

Sales Training Article: Rethinking a Seller's Role in Complex Sales

By John Holland, Chief Content Officer, CustomerCentric Selling®

Over the years it has been generally accepted that part of a salesperson's job is educating buyers. Extensive product training allowed sellers to "teach" buyers. I always cringed when thinking of sellers as educators. It never made sense to educate buyers unless or until they expressed a business issue (personal or on behalf of their enterprise) that they'd be willing to spend money to achieve with an offering. In trying to allow sellers to qualify opportunities I believe this is more important than ever. Given the changes in buying, it may be an opportune time to take a fresh look.

Buyer access to volumes of product information has reduced and perhaps eliminated buyer expectations of being educated by salespeople. The self-service approach (ATM's; gas stations; airline kiosks; etc.) is here to stay. Generally speaking non-Key Player titles interested in offerings:

- Research them via the Internet (websites; social networking)
- Enjoy their anonymity
- Don't want seller influence or manipulation when determining requirements
- Limit the number of sellers they interact with to "short list" vendors.

While empowered buyers present challenges for vendors, I view this development as a positive change, but it raises the question of what a salesperson's role in this age of 24x7x365 product information is. Product knowledge will add little value for buyers that have researched vendor offerings in a given space. This rings especially true for technical buyers.

I submit a seller's role has been and continues to be helping buyers understand how offerings can be used to improve business results.

Other parts of a seller's job are to help organizations determine fit, potential payback and implementation efforts.

If you take a step back, for A Players sellers most buying cycles begin one of two ways:

- Proactively contact executive level buyers and take them from latent to active need to achieve a desired business outcome. Starting at executive levels is important because if there isn't an identified need, there is no budget. Sellers should call at or near levels that can fund new initiatives (often by reallocating existing budget).

With executives, sellers should avoid getting "into the weeds" in discussing offerings. After identifying a desired business outcome the conversation likely should be at a "10,000 foot elevation." The buyer should understand why the outcome can't be achieved and the capabilities needed to address them. If value is created in the buyer's mind, sellers can execute "top down" sales resulting in shorter buying cycles and larger transactions.

- Inbound contacts from mid level or lower "buyers" are far more offering-focused. Buyers want to be treated respectfully and calls are different because they are aware of offerings available in the market (usually beyond those of the vendor they contact). Sellers should try to get a sense for research they've done and let buyers articulate requirements they've determined. Ultimately, the seller should help determine the value (business outcome) that can be achieved through the use of the offering being considered. This may well be an outcome for a higher title within the organization.

Once an outcome has been identified, the seller should...

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