shouldn't go on the defensive.

Avoid the adversarial

One thing advisors don't want to do is turn the process into an us-vs.-them scenario. That will surely give rise to even more objections. Remember, an advisor's job is to help clients accomplish all of their retirement hopes and dreams, not sell a product for the commission it brings in. And while people go to financial professionals for their expertise, those professionals should avoid putting on airs and talking above the heads of prospects.

"Some salespeople like to show how smart they are by overcoming every objection out there," Boe says. "And sometimes they induce the objections they want to hear." They will actually steer the conversation toward certain objections they are ready for so they can overcome them, show the prospect how good they are at meeting and beating back protests. It comes from their training. "Most salespeople think they can overcome objections by rote. They're taught, 'When they say something, you say exactly this.'"

It's a game Boe calls objection tennis or emotional arm wrestling. And it's a sport advisors don't want to play. Togo-Figa agrees that some salespeople try to be too smart for their own good. They come in with canned presentations and dump on prospects. As a result, they don't give their full attention to a prospect's problems and issues: they are busy planning ahead when they aren't exactly sure what they are planning for — because they haven't listened.

"The tendency is to come up with a solution," Togo-Figa says. "But advisors rush ahead without listening. They can overcome that by playback. Play back what you heard. Say things like, 'Let's recap...' or 'If I understand you correctly...' It helps to stay on the same page and it helps them agree or disagree. It also shows you to be a keen listener."

Boe believes in the power of feedback, too. He says that feeding the objection back to the prospect — after listening to him until he is done speaking, since interruptions are sure to sabotage an advisor's chance at success — gives the person a chance to expand on or explain the statement. There's a chance he will even overcome his own objection if he hears it spoken back to him and talks about it in more detail. To avoid interruptions, thereby keeping the prospect talking, Boe encourages advisors to take short notes, simple reminders of what needs to be addressed when it is the advisor's turn to talk.

And when it is the advisor's turn to talk, he should avoid a three-letter word sure to raise the emotional and psychological defenses of any prospect: b-u-t.

"You never want to say 'yes, but,'" Edelson says. "You need to acknowledge the objection and keep listening. Then, when it's time to address it, say, 'Yes, and.' If you say 'but,' they get turned off. Saying 'and' affirms the objection and

goes beyond it. The key is what you say after 'and.' Reaffirm what the person said and show a reason for [getting past] it without contradiction. Give them another reason to move forward.”

Edelson often accomplishes that by tying life insurance back to the estate planning process, which makes life insurance a component, not the end-all, be-all of the meeting. And therein lies the key so many advisors talk about today: Make everything part of an overall solution. Be someone who solves problems, not someone who sells products. That alone keeps some objections at bay.

Eventually, the process gets to the point of asking for the sale, but if trust and rapport have been established, if the pre-qualification process has exposed any potential for monetary or need issues, and if the advisor listens well before feeding any objections back to the prospect and dealing with them, any barriers to doing business should be knocked down. Such a process — with its lack of direct confrontation, absence of high drama and disdain for the rote dialogue of a script — may not get picked up for an additional season on a major network, but in the end advisors can feel good about their roles in planning successful retirement years for clients who deserve better than to be stuck acting in a financial cliffhanger.