

train your sales team

A H A N D S - O N G U I D E F O R R E P S A N D M A N A G E R S



Michael Bosworth
and John Holland
explain the concept
and implementation of
consultative selling

Consultative Selling Strategies

The basic concept of consultative selling is to view the selling process as helping a customer to solve a problem or achieve a goal through the use of the seller's offering. However, while most salespeople are familiar with the concept, they have no idea how to go about implementing it. This is because most salespeople have been trained to believe that the best way to sell a product is to educate the user on the product.

Such product-oriented selling is inefficient and ineffective. It inevitably leads salespeople to swamp customers with exhaustive menus of product features and detailed product demonstrations that have little or nothing to do with the problems and goals of the customer's organization. This alienates customers, espe-

cially managers and executives who have little interest in technical details.

As a result, salespeople trained in product-oriented selling often take the path of least resistance and focus their sales efforts on low-level technical employees who are willing to discuss products at the feature/function level. However, technical employees are usually not the final decision makers, which means (at worst) that the salesperson is wasting time or (at best) that the salesperson will be unprepared to describe the benefits of the product to the actual decision makers, even if the salesperson eventually obtains access to them.

Product-oriented selling can easily lapse into product evangelism, with the salesperson attempting to convince the customer of the su-

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Quick Tips for Your Next Sales Meeting

Have your sales team assess its ability to do consultative selling by asking the following questions:

- If you were in your prospect's shoes, knowing what you know about our product, what kind of help would you want to receive from a consultative salesperson from our firm?
- What are three ways that our offerings can actually help customers solve problems or achieve goals?
- Under what conditions would customers be unable to do without our offerings? What would be the best way to get them to visualize and understand that they have that need?
- What are some problems that we should walk away from because we don't have a strong solution for them?

Use the space below to make your own notes on consultative selling.

priority of the salesperson's product. This is ineffective. Pushing a product too hard drives a customer to raise an objection, because that's the only way the customer can reclaim the conversation. The basic error is spending too much time talking about the product and not enough time listening to the customer.

Unfortunately, many companies encourage product-oriented selling by providing internal sales training that's focused on product features. Ironically, product training is generally the responsibility of product managers who are familiar with the product but who have never had an actual conversation with a customer. Sales managers and sales teams must therefore take responsibility for translating product features into customer usage, so customers can understand the benefits of using the seller's product offering and the salespeople can act as consultants rather than just as ineffective product pushers.

There are three steps to accomplishing this.

Step 1: Rethink the Sales Process.

Moving beyond product-oriented selling and into consultative selling requires a change in your attitudes and beliefs about sales. There are four aspects to that change.

1. You must change what you're selling from a noun into a verb. Products are always nouns and solutions are always verbs. This is a subtle but powerful distinction that's best illustrated by example. If you are a salesperson who works for a firm that makes industrial glue, and you think that your job is to sell "glue" (a noun), you will tend to talk to the customer about product features, such as bonding ability, pressure requirements, adhesion characteristics and so forth. By contrast, if you think their job is to sell "gluing" (a verb), you will want to discover your customer's gluing needs and then show how your glue will fulfill that need.

2. You must begin thinking about selling as a process of helping the customer, rather than a process of making a sale. Unfortunately,

most salespeople habitually think about selling in terms of convincing, persuading and overcoming – activities that assume the salesperson is in contention with the customer. Instead, you should redefine selling as the process of helping customers visualize how (if they had your product) they could solve their problems and achieve their goals.

3. You must consider a sales call successful when you disqualify a prospect because the buyer does not actually need your product. Most salespeople get so caught up in quotas that they try to foist unwanted products on customers, who naturally resent such behavior. Rather than adopting a dogged determination to make a sale, you should make it clear to customers that you're willing to leave if your product can't actually help them.

4. You must learn to communicate with customers primarily through questions rather than through statements. Don't confuse telling with selling. Rather than talking to customers about the product, you must use questions to lead them to the natural conclusion that they need your product because it will help them solve a problem or achieve a goal. Most people would rather buy than be sold. The best way to move a prospect towards becoming a customer is to ask intelligent questions that the prospect is capable of answering.

Step 2: Create Sales Prompts.

The questions you ask customers must be planned out ahead of the sales call. The best way to do this is to create a series of "sales prompts," which are lists of relevant questions prepared especially for each type of decision maker within the customer organization. Each sales prompt has two types of questions:

1. Diagnostic questions. These help customers articulate needs and goals by identifying potential problems and potential opportunities that are biased to the seller's capabilities.

2. Usage scenario questions. These help customers visualize how their problems can be solved and their goals achieved through the use of your product.

The salesperson asks the diagnostic questions first, and then, based upon the responses, asks the appropriate usage scenario questions. For example, a salesperson selling an inventory control system to a manufacturing firm might use the following diagnostic questions:

1. How often are products late because component parts aren't in the supply chain?

2. How do you deal with customers whose products aren't shipped on time?

3. Have you ever lost orders, or even customers, because products weren't shipped on time?

Assuming the first set of questions exposed

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At Your Next Sales Meeting

Below are 12 practical steps to help your team begin selling in a more consultative manner. This sales meeting should take about 55 minutes.

