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## The Science of Selling

### Key Points

- The science of selling helps sales enablement professionals and business leaders understand what works, providing a clearer vision of how to enable performance.
- Relationship levels and sales processes contribute equally to sales success. Research shows that the higher the relationship level and the more formal the process, the better the sales results.
- Sales enablement owns relationship practices and reinforces defined processes.
- Perspective Selling is the next evolution of sales. Providing perspectives helps buyers move forward and helps the seller move up the relationship axis in the SRP Matrix.

### Is Selling Art or Science?

Thirty years ago, if you were to ask someone whether selling was an art or a science, they might have given you an odd look. The prevailing opinion was that selling was an art. Everybody knew

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selling was about relationships, and great salespeople were always “people people.” Exactly how they did what they did was a bit of a mystery, but so long as they made their numbers, sales leadership didn’t give it much thought.

Fast-forward a few decades, and sales leaders recognize that selling is just as much science as art. We now have the tools we need to track activities and behaviors and link them to results. We no longer need to guess at what works. We know what works, and we can prove it.

For enablement professionals, this is good news. Knowing what works means you can target your efforts more effectively. In this chapter, we’ll dig into the science of selling to paint a clearer vision of what you are trying to enable.

### **The Relationship/Process Dynamic**

Through our work with thousands of selling organizations, we’ve identified two critical levels of sales success: relationships and process. Each of these levels can be seen as a spectrum that describes the evolution of the organization.

#### **Relationship Levels**

*Level 1 Approved Vendor.* The organization is seen by the majority of its customers as a legitimate provider of the products or services it offers, but it is not recognized for having any significant, sustainable competitive edge over alternative offerings. Often the salesperson may sell the product using messages provided by marketing or product management, without thoroughly understanding what the customer is looking to accomplish. As information on products is easily accessible to customers, these are the kinds of relationships that rely less and less on sellers and are more likely to be replaced by artificial intelligence in the future.

*Level 2 Preferred Supplier.* Preferred suppliers add additional value by applying their knowledge of how clients use their

products and services. In addition to standard features and benefits, they emphasize attributes like reliability and a proven track record. It's a step up from approved vendor status, but sellers at this level are still vulnerable to unseen competitive and market forces because the interaction between the buyer and seller remains largely transactional and product oriented.

*Level 3 Solutions Consultant.* Solutions consultants possess expertise that moves beyond their own organizations and products to a deeper understanding of their customers' businesses. Solutions consultants connect with their customers by asking questions about the challenges the customers are facing or the goals they want to achieve. Then, they connect their solutions to these needs. They help the customer envision how products work within the customer's business.

*Level 4 Strategic Contributor.* Strategic contributors have an even deeper knowledge of the customer: their industry, who they compete with, who their customers are and so on. This allows them to add additional value by providing perspectives the customer may not have. Strategic contributors are often invited to help the customer define the challenge or opportunity and possible options, giving them a definite advantage over the competition.

*Level 5 Trusted Partner.* Trusted partners are viewed as key to the customer's long-term success. Their knowledge of the customer is so deep and so wide that the value they offer isn't always limited to the immediate sale. Trusted partners are viewed by the customer as part of the customer's organization.

Strategic contributors and trusted partners have a clear edge on the competition. They are also in a better position to adapt their sales strategies to changes in the customer's business and the marketplace. But, while sales organizations may make

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Levels 4 and 5 their goal, very few achieve it. Roughly 75% of organizations we've studied are at Level 3 or below.

### Process Levels

*Level 1 Random.* This company lacks a single standard process for how it engages with prospects and customers. Salespeople are allowed to do their own thing their own way. So long as targets are met, no one asks too many questions. When a salesperson underperforms, management usually looks to replace the individual, not the processes. Companies at this level are always at a higher risk of missing targets because they are reliant on a few high performers who have figured it out.

*Level 2 Informal.* This company has a documented sales process, but if they're being honest, sales management will admit that not everyone follows it. Successful people are still allowed to do their own thing. Less successful salespeople are encouraged to follow the process, but since it's often based on old, product-oriented selling methodologies, this doesn't always lead to improved performance.

