

Providing Strategic Leadership in Sales

A Marketing White-paper by Alex Hiam, author of:

Marketing For Dummies 3rd Edition
and
Marketing Kit For Dummies 3rd Edition

Introduction

The sales process is a journey for the buyer. Sometimes, he just takes a quick trip down the block, but he often has to make a difficult, even lengthy, journey — and then he needs the leadership of a good salesperson.

I teach and write about leadership, as well as sales and marketing, and some people think that those topics are unrelated. Not at all! When I teach leadership skills, I am often struck by the similarities between great leadership and great salesmanship. As a salesperson (or an entrepreneur, consultant, or other professional who needs to wear a sales hat sometimes), you need to be prepared to help and guide your prospects toward purchase. You can't force it, but you can guide and facilitate their journey. To paraphrase the old saying, you can lead your customers to water, but you can't make them drink. You can't close their sales. Instead, they have to be prepared to close them with you, and that won't happen until they arrive at the end of their purchase journeys.

Every purchase of any consequence involves the whole human being — and that means his thoughts and feelings. You need to address the prospect's cognitive and rational thoughts, but you also need to address his irrational, emotional feelings. Think about buying a car, for example. You don't buy a car if you think it's ugly. It has to appeal aesthetically, part of the emotional side of the purchase journey. But most people don't buy a car if they think it's poorly designed or in poor repair and likely to break down. Those considerations involve the rational side of the purchase journey. Advertising needs to appeal to both the rational and the emotional dimensions of this journey, as I point out in Chapter 6, and so does selling. But doing this multidimensional appeal well, and at the appropriate times, can be hard without some special training and practice.

Most people tend to focus on one or the other appeal when they sell — they orient their sales pitch more toward information and logical argument (I call this factor the *X dimension* in my sales workshops), or they focus it on relational and emotional elements in their approach (the *Y dimension*).

Are you an intuitive, feelings-oriented salesperson?

The classic example of the feelings-oriented or intuitive approach is the super-friendly salesperson who knows everyone well, remembers their birthdays, entertains them, and brings them considerate gifts. This strong relationship builder may do reasonably well in sales but he's, in essence, just a well-connected order taker. He leaves the logical side of the purchase process to the prospect and often doesn't give enough information and problem-solving support.

Are you a logical, fact-oriented salesperson?

Some people naturally tend to emphasize the cognitive side of selling. They prepare by researching the prospect's needs, they present a lot of factual information, and they anticipate and refute objections. They can be effective at selling, too. But sometimes their prospects balk — they refuse to complete the journey, even though it seems like all the evidence points that way.

Why do people sometimes fail to purchase when the purchase seems like a natural for them? Maybe the problems aren't rational or cognitive, but emotional. For example, you don't make a major purchase if you're feeling uncomfortable or uncertain — you postpone it or back out entirely.

Are you a coaching, multidimensional salesperson?

Perhaps you're one of the rare people who naturally combines both facts and feelings in their efforts to help a prospect move toward purchase. (I call this approach *combining the X and Y dimensions* in my sales workshops.) When the prospect has both factual and feelings-oriented issues or barriers, you need to use this strategy by encouraging the prospect to take small steps with plenty of support from you. For example, you may break the purchase decision down to make saying "yes" to a small thing possible today. Positive results from a trial or test purchase or a small use of a service can reinforce both the factual and emotional dimensions of the prospect's journey, allowing her to reach the next level.

Think about selling like being a coach, patiently improving the performance of an athlete. What can you get the prospect to do today to increase her comfort and move her closer to a major commitment? Try to do something with her each time you interact, even if you're only warming her up to the big purchase. Salespeople have the most success using the coaching-oriented style, especially with complex purchases, so if you don't use this style already, make a point of practicing it in the future.

Are you a delegating salesperson who knows when the prospect is ready to take the lead?

Many people overuse this delegate strategy. They assume that, if the customer needs something, he asks for it. Delegating means trusting the prospect to take initiative and make the purchase. Delegators set up the opportunity for a purchase, and then step back and wait to see who buys. That's not necessarily a good way to approach sales, because many prospects don't complete their purchase journeys without more help than that.

Normally, you want to check on your prospects and assess their level of factual and feelings-based readiness for purchase — and then step in, using one of the three strategies listed in the previous sections. Otherwise, if you delegate and leave it up to the prospect, he may not make it to the end of his purchase journey. However, you can use the delegate sales strategy effectively at certain times.

If your prospect is really committed and ready on the emotional dimension, and also has all the information needed to decide what to do, then you should delegate the purchase journey to him. Try a simple closing strategy, like asking him if he wants to place an order or what kind of purchase he wants to make. When the time is right, you need to trust your prospect to make a sound decision that's to his (and thus your) benefit. Try to close in several low-key ways until you secure the sale. Then make a flow of business occur easily by providing continuing access and service support.

I call the support you do after the initial sale the *Z dimension* in my workshops, to make sure that the business people I'm talking to don't forget this all-important element of maintaining a flow of business through good customer support. If you ignore the customer after the order comes in, you probably lose the customer and have to start all over again with another customer — a much harder task than retaining a good customer would have been. Put all three of these dimensions together and you have what I call the *XYZ method* of selling, where you attend to the facts (X) and feelings (Y) of the sale and then support with ongoing service to retain the customer (Z).

I've just taken you through the heart of a strategic sales workshop. Treat the four sales strategies and the three-dimensional sales process as the basic framework for all your sales challenges. Remember to ask yourself (or the prospect) what emotional (feelings) and informational (facts) barriers exist, and then choose a strategy to fit the strategic context. A great salesperson has (and uses) this core skill.

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