Simplification: A Catalyst for Employee Engagement and Operational Excellence

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Interpersonal selling should be both a well-orchestrated interactive value-building process for the salesperson and a positive value-adding experience for the prospective buyer. The seller performs the role of a guide, leading the buyer through a series of pre-conceived value-building activities designed to yield a quality purchase decision (or what might considered the end-in-mind). Concomitantly, the buyer is consciously and unconsciously making an evaluation of the perceived incremental value gained. The two key value questions buyers want the salesperson to answer are:

1. Why should I buy from you?
2. What’s in it for me?

Answering these two questions necessitates developing your value offering collaboratively with the buyer, through the entire buyer-seller engagement, and well into implementation. Delivering your value proposition should not be simply another step in your sales process! In other words, the concept of developing value for a buyer in order to gain a purchase decision should not be thought of as a static event or a single step in the selling endeavor, but rather a critical and dynamic factor, or a process, which is the common thread throughout your entire interactive engagement. At some point in our buyer-seller process, we will likely offer a summation or a quantifiable presentation of the financial results, but this should be viewed as just one linkage in our value-development chain.

A buyer’s value-analysis thinking can take many forms and have myriad contributing factors, but for sales purposes, it can be summarized as the measure of the net benefit (the difference between a buyer’s evaluation of benefits and costs or price, or simply \(V = B - C\)) that may be gained from the purchase of the offered goods and/or services. Of the two key value assessing components, perceived benefits are what the salesperson must focus on throughout the sales call interaction leading to the buyer’s value-adding conclusion.
What are Benefits and How are They Developed?

Benefit development is the critical factor to a salesperson’s ability to establish value gains and is largely a matchmaking process: the seller is matching his or her available capabilities with what the buyer is indicating he or she is looking for in a buyer-seller relationship. Early in the engagement, the seller is largely focused on relationship or personal factors, such as trust and likeability. This is very important to gaining a foothold to answer the question, “Why should I buy from you?” This question is the “elephant in the room” during the entire buyer-seller interaction. It’s there at the beginning when you make the first impression. Later, through various investigative techniques, the salesperson learns what the buyer wants and why, and then must lead the exchange into value-adding opportunities that focus primarily on the question, “What’s in it for me?” This question is more often answered while presenting “products” during the engagement. Neil Rackham and his Huthwaite, Inc. organization term this the demonstrating capability phase of the buyer-seller interaction (Rackham 1988).

Benefits are to be clearly distinguished from either features or advantages of a product or service that you are representing. Understanding features or characteristics and advantages, which is what a product or service can potentially do for any buyer, is critically important to the salesperson’s value-adding capabilities; however, when in a buyer-seller interaction, you have to focus the discussion on only those features/advantages that have potential value-adding consequences for that specific buyer. To do otherwise is commonly called feature dumping, and when practiced, loses the buyer’s attention and interest because you have now become irrelevant.

Whenever a seller can successfully match a buyer’s want to a feature or capability of his product, service, or relationship, you have the ingredients for developing a benefit. While guiding a buyer through this matchmaking process, the seller needs to emphasize what the offered feature will do for the buyer in terms of benefit. This is called using what’s in it for you or WIIFY-styled language. Summarizing the benefit and then gaining agreement are important confirmations that the seller is remaining aligned and relevant to the buyer’s wants. It is also a method of developing buying signal confirmations. If the buyer’s verbal and/or non-verbal communication indicates disagreement, confusion, or a lack of congruence, the seller should stop immediately and begin probing to assess the cause. To move further without consistent buying signals is largely a waste of time for both parties since it leads too often to buyer-seller frustration.

Earlier we discussed a simple cost-benefit formula for value, \( V = B - C \). The key component for creating value-adding results is clearly perceived benefits, especially when a salesperson has little-to-no ability to manage or set price. There are primarily two types of benefit generators: financial and emotional. The financial impact is often enumerated in some type of financial summary or projection of the results in a format consistent with the buyer’s preferences. The financials are usually essential to convincing the buyer to seriously consider a change and as a consequence, a purchase decision. On the other hand, the emotional element is what ultimately triggers the buying decision. Once you see the signs of the buyer being comfortable with the
proposed change or solution, it is time to move forward. If executed correctly, the ideal next step is gaining commitment, the end in mind when we started this process, and the salesperson should not be surprised if the buyer says something like, “This looks great, what do we need to do in order to get this implemented?”