*Level 3 Formal.* This company has a defined sales process, and it is enforced—sometimes fanatically. Sales operations periodically conducts process reviews, using performance metrics and analyses (often generated from data in the CRM system) to determine where improvements are needed in adherence to the process or in the process itself.

While a formal process is far better than an informal or random approach, it can also have a certain rigidity that doesn't allow the salesperson to adapt to the situation or the changing macro and micro forces. In addition, formal processes tend to live only as long as the current methodology remains popular. Jumping from sales methodology to sales methodology based on the latest best-selling business book can be confusing to the sales team and lead to a lack of faith in sales methodologies in general.

*Level 4 Dynamic.* A dynamic process is formal, but it is characterized by its adaptability. Companies at this level focus on developing situational fluency in their salespeople, and their processes support it. Instead of reviewing the process once a year or with the release of the next bestseller, they use a constant stream of key performance indicators to provide an ongoing analysis and to detect the need to adapt the process to market changes long before others in their space. We'll talk about this more in Chapter 10 when we discuss enablement technology, but companies at this level will be among the first to leverage artificial intelligence in their processes.

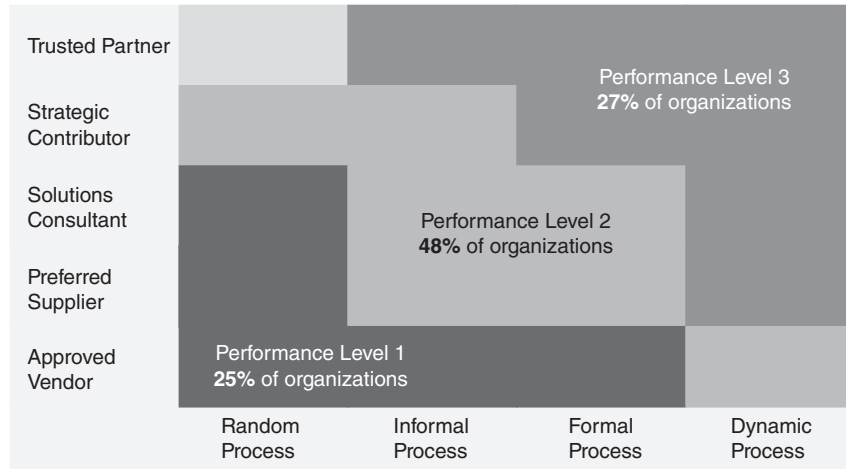
In our latest studies, there was an even split between companies that had a random or informal process and those that had a formal or dynamic process. When we dig into this in one-on-one conversations with executives, most admit that no matter how much thought they put into defining a process they don't execute it as well as they would like.

### **The Sales Relationship Process (SRP) Matrix**

Hopefully, after reading the previous discussion, you've been thinking about where your company falls on these two spectrums. If you're like most, you'd probably like to be considered a strategic contributor or trusted partner more often, and you know you need to formalize your processes a bit more. But is the effort worth it?

To answer this question, we combined relationship and process level with a Sales Relationship Process (SRP) Matrix and mapped thousands of sales organizations onto it to gauge the impact of relationship and process on performance. Let's first look at where companies fell on the matrix. It's probably no surprise that the bulk of organizations are in a zone we call Level 2. Their processes are somewhere between formal and informal, but rarely dynamic. Their relationships have progressed beyond the approved vendor stage, but few have made it to strategic

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Figure 1.1 SRP Matrix Performance Levels

contributor and fewer still to trusted partner status. The rest of the organizations were split between Level 3 and Level 1 (see Figure 1.1).

To gauge performance for each of these levels, we used standard performance metrics that are meaningful to almost every organization: win rate, percent of salespeople achieving quota and percent of revenue attained. For each metric, we saw a striking difference in performance as we moved up levels (see Figure 1.2).

In most organizations, sales operations is responsible for defining, managing and measuring sales processes. Nevertheless, as we'll discuss throughout this book, sales enablement plays an

	Performance Level 1	Performance Level 2	Performance Level 3
% of Forecast Deals Won	41%	47%	53%
% of Salespeople Achieving Quota	47%	54%	60%
% Revenue Plan Attainment	84%	84%	89%

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Figure 1.2 Results by SRP Matrix Performance Level

important role in facilitating and reinforcing those processes through the services it provides.

