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## Selling to Today's Buyers: Remain Customer-Focused

MAYBE IT'S CHANGING technology. Maybe it's the still-recovering economy, which in some sectors has yet to bounce back from the Great Recession. Maybe it's increased competition. Whatever the reason, it's useless to deny that sales is changing—and in dramatic ways. Researchers note, for example, that “[c]ompanies are reporting longer sales cycle times, lower conversion rates, less reliable forecasts, and compressed margins.”<sup>1</sup>

If the selling landscape is changing, so too is the buying landscape. Buying behavior is changing in numerous ways. Of course, today's buyers have always been and will always be different from the customers of yesterday. From the production era to the sales era to the marketing era to the information era, selling and buying have progressed, evolving with changing times, changing needs, and changing technology. It's no different today—except, perhaps, for the pace of change.

Back in the day, sales professionals held all the cards. If a customer needed something, the sales rep provided all the information,

educated the customer, and drove the selling conversation. Oh, how the tables have turned.

Today, customers are in large part driving the selling conversation. In fact, many studies have shown, and thought leaders agree, that customers are much further along in the buying process before engaging the sales professional; some reports indicate that customers are as much as 60 percent of the way through their decision-making process by the time they connect with a sales rep.

The implications of these findings are no less than earthshaking. In addition to changing technology, a challenging economic climate, and increased global competition, sales professionals today now must deal with customers who are much further along in the decision-making process, who are much more educated, who are technologically savvy, and who are busier than ever. Customers often know what they want and have an idea of what it should cost as well as how long it should take to get it. They know what you and your competitors can offer, and they might even understand how the products and services you can provide vary from your competitors' products and services.

As a result, it's becoming harder and harder to differentiate yourself and your organization by what you sell. Products and features, options and benefits, prices and specials—despite all the various nuances that might make what you sell at least a little bit different from what your competitors are selling, the truth is it is much more difficult to differentiate on these points. Therefore, today's sales professionals face an important challenge: how to differentiate themselves from all the other sales professionals out there who are selling similar products and services for similar prices.

This is a critical point: in order to succeed, today's top-performing sales professionals must find ways to differentiate themselves. They do this by providing value in how they sell, not just by what they sell. They differentiate themselves by how they build credibility with their customers, by how they nurture customer relationships, and by how they become trusted advisors. In doing so, they can better sell to today's demanding buyers.

Throughout these pages, we'll discuss how these changes have affected the selling conversation, and we'll look at how applying the steps in the Critical Selling framework will help you accelerate the sales process and close more deals, all while remaining focused on the customer. We'll look at planning, opening, discovering, presenting, and closing. And we'll look at overcoming objections. But for now, let's focus on what it takes to sell to today's customer. Because the bottom line is that, despite all the changes, selling is still all about the customer.

That means that today's sales professionals have to focus on the customer. Our research has shown that top performers do several key things to remain customer-focused: they use the right sales approach in dealing with customers at whatever stage they are in their decision-making process. They understand how customers perceive them. And, finally, they work to become trusted advisors. But before they can do any of that successfully, they first have to recognize (and accept) the fact that buyers have changed.

## **Recognize That Buyers Have Changed**

Yesterday's paradigms and yesterday's customers and yesterday's selling approaches no longer apply. Sales and selling are evolving, largely because buyers and buying are evolving. In many cases, buyers are bringing sales reps in much later in the process (the extent to which this happens depends in large part on the complexity of the sale). By some measures, most of the traditional sales process is already done by the time a customer even contacts a sales rep. *Forbes* recently noted, for instance, that about "57 percent of the sales process [has] just disappeared."<sup>2</sup>

Faced with such data, it is useless to deny the facts that sales is changing and that customers have changed. Today's customers have little desire to have their hands held by sales reps who usher them through a lengthy decision-making process. Rather, buyers already have access to a lot of information, and chances are they've figured out their needs (or at least they think they've figured out their needs)

before they've even reached out to you. Many likely have even already begun considering specific products or services that could meet their needs, solely based on what they've learned about your company.

Customers can do this because there's so much information out there. Your website; your competitors' websites; industry websites; online social media; traditional media; online, personal, and professional references; and so much more: all of these sources provide customers with avenues to conduct their own research in order to determine what products and services are available to meet their needs. As such, customers are doing much of the legwork that sales reps used to do. And, as a result, the customer may well be further along in the process than sales professionals are used to.

Not only have customers done much of the research but they're also often crafting their own solutions. The research they've conducted and the information they've gleaned from various sources allow them to identify their needs and determine what products and solutions will meet those needs. Today's customers know what they need, they know what they want, and they know how to get it. Furthermore, today's buyers not only know that there are various options available to them but also may even understand how they vary from one another. They have the ability to do the research and at times can determine what the points of differentiation are on price, features, and benefits.