**The Value-Building Sales Process**

The seller’s process should be inherently value driven from beginning to end, and for optimal results, the seller should attempt to get the buyer actively involved in a learning exercise. For best results, the value-building process should begin with the salesperson’s quality pre-call preparation. Since the end in mind is to offer the buyer a value-building proposal that you believe the buyer will want to purchase, your proposal needs to be shaped from the buyer’s perspective with minimal “telling” and an abundance of active listening. The biggest single complaint about salespeople from both prospects and customers alike is that they talk too much.

After the preliminaries, including the introduction, a first impression and rapport building, all of which can have meaningful value-building impacts, the seller should engage in a seven-part value-connecting process:

1. Deliver an attention getter to establish a theme and to summarize what benefits you hope to develop for the buyer in either statement or question form.
2. Learn who is involved in the buying process (the buying center) and the recommended decision-making process to be followed.
3. Diagnose and then summarize the buyer’s want(s) and why(s) through a series of questions delivered in an active listening and empathetic format.
4. Show or demonstrate specifics about how the offer will work by engendering benefits to build value.
5. Summarize the benefits gained and obtain the buyer’s confirmation.
6. Discuss or illustrate projected incremental value gained in a customer-defined format.
7. Be sensitive to reasons to buy now and gain commitment to the next step to earning the order as prescribed by the buyer during the buying center confirmation (step 2 above).

**The Seller’s Mindset or The Inner Game of Selling**

A salesperson’s preparation and anticipation can be significant to determining the buyer’s ultimate value to be gained. It commences with the seller’s mindset that you’re not selling to the buyer, but rather helping them to make a value-adding purchase decision. This reiterates habit #2 of Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Begin with the end in mind.” In other words, the seller has to empathetically make a value analysis from the buyer’s perspective before making a win-win purchase proposal (the end in mind). This should be the Salesperson’s Golden Rule: Propose unto others only what you would want others to propose unto you.
Beginning with the end in mind can be a significant challenge since pre-call effort may be limited by your lack of understanding regarding the buyer’s needs, wants, challenges and conditions. On the other hand, experienced salespeople do have the benefit of valuable references or models gained through their previous training and work with other similar, like-minded, but different buyers. Although every buyer is unique, all buyers do have similar pre-existing resistance factors that are integrated into the buyer’s initial value-analysis evaluation.

Pre-existing resistance factors include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Buyers don’t want to be sold, and potentially experience buyer’s remorse.
2. Buyers generally don’t enjoy implementing change decisions.
3. Buyers don’t want to do business with salespeople whom they don’t like.
4. Buyers are generally risk-averse.
5. Buyers want to make cash flow (which holds for business prospects in both for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises).

The salesperson should be very mindful of each of these natural sales call barriers or conditions precedent to both the buyer-seller relationship and the value-building process.

**Think Like a Doctor Examining a Patient Using Good Bedside Manner**

Another significant factor to a salesperson’s capacity to build value is her ability to concentrate on the buyer’s dynamics instead of being pre-occupied by her own egocentric factors or fears. Concentrating on the buyer encourages empathy and nurturing, which are so important to building buyer value. Zig Ziglar once expressed it this way, “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.”

An analogy to consider is a physician performing a physical exam on you while being overly concerned about his self-importance or the “what ifs” should something go wrong. “What if” thinking is very important, but it should be assessed long before the patient and certainly the doctor ever entered the examination room. Even worse would be having the examining physician spending a patient’s valuable time trying to impress with credentials and medical knowledge.

In interpersonal selling, a one-size-fits-all approach will not bring nearly as many closed deals as a more customized approach. For the medical practitioner, every patient is certainly physically
unique, but all male or female patients have generally similar physical compositions. This consistency principle actually simplifies the examination process and enables the physician to better perform specialized professional services for the well-being of the patient.