When it comes to relationships, sales enablement takes the lead. Its objective is to enable customer-facing professionals to add value in every interaction. Adding value is how organizations drive to ever-higher levels of performance. While it doesn't own responsibility for the sales process, sales enablement must design its services with the defined sales process in mind. In turn, this helps reinforce the process.

### **Leveling Up on the SRP Matrix**

After establishing where you are on the SRP Matrix, it's a natural next step to consider what you need to do to move up a level. In our *2017 World Class Sales Practices Study*, we examined over 60 sales practices to understand which were most strongly linked to sales results and then boiled them down to the top 12, as shown in Table 1.1.

As you can see from the list, these include a range of practices that require investments in skills, processes, systems and technologies. Many of these practices, such as "our salespeople consistently and effectively articulate a solution that is aligned to the customer's needs," are practices that are directly impacted by the strength of the organization's enablement efforts.

With this list established, we then combed through the 1,300 organizations that participated in the study to look for those World-Class organizations that strongly excelled in at least 10 of the 12. As you might expect, at only 7% of organizations in our study, this is an exclusive club indeed.

These organizations consistently outperformed the entire population of respondents. For example, the percentage of salespeople achieving quota averaged out to 53% when looking at all responses. When we segmented out just those who met the definition of World-Class, the percentage rose to 70%, right at the 65% to 70% level recommended by most sales experts. (Too many

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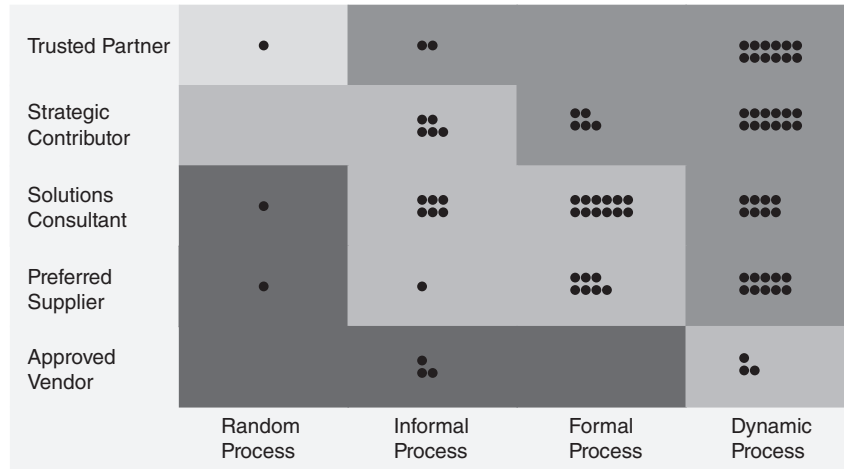
**Table 1.1 Top 12 World-Class Practices**

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- 1 Our salespeople consistently and effectively articulate a solution that is aligned to the customer's needs.
  - 2 We deliver a consistent customer experience that lives up to and aligns with our brand promise.
  - 3 We continually assess why our top performers are successful.
  - 4 When we lose a salesperson (voluntary/involuntary) we consistently determine the reasons why.
  - 5 We effectively collect and share best practices across our sales and service organizations.
  - 6 Our sales managers are held accountable for the effective use of sales tools and resources by the sales force.
  - 7 Our salespeople consistently and effectively communicate appropriate value messages, aligned to the customer's needs.
  - 8 Our culture supports continuous development of salespeople and sales leaders.
  - 9 Our organization consistently develops and ensures implementation of personalized performance improvement plans.
  - 10 Customers have consistently positive interactions with us regardless of which channel(s) they use to work with us.
  - 11 Our sales teams are effective at surfacing the specific reasons why certain customers stop doing business with us.
  - 12 We are effective at selling value to avoid discounting or gaining comparative value in return for price concessions.
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salespeople at quota is a strong indication that quotas were not set high enough.)

In our final stage of analysis, we plotted the 7% of World-Class performers onto the SRP Matrix. As you would expect, the majority are in Level 3. However, the analysis revealed that not all World-Class performers achieved the highest levels of relationship and process success. In Figure 1.3, each dot represents one of the World-Class participants.





