



By Irvin Gemora

# An Industry Call to Action: Stop the Negative Selling

Let's face it — when you're in the sewer industry for decades, you see a lot of crap. While the literal stuff is part of the job, the crap I'm referring to is completely unacceptable. I'm talking about the increased practice of negative selling. This destructive sales technique threatens the growth rate of old and new technologies and endangers the entire trenchless technology industry.

Negative selling is when a salesperson takes down their competition by providing negative and often false information to an engineer in order to win the business. Young engineers or others who spec projects are easily influenced and sometimes honor the information they receive as the truth. A salesperson who builds his business case by taking down his competition is no different than a person shaming someone else to build himself up. It's unethical no matter how you look at it and I'm concerned by how often I witness this practice.

Recently I observed an older engineer who was not completely comfortable with trenchless technology but found the need to use it thrust upon him. After listening to several salespeople tell him how bad other products were, he concluded that all of the trenchless solutions available to him were not worth the risk. He recommended a cut-and-cover solution to his boss because he knew it worked. Fortunately, he was directed to do some research on his own and in the end specified a trenchless technology solution for the project. All went well and the engineer now knows how misleading negative selling can be.

Both salespeople and engineers have an obligation in the selling process. When salespeople are visiting with the engineer it should be their intention to educate him or

her about the aspects of their product or service that will ensure a successful project in the most cost-effective way. Salespeople should speak about the unique selling proposition their products offer. They should tell prospects why their products offer a competitive advantage and viable solutions for the job at hand. At no time during the selling process should a salesperson provide misleading information about a competitor.

Engineers cannot submit to intellectual laziness during the sales pitch. Trained to think critically, engineers have a responsibility to learn the positive and negative aspects of each of the products or services he or she is considering by obtaining engineering facts and checking references through independent sources. We know — or should know — that there are no products or services that are perfect for every application. The job of deciding what is best for the project should not be based on a salesperson's perception of the competition.

Years ago, I was calling on an engineer to get my product into the list of approved bidders. The engineer opened the meeting by saying, "Your competition has told me about the problems with your product. You tell me about the problems with his product." I replied with: "My competitor's product is a good one. Let me tell you why mine is better." I was able to convince him that he had been given wrong information and ultimately I was placed on the approved bidder list for his project.

I wish I could tell you that I won the bid and everyone lived happily ever after. I did not. I lost the bid on price, but the good news is that the engineer understood, perhaps for the first time, that he was doing his job of selecting qualified bidders by using biased and

misleading inputs. That engineer is now known in his area as one who takes control of meetings and does not accept product information from competitors about each other.

I understand these are challenging economic times and many people in our industry are concerned about their businesses. Negative selling is not the answer. People do business with people they like. That will never change, no matter what the economy is doing.

On behalf of the leading organization for the trenchless technology industry, I urge you to join me in this call to action: If you are using negative selling in your work, STOP IT. It is destructive to the entire trenchless technology industry. If you allow salespeople to provide information about their competitors, STOP IT. It diminishes your company's professionalism. I encourage you to share this article with your employees and colleagues, incorporate best selling techniques at your next sales meeting and educate engineers to identify negative selling.

Every NASSCO member has signed a pledge statement that includes a phrase worth repeating here: Our integrity, ethics and technical competence are the source of our strength. They provide the industry's corporate intelligence and determine its reputation. Whether or not you're a NASSCO member, I hope you will adhere to this statement. It's the rising tide that will lift all boats. Our industry will only benefit with all of us doing the right thing — please join me.

Irvin Gemora is the executive director of NASSCO, the leading organization for the trenchless technology industry. Send your comments, questions or share your own experiences about negative selling to Irvin at [director@nassco.org](mailto:director@nassco.org).