

Executive Summary for Building Trusted Relationships with Farmers

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Trust is an integral part of maintaining any successful business relationship, and without trust, a business transaction would likely not occur. These statements certainly hold true in agriculture. Wilson (2000) defines trust as the cohesion in agricultural transactions, creating a value in relationships between people. Trust is the primary component holding relationships together in support of common business goals. Having assurance that each party will honorably uphold their end of a contract, under any and all unforeseen circumstances, generates value for both parties. Thus, farmers find value in working with sales representatives who they trust, reducing uncertainty in business transactions.

In order to build these trusted relationships, agricultural sales representatives need to strive to learn how to most effectively deepen relationships with their farmer-customers. To address this need, Kansas farmers and ranchers were surveyed on their trust preferences and perceptions in agricultural sales relationships. By surveying Kansas farmers, some of the best ways to establish and grow trusted relationships are revealed.

A clear and easily communicable definition of trust is necessary. The survey results will be difficult to interpret if trust is too broadly defined. If trust is too narrowly defined, the results will not be actionable or useful. Given business relationships tend to be complex and multi-faceted, trust is broken down into four key components as defined in Maister, Green, and Galford (2000). Based on the authors' research of the literature, trust is defined as a combination of (1) credibility, (2) reliability, (3) intimacy or how well one knows the customer and his or her goals, and (4) self-orientation or showing one has the customer's best interest at heart. Each of these components are straightforward and provide a clear and complete way to define trust for farmers.

According to Maister, Green, and Galford, credibility is one's credentials and the words used to describe their field of work. Thus, breaking down how knowledgeable or skilled the sales representative is at their job. Reliability is the ability of the sales representative to connect words with actions. That is, being able to follow through with commitments and remain consistently dependable. Intimacy embraces the level of security that a customer feels with their sales representative and is exemplified by the sales representative knowing the goals and objectives of the customer in both business and life. A more open and well-defined relationship will lead to greater transfer of information, increasing satisfaction for both parties. Self-orientation considers where the sales representative places the focus of the relationship. For instance, if a sales representative has low self-orientation, then they have the customer's best interest at heart. Conversely, high self-orientation places the focus on the sales rep and their own personal motivations.

The key findings from the survey heavily centered around a single unifying theme: sales reps have the ability and can directly control building more trusted relationships with farmers. That is, farmers did not put as much emphasis on the age or number of years the sales rep had been working in the industry. Farmers felt that to build trust, agricultural sales representatives should focus on improving themselves

both professionally and personally. Sales representatives should focus on being more knowledgeable in their specific area, exhibit honesty when they are not informed about a topic, exemplify dependability, and demonstrate their desire to help their farmer-customers. In summary, sales representatives should focus on their own personal development to build more trusted relationships as opposed to things largely outside of their control.

To do so, sales representatives need to constantly work with the farmer on clearly defining potential problems. Farmers feel trust is established and deepened through discussing the nature of issues rather than the sales representative trying to sell solutions. Thus, sales representatives need to improve and constantly work on their communication skills to better understand the wants and needs of the operation. That is, taking the time to understand the goals and missions of the operation while working with farmers to clearly defining the problem faced by the producer. In short, agricultural sales representatives can build more trusted relationships with farmers through personal development of credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation.

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