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**Figure 1.3 Distribution of World-Class Organizations Across SRP Matrix Levels**

### World-Class Isn't the Same for Everyone

While moving up levels on the SRP Matrix can impact performance, not every organization can or should aim for Level 3. Here are a couple of examples.

*A small law firm.* In a law firm or other small consultancy, those who manage client service and delivery are often responsible for selling these services as well. Long-term relationships with clients are key, and while the sales process is often informal or random, the relationship level would be considered one of trusted adviser due to the nature of the service.

World-Class for this type of organization is going to be high on the relationship axis, but not so far to the right on the process axis. When the organization is small, with limited growth goals, this works. The problem is that it doesn't scale if the consultancy decides it wants to expand, and it will have to invest in maturing its processes to maintain its World-Class status.

*A large organization selling commodities.* On the other end of the spectrum is the large organization selling commodity products. A good example might be a paper products manufacturer. These products are important, but they aren't necessarily of strategic value. Cost and availability often drive the decision to buy, and the buying cycle may consist of nothing more than the procurement team reaching out to various vendors for information on pricing and lead times.

For an organization like this, preferred supplier status may be as high as it will ever get on the relationship axis. However, through constant analysis of the market and needs of customers, the sales organization can identify and codify the processes that work and drive to World-Class levels of success. In the event this organization acquires another organization with more strategic services, it is better prepared to fully leverage the opportunity because of the formality of its processes.

### **The Evolution of Sales**

So far in this chapter, we've introduced the SRP Matrix and how moving up levels is linked to better performance. Then, we talked about the behaviors World-Class organizations consistently exhibit. Before we dive into enablement, we need to talk about how sales has evolved and how clinging to outdated sales methodologies can keep you from moving to ever-higher levels of performance.

There have been hundreds of sales methodologies introduced over the years, but most of those in the modern era (post-industrial age) can be grouped into one of three stages:

1. *Product.* Before the internet was at everybody's fingertips, buyers came to a salesperson needing product information, including detailed specs, because they couldn't get it anywhere else. Aside from the random word-of-mouth

- recommendation, many buyers had no idea what their options even were. They came to a salesperson expecting to be educated on products, including sitting through sometimes daylong demonstrations. The salesperson's role was that of product expert. They had to quickly understand the customer's issues and then match the product to the need.
2. *Features/benefits*. Slowly, sellers discovered that the best salespeople were those who could translate the features of the product into the benefits the customers were looking for. No doubt, this had been the case for decades, but the features/benefits stage formalized the approach. A ton of work was done creating "pain chains" and "feature/benefit statements," but at the end of the day, selling still revolved around the product.
  3. *Solution/consultative selling*. The first real leap away from product-focused selling came with the concept of Solution Selling. In Solution Selling, the salesperson uses diagnostic skills to understand the customer's objectives. Instead of just telling customers about the features and benefits of their products and letting the customer sort it all out, consultative salespeople match solutions to the customer's needs and put their proposals in the language of the buyers.

As you read through these descriptions, you probably noticed a correlation to the relationship spectrum we discussed earlier. Organizations that are still at the approved vendor level often follow an outdated product-oriented approach to selling. Moving to features/benefits selling can help you break to the next level, but you won't get much beyond preferred supplier. Solution/consultative selling is squarely in line with Level 3, the solutions consultant.

But one of the reasons few companies manage to break through to become strategic contributors or trusted partners is that they haven't evolved to the next stage: Perspective Selling.

## Perspective Selling: The Next Step in the Evolution of Sales

In a hyper-informed world, sales professionals need to approach buyers differently. Buyers come to the table armed with information (and misinformation) as well as preconceived notions about what your product does and does not do and how you compare to the competition. This makes for a challenging sales environment if buyers' understanding of their challenges and their concepts of a potential solution aren't aligned to what you have to offer.

The successful sales professional adds perspective by combining deep knowledge of the customer, their challenges and their desired results with the experience and insights gained from working with similar customers and their knowledge of potential solutions.

The successful sales professional adds perspective by combining deep knowledge of the customer, their challenges and their desired results with the experience and insights gained from working with similar customers and their knowledge of potential solutions. They also bring in expertise in the form of research, thought leadership and subject matter experts to help buyers see their challenges and opportunities in new ways. We call this Perspective Selling, and it can be applied at every phase of the customer's path.

