

Use trial closes at interviews to help secure the contract

Contractors can use 'trial closes' as an advanced sales technique to safely test the waters when they are being interviewed by a prospective client.

"A trial close – or test close – provides contractors with additional insights into the point they have reached in the sales process," says former IT contractor Dave Chaplin, a veteran of many successful contract wins.

Now CEO of ContractorCalculator, Chaplin explains: "The trial close is not a technique to finally close the sale. It is used as a test during the sales process to determine how the sale is progressing; if the client has concerns or objections still to be overcome; or whether the client will be really ready to say 'yes' and close the deal."

Ask test questions to evaluate the sales process status and overcome objections

Trial closes involve asking questions during the sales process to evaluate whether the client is happy with what has so far been discussed. These questions should be designed to solicit either a positive agreement from the client that they are happy with a point discussed, or to identify where the client might be unsure about something. It's about ticking all the boxes as the sales process progresses, ready for the final close of the sale.

Let's take as an example a case where the core assignment may be a developer's role, and so this is the focus of the contractor's CV. However, the résumé might also include information on a testing course completed a couple of years ago, and that the contractor did two recent assignments where testing was a significant element of the contract.

The client might pick up on this and start discussing their own testing requirements, to which you will respond and attempt to reassure them that you can help in that area. So a good trial question could be: "Do you think if we followed those suggestions I've made it would solve the testing problem you are experiencing and help ensure delivery of the project on time?"

The client might respond positively, in which case the conversation can be moved on to another point. If not, then you'll need to understand their concerns and try to demonstrate you can indeed help solve their issue. Having done that, you would try another trial closing, something like: "OK, are you happy that would work?". All the time you are looking for a positive response, or to counter their concerns.

There may be other boxes to tick using the trial close

Trial closes can also be used in tandem with open questions to uncover any important topics that the client may not have thought to deal with. These could be related to additional skill sets the contractor can contribute to the project team, or concerns the contractor may have about the contract.

A contractor can raise points by asking a question about the project that is related to the additional skills they have to offer. They might question how the project may be managed, who other team members are, specific time scales, how they tackle certain common problems, and so on. The objective is to make the client think it is their idea to have probed these areas and raised the issues they may have.

After discussing the issues and demonstrating that the contractor can solve them, a trial close can be introduced to confirm that the client is reaching the correct conclusion about hiring the contractor. "The plan should be to use trial closes to edge towards a final, successful close," says Chaplin.

Trial closes are used before asking the client for the sale

A contractor who understands the sales process will use trial closes as a way to test whether the client is ready for the final, more direct, close. In effect, the contractor should not actually be asking for the sale during the sales process, but checking to see what the client's position is on key aspects of the contract.

Rather than the contractor asking, "Will you hire me for this contract?", which is a very direct close normally used towards the end of the sales process, they might ask a more subtle trial close question, such as: "For this project, do you envisage me starting next week, or the week after?"

A response such as, "Well, I've not decided if you are right for the contract," indicates that there are concerns the client still has, and these need to be handled by asking, "What are you unsure about at this stage?". A positive response to the trial close such as, "I'm thinking more like in three weeks", indicates that the client has already decided in their mind that you are right for the project. If that is the case then you could consider a final close with, "Great. Shall we agree I'll start three weeks on Monday?".



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Dave Chaplin is a former IT contractor in the City of London, and is founder and CEO of ContractorCalculator, and author of the Contractors' Handbook.

Started in 1999, ContractorCalculator (this site) is the leading independent website for the UK contracting industry – most of whom are highly skilled knowledge workers. [Read Full Profile...](#)

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Ideally contractors should make smaller and more regular trial closes to enable 'box ticking' to be completed along the way. That ensures that when the contractor gets to the final close, there are no reasons left for the client to say 'no', because all of the objections have been positively handled.

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