
NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RELATIONSHIP SELLING APPROACH

■ **Abstract:**

The traditional selling approach has suffered tremendous changes lately related to a major shift in the way the sales force is approaching the existent and potential customers. The new developments can be classified into many categories, but we would like it concentrate on few major developments that would dramatically impact the way sales force is evaluating the sales approach. We can classify these developments into 2 major categories: technology and conceptual. In the current context, we would like to analyze the specific changes in each category and a better understanding of the specific characteristics related to each category.

■ **Keywords:**

Relationship, selling approach, customer, buyer

■ **DEMANDING CUSTOMERS – FIERCE
COMPETITION – BREATHTAKING
TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION...**

These are the realities of today's global marketplace... realities that have changed forever the way we do business, especially the way we sell. Gone are the days when salespeople could rely on charming small-talk and aggressive closing techniques alone to generate business.

Many traditional selling approaches regard selling as something the seller does to the buyer. They sell them something. The result of this attitude to sales is that many salespeople adapt a manipulative, almost coercive style of selling. Some salespeople think of selling as pushing a customer into buying, and success as a victory. Often, people fear salespeople and distrust them. They think of salespeople as fast talking

and slick. They are wary of being sold something they really don't need or want.

The traditional customer call once seemed indispensable to the selling process; the time and expense involved were just a basic cost of doing business. In recent years, however, the business community has come to regard the sales call as an expenditure for which there are substitutes. For many companies telemarketing and direct mail have made the sales call a choice not inevitability. This is not surprising when various studies suggest that getting one sales person in front of one customer now costs triple since 1983. As a consequence professional salespeople have to be more effective than ever to justify the investment in a face to face effort.

In essence, we can draw a number of primary conclusions and taken together, these findings paint a picture of the current state of the sales environment.

■ CUSTOMER FOCUS CREATES COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Customer focus creates competitive advantage are:

- ✦ The one term that sets top performers apart - customer focus*
- ✦ Outstanding sales results depend on:

 - The ability to think from the customer's point of view*
 - Understanding the customer's agenda, buying cycle and best interests**
- ✦ Beyond a superficial reading of immediate customer needs, salespeople must gain a deeper understanding of both the buyer's long-term goals and the overall business climate*
- ✦ At the heart of customer focus is the art of listening constructively - the best salespeople are masters at capturing information*
- ✦ Customer focus means taking the customer seriously - to-day the salesperson who clings to the product orientation of a decade ago is losing ground*

As client companies branch into new markets and unfamiliar territories, they are demanding unique, flexible solutions from their vendors - customized to support specific goals.

Another myth which can be exploded is that whilst customers value flexibility, being too flexible can undermine the sales relationship. On the whole salespeople imagine that customers value a vendor's responsiveness above all. However recent research shows that their primary concern is reliability.

In summary, in order to maintain customer focus the best salespeople become facilitators, creating a partnership that extends the selling relationship within the customer's company. The motivation to achieve this should be strong - it costs five times as much to attract and sell to a new customer as it does to an existing one!

■ THE RIGHT TO DO BUSINESS HAS TO BE EARNED AND NEVER ASSUMED

Rather than doggedly asking for the business, the very best sales people work to keep the relationship moving towards a sale. They realize the need to identify how to turn their company's products into real solutions, which must meet specific needs.

Unfortunately, our surveys confirm that the average salesperson drags the customer over old ground as much as 52% of the time - they are unable to provide continuous stimulation and never know when to treat an existing customer like a new one.

Conversely, exceptional salespeople only make such 'return' calls for 10% of the time. Above all, earning the right to proceed requires gaining the customer's trust and top salespeople work diligently to establish a climate in which the customer is willing to share information and feels comfortable doing so. The key here is integrity.

