

PART I

Connect



CHAPTER 1

Seven Realities of Selling Services

Filmmaker Woody Allen reportedly once said, “80 percent of success is just showing up.”¹ If that aphorism were true about selling, there would be little need for the countless books, seminars, web sites, and software programs that claim to be vital to sellers’ success. Especially when it comes to selling services, you’re likely to *lose* 80 percent of the time if you just show up. Imagine the advantage you would gain if your competitors believed that’s all they had to do.

If you ask 10 successful salespeople how they land profitable work, you will *not* hear, “Hey, I just go and see what happens.” Their answers *will* reveal consistent patterns of behavior that contribute to their clients’ success and, by extension, their own. It’s not accurate to call their behaviors customer-centered or client-focused, because that would imply that these sellers were, at some point, not focused on the client, which isn’t the case. Instead, these sellers embraced the transformation of the seller’s role to business adviser long before most people knew a transformation of selling was under way.

They also refuse to accept conventional selling wisdom at face value. Maybe there are cases, for example, when a client relationship is *not* the most important factor in a services sale. How can there be a list of hard-and-fast rules for selling services when each sales situation presents a unique mix of challenges, issues, and people? After all, today’s winning “rule” can readily become tomorrow’s relic.

Top sellers do share this goal: to deliver extraordinary value to their clients before, during, and after the sale. To accomplish that, they uncover what each client really needs and then use flexible, pragmatic strategies to chalk up wins for all concerned. Most of all, they understand the realities of

selling services, and they use that knowledge to help their clients and themselves.

Sales Reality #1: You Must Prove Your Answers to the Three Burning Questions

Not all that long ago, services sellers rarely had to do much more than proclaim the greatness of their experience and promise to deliver results to make a sale. Naturally, even then this wasn't always sufficient. But often enough, competitive situations became battles of seller promises. And whoever made the most confident claims won.

Sadly for some, those days are gone. The "Assert and Promise" routine always made for a good show. But those who cling to this antiquated approach will watch their profits slip away. Granted, you necessarily make assertions during the sales process. What's changed is that you have to *prove* every assertion and show how you'll fulfill each promise—in detail. It doesn't matter whether your company is Global Galactic LLC or Two Guys in a Garage, Inc. You *must* back up everything you say.

Specifically, be ready to prove your answers to the three burning questions every client will ask (or is wondering about):

1. *Do you really understand what we need?* You have to demonstrate that you understand why the issue must be resolved and the implications of any solution you propose. You need to address risk and how you manage it, complexity, and the realistic level of client effort to get the job done. Clients expect you to take their preliminary ideas about how to manage a challenge and take that thinking a step further. Otherwise, why would they need you? To do that, you must grasp the issue with a degree of depth that allows you to speak authoritatively about resolving it. You prove your competence by conducting substantive discussions on the details of the issue. A superficial understanding will only get you into trouble and will likely lead to a sales process that veers off course. Your efforts to comprehend your clients' situation send an important signal that you are thinking about their interests. That begins to build trust, which will serve you throughout the sales process and your client relationships.
2. *Can you do what you claim?* As you talk to clients about your capabilities, imagine them uttering silently to themselves that famous line from the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, "Show me the money!"² They're probably thinking about some version of that demand. Until

you prove what you claim, by whatever means your clients want, it's all puffery. Don't use an unproven claim anywhere in your proposals, presentations, or discussions with clients. Be ready with your evidence, even if you don't need all of it.

3. *Will you work well with us?* Expect clients to test whether you and your team fit with theirs. You don't have to be clones of your client's team, so ignore most advice about creating artificial rapport by pretending you're someone you're not. On the other hand, don't be tough to work with, either. Find the balance between being too aggressive and being a pushover, and check your ego at the door. Remember, you may answer the first two questions with flying colors, but fail this one and you're likely to lose the sale.

Besides seeking answers to these questions, clients will also try to gauge how much you care about what they're doing. Some clients will assume that your interests are self-serving, but people pick up on the true motives of others in time. Be patient. If you do really care, your clients will figure that out soon enough. If you don't, they'll know that, too.

How to Escape the Commodity Trap

Some sellers complain that clients view their services as a commodity, leading them to ask for lower and lower prices. If clients say or imply that they can't differentiate your services from those of others, what they're really saying is that they can't differentiate your ideas. And that shifts the competitive battle to something they *can* differentiate: price.

You can escape the commodity trap with the power of your ideas. That is, after all, what you are selling. Find the insights and innovative approach that set you apart from others. Clients want your ideas, especially ones they're not hearing from every other services seller. Communicate your best ideas to clients and avoid the commodity trap.

Sales Reality #2: Insights and Capabilities—Not Relationships—Close Sales

Suggesting that a strong client relationship is important to the services sale is like saying humans need oxygen to survive. Everyone knows that it's

more comfortable, and often more beneficial, to buy from someone you know and trust. But it's easy to overestimate the power of those relationships, especially when it comes to selling services. The days of clients automatically handing work to their favorites went the way of the three-martini lunch. Even a multiyear client relationship doesn't earn you a free pass, and it shouldn't.