We'll get deeper into the customer's path in Chapter 3, but for now, think of it as the process the customer follows to approach a challenge or opportunity, gather information, make a decision and implement the solution.

While the customer is still gathering information, sales professionals can ask strategic questions and provide thought-provoking insights and information to guide the customer's thinking and help them explore areas they hadn't thought about. Adding perspective helps prospects and customers understand the real business impact of their challenges and what outcomes

they could achieve if they decide to change their current state. If they don't commit to change—and they are only likely to do so when the perspective the salesperson offers shows measurable business value in metrics that matter to them—they will never progress to the buying phase.

As customers move toward buying, the sales professional can provide further evidence that helps them assess how best to solve their challenge or reach their goal. Perspective Selling is even applicable after the sale is closed, as the sales professional can offer perspective to help the customer recognize the value that has been delivered.

### **Solution Selling Didn't Die; It Evolved**

In June of 2012, *Harvard Business Review* published an article in which the authors declared “The End of Solution Sales.” The piece anointed “insight selling” as the successor, executed by sellers who profile as “challengers.” This method, notable for “creating tension” as a selling trait and working to “upend your customers’ ways of thinking” was described as being in direct opposition to Solution Sales.

In reality, Solution Selling is not dead. Its tenets, such as helping customers surface needs they weren't originally aware of and using questioning skills to help customers process through their opportunities and problems, are still very effective methods. These methods have been combined with techniques for providing perspective to customers to expand the nature of interactions, and ultimately, relationships. This has evolved Solution Selling into a more value-added, business-level approach called Perspective Selling.

Why evolve Solution Selling into Perspective Selling rather than abandon it in favor of something completely different?

- Perspective Selling works with a range of seller types. There are too many variables to define one universal successful

seller profile. Success profiles vary by industry, selling environment, sales type, customer segments and more. They should be built in the context of a specific sales organization, not broadly defined.

- It works with a range of customer types. According to Miller Heiman Group research, there are five unique decision-making styles. Each prefers information to be presented differently depending on how they consume data and how they use that data to make decisions. With more than five sellers and five buyers involved in a typical complex sale, agility and adaptability are required to manage sharing insights with a mix of styles.
- It provides multiple ways to capture a customer's interest. There are many ways to provide insights to a customer, and not all are contrarian. Miller Heiman Group methodologies have long emphasized value drivers such as helping customers become aware of unrecognized needs or opportunities, expanding the customer's definition of success and educating the customer on new solutions.
- It uses conversation and relationships as the broader context. Disruptive information can certainly deepen relationships, but only after establishing credibility first. Sellers must earn the right to share potentially provocative information with their customers if they want that information to help guide thinking versus destroy rapport.
- It works in a range of selling scenarios. Selling is not just for new customers. In fact, CSO Insights research shows that an average of 68% of revenues come from existing customers. Customers in the implementation phase of a buy cycle or those considering renewing their purchase derive more value from aligned support than disruptive content.

Sales organizations are best served by defining a successful talent profile, selecting an adaptable sales methodology, defining a dynamic sales process and building out an enablement road map. Sales enablement is in the unique position to help

drive and align these activities to ensure that they are tightly integrated to selling realities.

## **A Framework for Performance**

Now that we know how to impact performance, we better understand what we need to enable.

But what exactly is sales enablement? And how do we do it? Many organizations set themselves up for failure by launching sales enablement initiatives without giving much thought to what sales enablement is and how to be successful. Sure, they think about the results they are trying to achieve, but not a lot about what kind of approach will get them to their desired outcomes.

In Part Two, we'll start by defining sales force enablement so we have a common understanding of what it is. Then, we'll provide the framework that will serve as the structure for the rest of this book and your enablement discipline.

### **Questions to Consider**

- Where does our organization fit today on the SRP Matrix? What evidence do we have to support our conclusions?
- What would our ideal position be and why?
- Which of the 12 World-Class practices do we consistently demonstrate?
- How are we using sales enablement to improve customer relationships and reinforce processes?
- How well do we equip our sales professionals to add valuable, relevant perspectives in every interaction with prospects and customers?