- 1.** Before the meeting, create a sales prompter intended for a key player at one your firm's target customers. Be sure to include diagnostic questions and usage scenario questions.
- 2.** When you begin the meeting, make certain that your sales team members know that you consider this training to be important and you'd like them to participate enthusiastically.
- 3.** Ask for a volunteer from the team. Tell the volunteer that he or she will be making a sales call on you, while you will be role-playing the customer for whom you made a sales prompter.
- 4.** After the preliminaries (introduction, some rapport building, etc.), ask, "So, how does your product work?" This will probably result in a product description or a list of features and functions. While the presenter talks, keep track of how many times he or she asks questions.
- 5.** Let the presentation continue for a while, then end the role playing, thank the volunteer, and explain basic concepts of consultative selling and the importance of asking questions, based upon this training module.
- 6.** Ask for another volunteer. Tell the volunteer that he or she will now be the customer while you will be the salesperson.
- 7.** After the preliminaries, begin asking the diagnostic questions. Let the "customer" do the majority of the talking. (This may require some prompting on your part.)
- 8.** If your diagnostic questions reveal a need for your product, jump to step 10.
- 9.** If your diagnostic questions do not reveal a need for your product, thank the customer for his or her time and end the sales call. Point out to your sales team that this was a "win" even though you didn't make a sale, because you are acting a consultant rather than a product pusher. Then go back to step 6 and begin again.
- 10.** Move to your usage scenario questions, helping the "customer" to visualize how your product would help with the problems or opportunities revealed in step 7.
- 11.** Use the product (or a description of the product) as a proof point that the solution that you've proposed will actually work.
- 12.** Obtain specific commitments from the sales team to build draft sales prompters for the different types of decision makers inside your customer's organization.

At your next sales meeting, review the sales prompters as a group and then break into groups to practice consultative selling. Continue to monitor and track progress, reporting to your team any successes that fellow team members achieve using this sales method.

Quick Tips for Your Training Session

- 1.** It is easier to build sales prompters for top managers and executives than it is for line managers. This is because concerns of top management (profitability, employee morale, dealing with investors, etc.) tend to be similar, regardless of industry.
- 2.** When you're playing the role of the customer during the initial sales presentation, avoid being combative or belligerent, even if your customers sometimes act that way. The focus needs to be on why the product-oriented selling process fails and why consultative selling is more effective.
- 3.** Building effective sales prompters is a time-consuming process, but well worth the effort. You may want to hire experts to help you identify questioning sequences that would be most likely to reveal problems and opportunities and be best able to help customers visualize solutions.

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a customer need, the salesperson moves to a related set of usage scenario questions, such as:

1. Would it have a positive financial impact on your company if there were one-tenth as many inventory failures as you currently experience?
2. When you have a delay in shipments, would it be useful to be able to be automatically inform all your customers that their shipment will be late?
3. When dates for delivery of components slip, would it be helpful for the system to identify all orders that will be impacted, so you can proactively

notify customers and minimize the impact to your business?

Sales prompters must be customized to fit the requirements of each decision maker inside the organization. Fortunately, in every sales situation there is generally a predictable list of key decision makers, so sales prompters, once created, are often reusable. For example, the sale of a CRM system to a large corporation might involve sales presentations to the CFO, the VP of sales, the VP of marketing and the CIO. Because each decision maker has a different set of concerns, each person must be approached with a different set of questions. In this case, the salesperson would ask the CFO about cost savings, ask the sales VP about the importance of increasing sales revenue, ask the marketing VP about ad campaigns, and ask the CIO about system compatibility.

Sales Reps' Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What do I do when a prospect identifies an unexpected need?

A: First ask, "What are you hoping to accomplish?" in order to determine whether the apparently unfamiliar need is actually a familiar need in disguise. If it is, then move to the appropriate usage scenario questions. If not, then say, "I'm not sure I can help you with that. We're really good at [whatever your firm is good at]. I'll go back to my office and ask."

Q: What do I do when my diagnostic questions don't identify a need?

A: Thank the customer for his or her time and end the meeting. A big part of consultative selling is being able to walk away from situations where your products or services won't help the customer.

Q: How can I keep the questioning process from sounding rote?

A: Memorize the questions and use them verbatim during practice sessions. Then, when you meet with a prospect, rephrase the questions in your own words as part of a conversation with the prospect.

Q: Can I be a consultative salesperson to an executive, even though I'm just a novice salesperson?

A: Probably not. Consultative selling is only possible when the seller can add substantial value to the conversation. Consultative selling is not possible without a deep understanding of the buyer's environment or how he would use the product to achieve a goal or solve a problem. Under these circumstances, the only way to become a consultative seller would be to study the customer's industry until you can add substantial value to the discussion.

Step 3: Use the Product as Proof of the Solution.

In product-oriented selling, the salesperson uses the product to educate and generate customer interest, often through use of a demonstration. However, because the salesperson is unaware of customer needs and goals in the early stages of the sale, it's likely that the demonstration will not be effective, especially if the salesperson runs through a plethora of the features, hoping to strike a chord with the customer. This technique is known as "spray and pray" or, worse, "death by demo."

In consultative selling, the salesperson uses the product to demonstrate the proposed solution that emerged from asking the usage scenario questions. For example, a salesman for a company that makes inventory control systems might say, "You told me that, if at the end of each month you could view a report of inventory sorted by date of last use, then you could reduce overall costs. Now let me show you how easy it is to get that report." —GEOFFREY JAMES