In addition to all of this, buyers are busier than ever—just like everyone else. We're all doing more with less, working on tight deadlines, solving problems in a 24/7 world from which we can rarely, if ever, disconnect. Like the rest of us, buyers are busy and demanding. They have less time to spend (and less inclination to spend time) with salespeople.

Faced with all of these changes, top-performing sales professionals recognize that their world has changed. Top performers don't waste time pining away for the good old days when they could share select, scripted information with less knowledgeable buyers. They don't bother to "always be closing" or go in for the hard sell. Instead,

they accept the fact that buyers have changed and that, as a result, they have to change, too. Sales and selling must evolve along with buyers and buying.

With that, top performers understand that today's buyers want salespeople who are ready, willing, and able to meet them where they are in the sales process. They don't want a sales rep who will waste their time going over ground they've already covered on their own. Instead, today's top-performing sales professionals understand that in order to sell to today's demanding customers, they have to adopt a new approach.

## **Use the Right Sales Approach**

Today's customers have no desire to waste their limited time with salespeople who cannot provide tangible value. They have less need to be educated. And they are not at all inclined to deal with sales reps who are more intent on selling a truckload of widgets than they are on solving the customer's needs. So today's salespeople have to use the right approach when dealing with today's buyers.

As much as things have changed, as much as buying and selling have evolved, the right approach remains a customer-focused approach. Today's sales professionals still need to ask questions, listen to the answers, and confirm understanding in each and every dealing with their customers. They also have to be conscious of where the customer already is in the sales process. They have to understand—and appreciate—how much legwork the customer has already done. But, perhaps most important, they have to remember that the customer is still at the center of the right sales approach.

Top-performing sales professionals make it known to their customers that the buyer's needs come first. They put the customer's needs before their own, and they are determined to help solve the customer's problems. They understand their primary role is to help their customers achieve their desired outcomes.

This focus has to be at the center of any sales approach—and it has to be genuine. Top performers aren't putting on an act when they

tell their customers that they want to help them find the right solution. They sincerely want to help. Good thing, too, because today's savvy customers can tell when sales reps are insincere. They can sniff out when a sales rep is more focused on making a sale than on providing a solution and helping the customer.

So, instead of launching full-bore into a scripted sales approach, top performers use a customer-focused approach. They seek to have a full understanding of the customer's needs because they know that it is those very needs that drive buying—and selling—opportunities. In order to address the customer's needs, you need to get to know your customer, digging deep so you can discover what it is that's driving the purchase decision; what the customer values most; and what his needs, priorities, and goals are. Despite all the changes in buying behavior, that hasn't changed.

In fact, it's more important than ever. Asking questions in order to discover more about your customer's known and unknown needs, actively listening to the answers, and understanding where the customer is in the buying process are critical components of successful selling to today's buyer. Only in uncovering this crucial customer information will you be able to devise the right solutions that meet his needs. Only then can you bring your expertise, insights, and ideas to the table, helping your customer in ways your competitors simply cannot.

Buyers might well have access to more information than ever before. They might well do more research and, as a result, have a better sense of the solutions that can help them meet their needs. But that doesn't mean they're always right or that they're not open to other ideas, further insight, or useful advice. That's where you come in.

Our research shows that buyers value those sales professionals who can bring these attributes to the sales process. No longer can you just ask the customer what he wants and fill out the order form. It's critical to show the customer that you can be of value as a knowledgeable, helpful sales professional who will carefully evaluate

the customer's needs, offer credible insight, and provide valuable advice.

It's in this that you demonstrate what makes you different from—and better than—the competition. Top-performing sales professionals are well-educated about their own products and services. They know their organizations inside out. They also are well-informed about their competitors and their industry in general. In asking thoughtful questions and actively listening to the answers, they develop a deep understanding of their customers. As such, they become the point of differentiation. You can do the same. As a top performer, you can offer added value in your expertise, uncovering of unknown needs, offering of insight and advice that you—and only you—can provide the customer.

You might like to believe that your company offers a truly special product or service, one that is so unique that no other organization comes close. But the truth is that as quickly as your company offers a new feature, your competition is trying to one-up you. However unique you think your product or service is, your competitors are working on replicating that same product or service—and trying to go you one better. The one thing that you can offer that no one else can is yourself. Customer-focused sales professionals who succeed in today's changing marketplace understand that they can provide unparalleled value in the form of their approach.