Physicians can be masters at performing their professional work in a standardized, almost structured fashion, while the patient feels unique and even “special.” That’s another one of the salesperson’s value-building challenges. How a buyer feels during the sales interaction is very important to his ultimate value analysis. Don’t forget that feelings, not facts, are what drive the purchase decision. Medical professionals have had to learn this difficult lesson in recent years.

Lastly, all exams or visits to your attending physician tend to follow a similar, almost standardized, step-by-step process to minimize oversights and risks and to maximize win-win patient care success. Salespeople should approach prospective buyers in a similar process-minded fashion for most effective value building and sales results. Especially on an initial sales call, keep the customization largely to the need to adapt to the prospect’s personality or social style and stay on your proven process/diagnosis track to more effectively and efficiently discover what concerns the buyer and why.

**Understanding Your Prospective Buyer’s Wants**

A significant part of earning a buyer’s likeability is a salesperson’s ability to stay aligned or relevant to the buyer’s needs and wants. Tim Sanders emphasizes outlines four key components to likeability in his book, *The Likeability Factor:*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Friendliness</th>
<th>Your ability to communicate liking and openness to others.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Your capacity to connect with others’ interests, wants and needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Your ability to recognize, acknowledge and experience other people’s feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realness</td>
<td>The integrity that stands behind your likeability and guarantees its authenticity.</td>
</tr>
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Gaining relevance would seem to be a fairly easy to accomplish task; however, the buyer is often not of a mindset to “lay his cards on the table” or divulge his “problems,” especially if the buyer-seller relationship is less developed. In addition, the buyer is oftentimes not even aware of meaningful issues, either present or prospective. If buyers had all of the answers, then why would they need a salesperson’s recommendations? On the other hand, they did invite you in for a visit. Therefore, questions such as, “What is it that you are trying to accomplish?” are often responded to with a blank stare, indifference or possibly a defensive reaction. It would certainly be easier if buyers would be forthright and open, but that is usually not the case. Salespeople need to develop investigative or mining techniques that employ active listening tools to discover the potential win-win value-adding opportunities. There are many techniques to do this work.

One highly regarded method is the SPIN technique developed by Neil Rackham (Rackham 1988). SPIN stands for the four types of questions: Situation, Problem, Implication, and Need-
payoff. Each type of question has a specific purpose in mind and a reason for the order or sequence of delivery. Situation, and to some degree problem, questions largely help the seller and indirectly the buyer gain a clear understanding of what is needed/wanted. It’s imperative that the seller have a clear understanding of the buyer’s desires, and how product/service performance will be measured. The implication questions are probably the most important because feelings are so important to shaping the buying decision and during the implication questions, the seller must learn the “why” component. The SPIN process not only enables the seller to quickly become relevant to the buyer’s “eager” wants in a programmed, yet nurturing and empathetic fashion, but if properly deployed, it should open the door to the next step in the buying decision process, the buyer’s willingness to consider a change.

**Summing It Up**

Salespeople need to think of selling as a continuous, from beginning-to-end, value-building process. Furthermore, value development has a pattern-with-disturbances that seems to be an orderly disorder. To consistently and efficiently build value for your clients during a selling interaction, salespeople can follow a fairly standardized seven-step process, and then adjust accordingly based largely on personality or social style factors.

**References**


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Chuck Fifield is a Senior Lecturer for Baylor University’s Hankamer School of Business, Marketing Department and serves as the faculty coach to Baylor’s Sales Team. He joined the faculty at Baylor University in 2001, teaching in the Graduate Business School (Operations Management), the Management Department (Negotiations and Conflict Resolution) and the Economics Department (Principles of Macroeconomics). Chuck has taught or guest lectured at other Texas-based Universities in the fields of sales, international business, money and banking and finance/investments. Professor Fifield has conducted sales research and training for several organizations, including most recently State Farm Insurance. Prior to joining Baylor, Chuck was a financial consultant for nearly thirty years to businesses located throughout the U.S. He owned and operated several financial service businesses in the fields of securities, real estate, oil and gas and insurance.