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Solution Selling

Creating Buyers in Difficult Selling Markets

Michael T. Bosworth • McGraw-Hill © 1994 • 224 pages

Sales

Take-Aways

- Many salespeople focus on their product's features when they should focus on their buyers.
- Use the "Nine-Block Vision Processing Model" – a structured series of customer-oriented questions – to define the buyer's needs and diagnose a solution.
- Help buyers develop solutions that depend on your product or service.
- Your sales method can make you stand out from the competition.
- Buyers have different needs at different stages of the buying cycle.
- Salespeople who are out of sync with their buyers' needs will not be able to sell to them.
- If you handle the buying cycle wisely, the close will occur naturally.
- During a cold telephone call, you have only 20 seconds to secure an appointment with a buyer.
- Don't pursue requests for proposals, which cost you control over the sales process.
- If the buyer tries to squeeze you too hard during contract signing, walk away from the sale.

Recommendation

Instead of focusing on a prospective buyer, many salespeople spout lists of their product's or service's features and benefits. Does the buyer have a problem that these advantages solve? Maybe. The salesperson doesn't know or care. He or she "sprays and prays," hoping one of the product's bells and whistles will engage the buyer – who just wants the conversation to stop. Sales trainer Michael T. Bosworth suggests a different approach. He teaches salespeople to use an engaging question-and-answer process to learn potential customers' individual needs. With this diagnostic approach, the salesperson can specify the product or service that meets those needs. *getAbstract* recommends the author's clear explanation of his sales method. Bosworth shows you how to shed the high-pressure, "always-be-closing" mindset and align your sales approach with a buyer's real desires. This is the true nature of business-to-business selling.

Summary

How You Sell Makes All the Difference

Today, selling is harder than ever. Expert buyers know how to negotiate, want only the best, can choose from an array of vendors, distrust salespeople in general and will litigate at any hint of difficulty. This makes selling an almost vertical climb. To reach the summit, use advanced sales methods that make the "way you sell" the pivot point of closing sales. The best sellers intuitively know how to help buyers develop "action visions" – mental images in which buyers imagine using and benefiting from a product or service in a specific context.

"The best salespeople seldom have to close – their buyers volunteer to buy."

This kind of selling requires understanding the "three levels of buyer need." First, buyers experience "latent pain" from business problems they cannot solve or even admit. Second-level buyers feel "pain" they can recognize and acknowledge. They want a solution. Buyers on the third level have developed "vision" and see solutions. Your job is to "re-engineer" this vision so it includes your product.

"Since most buyers have a negative impression of salespeople, one of the best things salespeople can do is to sell in less stereotypical ways."

The buying cycle also has three phases. First, the seller must earn customers' trust, help them delineate what they need, and show that his or her product is the ideal solution. In the second stage, buyers examine their options. In the third stage, they move from analyzing solutions to investigating the consequences of making a choice before taking action. They may ask, "Should I buy?" "Is this the right price?" or "Will the service and support be there when I need them?" At this point in the process, the salesperson must be fully aligned with the buyer's mindset and concerns. Failure to create this link can kill the sale.

"The 10 Faces of Pain"

Why is selling so difficult? The 10 primary reasons could be called the 10 faces of pain:

1. **“Latent pain”** – Through rationalization or ignorance, the buyer does not think about his or her “pain.” Assuming that no solution is available (that is, being unaware of your product), the buyer ignores the pain. It becomes a latent need. The salesperson helps the buyer develop hope that a cure exists, thus moving the product to the front burner.
2. **“Price negotiation”** – Savvy buyers exploit the salesperson’s need to close by wringing every concession out of the deal. Expect such treatment and be prepared.
3. **“Cold call ‘window of opportunity’”** – Salespeople hate telephone prospecting, yet handled professionally with a script, cold-calling can be highly rewarding.
4. **“Organizational interdependence and access to power”** – Often your prospect has no buying power. Though it’s challenging, try to gain access to someone who can buy.
5. **“Product or service viewed as a ‘commodity’”** – To get your product or service to stand out, don’t babble about features. That is how everyone else sells. You can’t differentiate yourself that way. Don’t be a “feature creature.”
6. **“Requests for proposals”** – Bid requests can turn into a pit of wasted effort.
7. **“Free education”** – Too many prospects meet with you just to upgrade their knowledge about new product developments, not to buy anything.
8. **“Buyer gets cold feet”** – Many buyers hesitate to sign sales contracts. They may have legitimate concerns about the consequences of their purchase. Salespeople who misinterpret these concerns tend to panic, causing a rift with their buyers.
9. **“Booking appointments over the phone”** – You get only 20 seconds to make your case about why the prospect should see you. After that, you are as good as dead.
10. **“Buyer has been to negotiation school”** – If the buyer hits you with too many price and concession demands, the only thing to do is to walk away from the deal.

“Men are best convinced by reasons that they themselves discover.” [– Benjamin Franklin]

The “Solution Selling” method offers 10 steps salespeople can take to heal all this pain:

One: “Recognize the Three Levels of Buyer Need”

Top sellers can move buyers from level one (latent pain) and level two (pain) to level three (vision). Lesser salespeople falter because they respond to any hint of need from a buyer with an immediate “I’ve got it!” This classic error will not result in a sale. To establish credibility and create demand, spend time diagnosing the buyer’s need. This is the only way the buyer will eventually adopt your vision of a solution. Conduct your diagnosis by asking the buyer intelligent questions that shed light on his or her needs, and then help turn those needs into a shared vision.

Two: Go Beyond “Features, Advantages and Benefits”

Ranting about your product underwhelms and irritates buyers. Salespeople tend to assume that buyers share their vision of a business solution, even if those buyers may not be ready to acknowledge any painful problems. Instead of using your product’s benefits to sell, use them to prove that your product matches the

buyer's vision. First, engage the buyer in an inquisitive conversation to help him or her bring that vision to the forefront.

Three: "Participate in the Buyer's Vision"

Use "reference stories" to help a buyer uncover pain so you can address it. A reference story shows the buyer how your product helped someone similar solve a related business problem. The reference story supplies hope, an all-important ingredient. Once buyers acknowledge their pain, help them create workable solutions by asking a series of questions based on the "Nine-Block Vision Processing Model." This method involves a pivotal process of asking prospective buyers nine structured questions. Picture a nine-box grid with three boxes across and three down. The top row sets out "open" questions that allow elaborate responses and use "who, what, why" constructions. The middle row holds "control" questions that set parameters and the bottom row has "confirm" questions you use to verify information. The left column has "reasons" (diagnostic) questions, the middle column contains "impact" (exploration) questions and the right column lists "capability" (visualization) questions.

"People love to buy, but they hate to be sold."

Imagine that your potential client's company is losing sales because its 1,000 field representatives cannot keep up with its ever-changing product line, prices and specifications. To solve this problem, you are trying to sell the company a closed-circuit business TV network that it can use to communicate instantaneously with its reps. To begin, follow the nine-box system by asking open, control and confirm questions in three sets:

1. **Reasons: Open, control, confirm** – Begin with open-ended questions, such as "What is the extent of your problem?" Then ask control questions to delineate the diagnostic response: "Can you contact all your field reps in a two-hour window?" Then ask confirming questions: "So you can't reach your sales goals because your reps can't stay on top of product changes?"
2. **Impact: Open, control, confirm** – Now, move to the impact column and start again with an open question: "What effect does all this have on the company?" Your next impact question is also a control or scope-setting question: "What impact does this have on the CEO's planning?" Your confirmation question also seeks impact data: "So this is not just an internal communication problem, but also a marketing problem, correct?"
3. **Vision: Open, control, confirm** – Next, ask three questions from the vision column, starting with an open query: "What will it take to solve this problem? Can I suggest some possible solutions?" Follow with a control question: "What if there was a way all your reps could learn about product changes immediately?" Finish with a confirmation question: "From what I just heard, if you had the ability to (repeat capabilities), could you solve (repeat pain)?" This helps the buyer share your vision of a solution. You don't pitch. You probe. That makes all the difference