Of course, they also understand that knowing their customers at a deep level and offering sage advice can't take forever. Today's customers are busier than ever, and there's nothing that turns off a customer more than a sales professional who wastes their time. Top-performing sales professionals respect their customers' limited time. They take the time to plan for each and every selling conversation. They engage in the right activities before, during, and after every sales interaction in order to maximize the limited time they have with their customers.

We'll talk more in the chapters to come about how following the Critical Selling framework will help you save time (for yourself and

for your customers), but it's important to note for now that sales professionals should use their time wisely by, for example, researching their customers so that they don't waste precious moments asking for information that easily could have been found out ahead of time. They also should take the time to prepare presentations that are carefully tailored to each customer's needs, avoiding superfluous information that has little or no bearing on the precise solution that will meet the customer's objectives.

Respecting the customer's time, offering keen insight, providing helpful advice, understanding that the customer might have already done a substantial amount of legwork—all of that plays into using a customer-focused approach to sell to today's buyer. It also helps customers perceive you as someone they can rely on and someone they can trust. And in a day and age when customers might not need you as much as or in the same way that they once did, that perception is crucial.

## **Know How Your Customers Perceive You**

How a customer perceives you and the relationship you have together has a significant impact on whether you win a deal and book the sale. Few customers want to deal with an automaton who fills out purchase orders, completes invoices, and arranges to ship orders. Today's customers are looking for someone they can rely on to provide them with crucial information, keen insight, and expert advice that will help them make important purchasing decisions.

Most of us would like to believe that we offer superior service to our customers. But what really matters is what our customers think of us and how they would describe the relationship they have with us. Through our research, we have identified four different and distinct relationship levels that sales professionals can earn with their customers. At each level, the actions, behaviors, and values displayed by sales professionals vary—as do the ways in which customers perceive, value, and trust sales professionals. As shown in





**Figure 1.1 The Relationship Continuum**

Figure 1.1, the Relationship Continuum identifies those four levels as order taker, friendly salesperson, effective salesperson, and trusted advisor.

It's critical that you understand these levels, and so we define them in detail here:

### **Order Taker**

- Has zero understanding of customer needs
- Does not focus on connecting with or developing relationships with customers
- Is focused on closing the sale without consideration of customer needs
- Does not challenge the customer's thinking or offer options and alternatives
- Does not offer any insights or ideas on the application of products or services

### **Friendly Salesperson**

- Has limited understanding of customer needs
- Is slightly focused on connecting with or developing relationships with customers
- Stays focused on closing the sale with limited consideration of customer needs
- Has slight willingness to challenge the customer's thinking and rarely offers options and alternatives
- Offers very few insights or ideas on the application of products or services

### **Effective Salesperson**

- Has a strong understanding of known customer needs (needs the customer is aware of)
- Remains focused on connecting with and developing relationships with customers
- Strongly considers customer needs when making recommendations in the sales process
- Is willing to challenge the customer's thinking and offer options and alternatives when customers seem open to other ideas
- Offers some insights or ideas on the application of products or services

### **Trusted Advisor**

- Has complete understanding of customer needs (known and unknown needs)
- Deems connecting with and developing relationships with customers of the utmost importance
- Makes customers' needs the number-one priority in the sales process (willing to walk away from a sale)
- Is always willing to challenge the customer's thinking and offer options and alternatives, no matter how strong the customer's opinions
- Always seeks to offer insights or ideas on the application of products or services

Sales professionals who aim to sell to today's demanding, busy customers must strive to become trusted advisors if they want to succeed. In fact, in order to become a top performer, it's critical to work on the skills and best practices that will position you as a trusted advisor. You can't be one without the other: top performers are trusted advisors, and trusted advisors are top performers. It's critical to achieve the highest level of credibility and trust with your customers so that you can accelerate the sales process and close more deals—and become a top-performing sales professional.

### **Critical Moment: Put Your Customers First**

Sales professionals who wish to succeed with today's buyers know they have to focus on customer needs. They put the customer first. Customer-focused selling acknowledges that the customer is at the core of each and every sales interaction. Focusing on the customer and how you can meet her needs (rather than simply on closing deals) helps you earn trust, accelerate the sales process, and close more deals.