■ CUSTOMERS ARE PERSUADED WHEN THEY ARE PART OF THE PROCESS AND NOT PART OF THE AUDIENCE

Sales success to-day demands a radical shift from the 'peddler' mentality of merely demonstrating products and expanding on their features. It requires treating the customer as a participant. More often than not, a 'flashy' sales presentation alone alienates rather than persuades

The best salespeople regard the sales call as a two-way conversation - not a one sided pitch. They have developed active listening skills. Average salespeople score fairly well in their ability to provide customers with facts and figures, but top performers dramatically outscore the rest when it comes to gathering information.

In addition, how a salesperson collects information still distinguishes exceptional achievers from the rest of the pack. I.e. top performers ask better questions and as a result gain much better information. Essentially, they aim to engage customers in the buying process with questions that require thoughtful answers, that stimulate curiosity and that reveal the customers underlying needs.

■ BUSINESSES NEED TO RE-DEFINE SELLING AND WHAT CONSTITUTES BASIC SELLING SKILLS

In to-day's world of selling, there is less and less room for apprenticeship. Selling has become an exclusive club of highly skilled professionals where product knowledge and time management skills, for instance, are the cost of membership not leadership.

Ongoing research demonstrates that to-day's 'average' salesperson is just as effective as the high performer in explaining features and benefits effectively, relating a service or product to customer needs and closing a sale. But, above this Level 1 plateau of competence, the exceptional salesperson is busy defining the "basic skills of tomorrow".

Building an up-to-date foundation in sales competence does mean sacrificing some old notions of what it takes to succeed in a competitive marketplace. For example, a salesperson can no longer just "win by knowing". Every company needs to test their assumptions about what skills really contribute to sales success. Too often operating on old sales theories means training and rewarding people to do the wrong things.

■ WHEN THE BUYER AND SELLER ACT AS PARTNERS, THEY ARE BUILDING A BRIDGE TO PROFITABILITY

Successful selling is definitely not about the "hit and run" sale. Sales achievers regard their relationships with key customers as a partnership and cultivate it as such. When customers face tough business challenges and complex technological choice, they rely on sales people who can assist them in making the right decisions.

The primary objective of a sales partnership has to be, to create and sustain a mutually productive relationship, which serves the needs of both parties, now and in the future. The key word here is symbiotic. Partnership does not mean eliminating the tension between buyer and seller; it means that top-performing salespeople know how to strike a balance between achieving immediate results and developing the relationship fully.

■ IN SUMMARY: WHY DO WE NEED A FRESH APPROACH TO SELLING?

Many organisations have developed without objective analysis of their purpose and structure. The buying power in many industries is no longer evenly distributed - in a large number of markets a few big firms control the majority of purchases.

The development of new marketing techniques has meant that some tasks traditionally performed by the sales team can be more effectively handled by other methods. The prime objective of all sales staff is to gain business. From an organisational point of view, however, how they all achieve their goals must be defined in order to identify what kind and the quality of skills that are required.

Develop a long term relationship by attaining customer satisfaction Truly effective salespeople succeed because they are genuinely curious and concerned about people in general - and customers in particular. Their desire to understand the customer takes priority over their desire to sell their products and services. The delightful irony, of course, is that the very reason they are successful at selling is because they have made their desire to sell a secondary issue. The primary issue is the relationship they have with their customer.

The surest way to cement a long term business relationship with your customer is to remember that no sale is completed until the customers expectations have been met or, preferably, exceeded. There are many salespeople who take customers for granted. The excitement of new sales often leads to ignoring existing customers. The result is constant pressure to create new business from scratch. Meanwhile, some of your best prospects are right there under your nose, in your own customer base.

The "traditional", fast-talking slick sales person is no longer effective in today's global marketplace. Dynamic and highly competitive, our market consists of well educated, savvy consumers looking to the modern salesperson for guidance in making well-informed buying decisions. Those unwilling or unable to adapt not only experience declining sales, but also risk severing long-term customer relationships. The challenge is enormous and the stakes are high.

Customers buy for their reasons, not ours. When we strive to form a partnership with our customers, providing them with valuable help and advice as well as supplying vital products and services, we virtually ensure sales success.

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