Four: Use "Solution Selling Tools"

The three tools of solution selling are "the reference story, the pain sheet and the telephone script." The reference story includes a "situation" (someone similar to the buyer with a comparable problem), a "critical

issue” (pain), “business reasons” (factors that cause the pain, albeit interpretatively, and point to your product), a “vision” (capabilities the buyer wants to solve the problem), a “we-provided” section (how you solved the problem), and a specific “result.” The pain sheet lists all the information you gathered during the nine-question process. The telephone script is just that: a cold-call script you use to engage a prospect within 20 seconds to secure an appointment. Build it around a problem the buyer may have that you can solve.

Five: “Align With the Buyer’s Shifting Concerns”

If you are not aligned with your buyer’s mindset and concerns, you will never sell anything. The buyer’s concerns shift, depending on where he or she is in the buying cycle, from “Do I have a need?” to “Do I have a solution to my need?” and “What will be the cost and risk?” If you focus on cost when the buyer focuses on need, you are out of alignment. If you concentrate on features when the buyer focuses on risk, you also are out of alignment. Being out of alignment kills sales. It can lead to the dreaded “death spiral,” where you mistakenly interpret a buyer’s real concerns about risk as a sign that you are in danger of losing the sale.

Six: “Lead the Buyer and Stay Strategically Aligned”

Follow eight steps to control the buying process: 1) “Establish rapport” by looking professional and being sincere; 2) Introduce the reason for your call by explaining who you are and why you have contacted the customers; 3) Make a “transition to need development/vision creation” by using the nine-block vision-creation process; 4) Explain the benefits your product provides; 5) Start to close by matching your product or service with the buyer’s vision; 6) “Qualify the buying process” by assessing how the buyer will evaluate your firm and its offerings; 7) During this process, try to reach the “power sponsor,” the person who makes the purchase decision; and 8) If necessary, trade a major commitment of time and resources – for example, documenting the potential capabilities of your service for this client – to get an appointment with the power sponsor.

Seven: “Advance the Buyer’s Vision With Value Justification”

The Nine-Block Vision Processing Model is a versatile tool. Use it to get buyers to give you the metrics their company will use to evaluate your sales proposition. Then arrange your benefits and advantages accordingly. This makes the buyer invested in the criteria you use to prove your product’s value. The ideal value justification centers on five questions: “What will be measured?” “Who is responsible?” “How much is possible?” “What capabilities will be needed?” and “When will the investment pay for itself?”

Eight: “Control the Process, Not the Buyer”

Empower the customer by becoming a “buying facilitator.” If you ask for the business before the buyer is ready, you endanger your relationship. Avoid taking requests for proposals, because they cost you control over the process. If you must submit a proposal, get the buyer to agree up front to a “pre-proposal review” in which he or she checks the proposal in advance to ensure that it meets all the company’s concerns. Create an understanding that the final proposal merely “documents and confirms” the terms you’ve already discussed so the company cannot reject you later.

Nine: “Draw the Line in Price Negotiations”

At contract-signing time, buyers love to squeeze salespeople for the lowest possible prices and every possible concession. Expect such treatment from every buyer. If the buyer asks for a concession, ask for something in return (maybe an accelerated payment schedule). If the buyer asks for an unreasonable price concession, plan to walk away. This takes courage, but if that is not your plan, the buyer can steal your commission. When you draw a line in the sand, the buyer will understand that he or she has achieved the best deal available.

Ten: “Implement the Solution Selling Process”

Solution selling does not just change how salespeople sell. It offers a new approach for sales management. Sales managers have four basic tools for implementing this process: “a first-call debriefing log, a prospect qualification form, a call log and a pipeline/activity summary.” Various software companies are now developing solution selling modules that have these mechanisms, along with a forecast database, in their individual sales packages.

About the Author

Michael T. Bosworth is a sales trainer and consultant who lectures at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and at a Stanford marketing program for technology firms.



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