

How to Take a Problem-Solving Sales Approach in the Internet Age

Friday, July 19, 2019 - Written by: [Jeff Kalter](#)



The Dynamics Have Changed

Yes, technology has changed the dynamics for both buyer and seller. For almost ten years, Gartner has predicted that by 2020, buyers will manage 85% of the sales process without interacting with a sales rep.

Whether because the Internet has empowered buyers or because buyers embraced an alternative to hard-sell, product pushing sales reps, more than half of buyers today have conducted extensive research, ranked their options, decided on purchasing criteria and even started to compare prices before contacting you.

When buyers are in the consideration phase of their journey, and they come to you, how do you proceed? How do you handle their inquiries? If you say I “initiate a standard solution selling strategy,” you may be losing sales that you should have closed.

And here’s why ...

The goals of buyers and sellers are at odds from the first call. According to HubSpot research: Among buyers who think they’ve done their homework, more than half (58%) want to start with a discussion about price, followed by a product demo (54%).

On the other hand, most sales reps (65%) want to understand what a prospect is hoping to achieve with the purchase and the reason why they think they need to purchase (63%). They’re more interested in creating solutions than selling on price.

In other words, while you’re sticking to the standard solution-sell playbook, many buyers believe they have figured out everything they need to know, except which vendor to choose. They’re asking about features and price before you understand the nature of their problem, let alone the solution. You don’t want to follow their lead and be pushed into a price discussion, but you can’t go back to the beginning either.

You need to take back control of the sales cycle, but on terms that buyers will find both helpful and are designed to keep the process moving forward.

Problem-Solving Selling for Today

So here’s your challenge: You still want to put helping customers first. But buyers who think they already know what they want will perceive the standard solution sale as a waste of their valuable time.

You need to move at the speed of your buyers...at the same time ferreting out their

wants and needs, including problems they haven't even considered. You need to become a consummate consultant.

Let's start with a few don'ts:

- **Don't compartmentalize relationship building.** Instead, let it happen as part of the conversation. If you can engage them in meaningful conversation and even share new information and insights while discovering their objectives, the relationship will happen.
- **Don't focus only on pain points.** We're always told to find the prospect's pain points as these are what you want to solve. The problem is, executives involved in the buying process may not always dwell on the pain. They may be more interested in a discussion of possibilities. Focus on outcomes—better customer service, higher ROI, more flexibility, etc. Be positively proactive.
- **Don't interrogate your prospects.** If you want to keep buyers focused on what you have to say and at the same time build trust, demonstrate that you understand many of the challenges and opportunities facing their industry. Even if you have to research the business on your own time. Ask five or six well-chosen questions designed to get at their aspirations. Be diagnostic. And break up your questioning with some useful insights. Listen and use the feedback and answers you receive in conversation to drive your contributions.
- **Don't talk in generalities.** While marketing can use fictional buyer personas to shape their messaging, you are speaking with a person. Not a persona. Engage. Share. Respond to the conversation and avoid devolving into a generic sales pitch.

And a few dos:

- **Do share stories, case studies and knowledge the buyer doesn't have.** You become a source of new insights and perceived to bring value to the sales process.
- **Do turn the tables as needed.** If you feel the buyer is off track or making some wrong assumptions, don't be afraid to bring up something they haven't considered—even if it slows the sales process slightly. Take charge; be your

authentic self. They'll appreciate your insights.

- **Do test the buyer's intent.** Even if the buyer is intent on getting pricing and product information, remember that at any given time only 3% of your market is actively buying. It's up to you to determine if they're buying, preparing to start the purchase process or "just looking."
- **Do focus on the buyer's perceived priorities.** Make sure you understand how the company defines success, and the performance metrics and KPIs used to measure that success—increased ROI, reduced costs, mitigating risk, increased efficiency, ability to drive revenue, etc.
- **Do create value.** When you're ready to deliver a solution, tailor your presentation to the prospect's specific situation—need, industry, etc. Bring the conversation around to the value proposition you offer. Address their KPIs. Selling your products and services should seem almost secondary.

Finally, once you've defined your solution, you can point out the differences between your products/services and those of the competition. Prove that you are thoroughly informed. Also, you can use the competitive discussion to present your value wedge—what distinguishes you in the market.

"Stop selling. Start helping." — Zig Ziglar

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