Overestimating the influence of a client relationship can lead to complacency and a lack of the pure hustle you used to start that relationship. Maybe the client returns your calls immediately and gives you an audience whenever you like. But that level of access should encourage you to work even harder to make an impact. Some service providers check in with their top clients and use the time for informal conversations about the client's issues. If you're not ready to give your client two or three items of value for everything they share with you, that relationship will eventually lose steam.

Think about the first three meetings you had with your best client. Chances are that you prepared with intensity and looked for ways to bring original ideas your client could use. That's the behavior that got your relationship moving, and that's what will nurture it. Remember, the value of the relationship to the client lies in your ability to integrate your past experiences and your creativity to generate insightful guidance. Assume that the client holds you to a higher standard of performance than a new competitor, and you'll keep the relationship vibrant. Building relationships of mutual respect with clients gives any service provider an edge—if you take care of the relationship. But relationships take you only so far. They may open doors for you, but don't assume that past client relationships will also close sales.

Sanity Check: Maybe the Client Doesn't Want a "Relationship"

The conventional wisdom is that you should pursue trust-based relationships with every client. While that's generally good advice, some clients don't want or need a relationship with you. They are perfectly happy with mutually productive transactions with you and have zero interest in taking it further. Don't be offended if a client doesn't want to pursue a long-term relationship, and don't assume that the client is not right for your business for that reason alone.

Sales Reality #3: The Client Buying Experience Trumps Sales Techniques

Think about the last time you bought a small electronic product like a calculator, watch, or a data storage device. Chances are the product was encased in thick, molded plastic packaging, with no visible way to free the product—except maybe a hacksaw. That packaging makes the seller's life easier, not the customer's. Such experiences influence buyers' opinions. Some people swear they'll never buy again from a company that makes it so difficult to use their products.

In that sense, the sale of a service is no different. Your client's experience in working with you has enormous impact on the buying decision. You want that experience to be the *opposite* of trying to pry open that hard plastic product casing. Your job is to create a buying process that works for your client, not just for you.

The concept isn't exactly radical: You and the client codesign a buying process together, which allows the client to learn, analyze, and decide how and when to buy. Instead of focusing on how to sell to the client, you work to identify and create the conditions under which the client is comfortable buying. How do you design a client buying experience? Ask questions.

For instance, don't assume that a client wants to see a presentation, call references, and then read a proposal. Offer alternatives for the client to learn about you. Maybe your client wants a series of small group briefings, an interview with the service delivery team, and a call of support from your boss. The possibilities are endless, but you won't know how clients want to buy unless you ask. And you'll get kudos for bringing up the subject.

Some sellers take this codesigned buying concept a step further by offering to help their clients solve some aspect of the current problem as part of the sales process. Maybe the client has questions about managing the prospective change or about how to decide which seller to choose. It's becoming more common for sellers to lend their expertise in these matters to make the client's life simpler and to create a positive buying experience.

No matter how your client wants to buy, you'll still undertake traditional sales activities such as identifying decision makers, positioning your services in a favorable way, and communicating why you are the best choice. You'll pursue the precise activities, though, in collaboration with the client, not according to some predefined sales process.

Sales Reality #4: Likability Is Overrated

Sales experts tell us that people buy from people they like, so we should get out there and get on the buyer's good side. Some claim that people *never* buy from someone they don't like. The unfortunate result of this perspective is that salespeople get caught up in trying to win a popularity contest. Naturally, you don't want clients to find you repulsive, and no one wants to hire a jerk. But trying to get a buyer to like you is the epitome of seller-centric behavior, and clients instinctively recognize it as such. When you try to steer attention your way, it diverts everyone's attention from the problem at hand, and that's not good for you, the client, or the sale. Robert Cialdini, author of the classic book, *Influence*, has this take on likability:

In every sales training program, the first rule is that you have to get the buyer to like you. I think that's wrong. The first rule of sales is for you to come to like the buyer.

When you feel sincere affinity and concern for someone, that person usually senses those feelings, and barriers go down. That's because you are much more likely to protect that person's interests, and so both sides win. Besides, you can't control what the person across the table feels about you, but you can control what you feel toward that person.⁵

If you are skeptical, ask any politician whether this works and you'll get eager nods. They know that they must convince voters that they are looking out for the voters' interests or they won't win the next election. The reality is that a client may like you, and may even enjoy having you over for dinner, but unless you like your client and behave in ways that demonstrate that, you may be unable to reach a level of trust that encourages that person to buy from you.

Sanity Check: Dump "Business Development" from Your Card

When you begin a sales meeting with the ritual business card swap, what message does the title on your business card send? Many sellers use the title, "Business Development Manager," "Account Representative," or something similar. Think about how clients view that seemingly innocuous title. It says that you are there to build *your* business. Look for a more client-focused title, or leave the title off your card entirely. Your client knows that you're there to sell. No need to make it any more explicit or create barriers before you even hear the client's first word.