Customer-focused selling is an intentional approach and a crucial component of the Critical Selling framework. We've identified a few tactics that can help you put your customer and her needs first:

- **Address Your Customer's Priorities.** Remember that no sales interaction is about you or your goals or your quotas or your schedule. It's about the customer, her priorities, her goals, her values, and her time. Don't assume that you know what she needs or when she needs it. Discuss her priorities with her. And the only way to find out what your customer needs is to ask questions and listen to the answers.
- **Make Sure You Understand What Your Customer Is Telling You.** Customer-focused selling requires sales professionals to continually confirm understanding with their customers. We'll talk a lot about the importance of confirming in the chapters to follow, and that's because it goes a long way in building trust between you and your customer. For now, note that when it comes to meeting your customer's needs, you can do that only when both of you are on the same page as to what those needs are.
- **Share Your Expertise and Your Insight.** If all a customer wanted to do was place an order, she could order her truckload of widgets online, saving herself and you a lot

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of time and energy. Remember that your customers are looking to you to add value to the sales process. That means you have to dig deep and listen carefully to what your customers are telling you so that you can analyze the customer's situation, assess her needs, and provide valuable insight and helpful advice. Doing so goes well beyond mentioning features and benefits your customer might not be aware of to offering the expertise and opinions that only you can share.

- **Use Your Customer's Time Wisely.** When it comes to earning trust and building credibility with your customers, nothing can derail that faster than wasting your customers' time. Don't waste time telling your customer what she likely already knows. Remember that she's likely done research into you, your organization, and your product and service. Don't regurgitate features and benefits that she's already aware of. Instead, focus on discussing what she doesn't know, which might well include things she doesn't even know she doesn't know (those "unknown unknowns"). Ask thoughtful questions, listen attentively to the answers, and confirm details with your customer during every selling conversation.

No one can build trust and earn credibility with their customers unless they put their customers first. It's simply not possible otherwise. If you want to become a top-performing trusted advisor, it's critical that you address your customer's needs and make sure you understand those needs, all while respecting her time. Do that and you'll be on your way to building the kind of trust that moves you in the right direction along The Relationship Continuum.

## Become a Trusted Advisor

Trusted advisors go well beyond simply providing specs and product data to offering valuable information. Trusted advisors identify needs and seek to tailor solutions that fit those needs—both known and unknown (i.e., those needs that customers need help in identifying and articulating). Trusted advisors are more than salespeople. They're something different. Trusted advisors are those professionals whom customers trust and rely on for opinions, insight, ideas, and advice. They help educate their customers so that they can make the best possible purchasing decisions.

This is all great for the customer, and it's great for you, too. There are a number of benefits associated with being a trusted advisor. When your customer perceives you as a trusted advisor, you:

- Get more access to important customer information, which will better help you tailor a unique solution to fit his needs;
- Get more time to spend with the customer, who values your insight and advice and wants to take the time to discuss your ideas;
- Get access to more people who are involved in the decision-making process;
- Get the first call when the customer is looking to buy again, which goes far in helping to accelerate the sales process and close more deals.

Of course, we know we're not coining a phrase here; the notion of "trusted advisor" has been around for a while. For example, nearly two decades ago, in their 2000 book *The Trusted Advisor*, authors David Maister and Charles Green explained that, without trust, no salesperson can achieve his goals—but that when trust is established between customer and salesperson, just about anything is possible.<sup>3</sup>

We couldn't agree more, and our own research shows that trust remains of the utmost importance to the sales process. In fact, at a time when customers are smarter, savvier, and busier than ever,

trusted advisors are more important than ever before. Regardless of all the changes facing the industry, the importance of achieving the status of trusted advisor has not changed. What has changed is how you go about earning that status.

Following the Critical Selling framework discussed in these pages will help you earn the status of trusted advisor. Adopting the skills discussed in these pages will help you create the kind of effective selling relationships that benefit your customers and your organization. And accepting that today's buyers have changed will make that process a lot easier for you.

Of course, it won't happen overnight. But if you commit to the process, follow the Critical Selling framework, and remain customer-focused, you'll find that, over time, you'll very likely earn the distinction of trusted advisor. And, once you have obtained that distinction, you'll see higher levels of performance. You'll close more deals, and you'll do so more quickly and with fewer objections.

Top performers understand that none of this happens just because they wish it to. It takes an open mind. It takes an "always be improving" mentality. We'll talk about the importance of having an open mind and adopting an always-be-improving attitude next, in Chapter 2.

## **Critical Selling: Lessons Learned**

- Changing times have led buyers to change their behavior, which means that sales professionals also need to change if they wish to keep up with their customers—and their competitors.
- Top performers also know that the right sales approach remains one that is customer-focused. The customer remains at the center of each and every sale.
- Top-performing sales professionals understand that products and services vary little from one company to the next. Because of that, they make themselves the point of differentiation, sharing

their unique expertise, insight, and advice with customers in order to craft tailored solutions that meet their needs.

- How your customer perceives you can make or break a deal. Sales professionals who earn the title of trusted advisor are best able to meet their customers' needs, all while accelerating the sales process and closing more deals.