Sales Reality #5: Your People Are Not Number One for the Buyer

Services sellers often claim that the key to winning is the people they propose to do the work. Some go so far as to say that their company's talented people are the ultimate differentiator. There's little doubt that individuals can sway a sale, but to suggest that it's the primary decision point ignores a simple reality of the sales process: Clients care first about the impact of your services on them; then they think about your people.

Your team does have to make a good impression, and perceived competence is central in selling services. But the people on your team are probably not your buyer's foremost concern. Consider, for example, the architect who blithely describes the process of demolition and reconstruction of a client's office space, or the lawyer who suggests that litigation is the best alternative to resolve a dispute. Reconstruction projects or protracted litigation may be just another day at the office for the architect or lawyer. But either can be a jarring prospect for clients, whose mental wheels are no doubt spinning about the impact of those activities on their businesses.

Your challenge is to view the problem as though it's the first time you have confronted it and the possible solutions. Then, discuss the problem from that perspective. Just because you know that a wall must come down, don't assume that anyone agrees with you. Take your client through the thought progression and reach the conclusion together. The conversation may take a little longer, but you will have differentiated your services and yourself. Once your client sees that, then the people you propose to deliver the service can make the difference between a win and a loss.

Sales Reality #6: Value Is in the Eye of the Beholder

No matter what you believe about the value of your services, it's the client who ultimately decides the sources of value. Some sellers are so sure of their own perceptions that they miss what's really important to the client.

That's what happened to Chris. His company helps clients tighten up security for their information systems. His message, that clients can achieve highly secured information systems at a reasonable cost, helped

him generate enviable sales momentum. Chris was winning in the marketplace with his message. But when he proposed his services to a longtime client, he lost the sale to a lesser-known, higher-priced competitor.

The loss was perplexing. Chris's sales proposal was flawless, including his detailed assessment of the threat his client faced, a creative strategy for mitigating that threat, and the six-figure estimate of value the program would deliver. He reviewed his hand-delivered proposal with his client sponsor and it was well received. Chris thought everything was in place—a high-value proposal, a trusted client sponsor, and the track record to make it all happen.

Why did he lose this seemingly sure bet? Chris got beat on his analysis of value. He made a compelling case for the overall financial value, but he missed the importance of one deal-breaking detail. The client was intent on training his own staff in conducting information security reviews, but Chris's proposal made only a passing reference to that priority. His competitor made the client's view on that point the centerpiece of the proposal and walked away with the deal.

You may think that Chris didn't listen to his client and that's why he lost. But Chris demonstrated that he heard the client by making reference to enabling the client's team to become self-reliant. Unfortunately, he didn't emphasize that enough; he stressed what *he* thought was more valuable, not what really mattered to the client.

You may understand how vital a credible expression of value is to winning the services sale, but keep in mind that the client is the final arbiter of value. Don't be surprised if you see value in a completely different light than your client does. When you are trying to come up with an expression of value, rely on the facts you gather during your interviews, and don't let your preconceived notions cloud your judgment. As Chris's case demonstrates, a superior understanding and expression of value can edge out a formidable opponent with a long-standing client relationship.

Sales Reality #7: Not All Sales Techniques Are Bad

Experts are always hyping various sales techniques as the guaranteed way to win. They have urged us to use a sales script, build “instant” rapport with buyers, ask inane questions about their worst nightmares, find their “pain,” perfect an elevator pitch, read body language, ask for the sale, and always be closing. The latest rage is to advise salespeople to abandon their

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sales techniques to close more sales. Supposedly, today's clients have seen all the sales techniques and are immune to them.

It's clear that some techniques, like the high-pressure close, have no place in the services sale. And it's true that clients are on guard against slimy tactics the moment any salesperson contacts them. So falling back on annoying techniques, though presumably designed to help, can be bad for your prospects of winning the services sale. But be selective about which techniques you keep and which you throw away. Dumping all your sales techniques is as counterproductive as trying to diet at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

No matter what client situations you face, you still need to know how to conduct a sales meeting. That means you have to be able to open a dialogue, guide a discussion of the issues, and end the meeting appropriately. And you still have to persuade people to do business with you, so be sure you know how to negotiate and close the deal. Instead of labeling all sales techniques as bad, rethink how you communicate with clients throughout the sales process.

Don't waste your client's time on gratuitous compliments, but focus on the substance of the issues. Drop the presumptive closing techniques and concentrate on reaching a mutually agreeable solution. Forget about creating superficial rapport and instead build a relationship based on your competence to tackle the problem. Instead of relying on techniques to push to a close, use your insights and value—the ultimate selling techniques—to pull your clients to a solution they want to buy.

Reality-Based Selling

If the realities of selling services tell you anything, it's that buyers want more from services sellers. They demand insight, not sales technique, and problem solvers, not vendors. Some people may suggest that responding to these realities is a sales training issue. But it is more than that. This market shift means redefining and expanding the traditional role of the seller. And that calls for sellers to change their approach to sales, beginning with how they prepare for their first sales call or meeting with a client.

