

The Three Most Important Words in Highly Effective Personal Selling

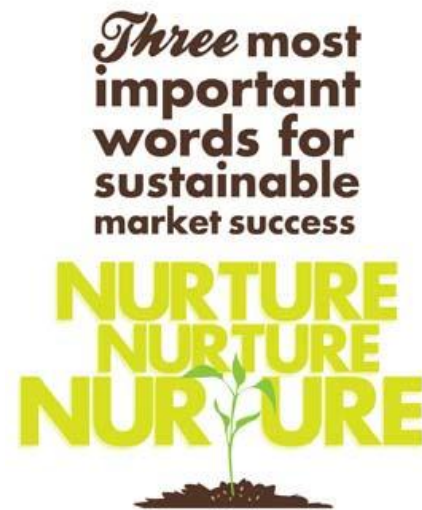
By Charles S. Fifield, M.B.A.

“Our self-interest and our mutual interests are today inextricably woven together.”
-Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair

This interwoven reality demands salespeople and their sponsoring organizations become more relationship focused and proactively better aligned to their customers’ value perspectives. For the business in which personal selling is an integral component of its strategy for sustainable market success, the three most important words to guide its future buyer-seller interactions are nurture, nurture, and nurture.

Let’s commence this personal selling analysis with a working definition or suggested buyer-seller relationship building model. Personal selling is a multi-faceted interdependent process in which the salesperson sequentially:

1. Interactively engages a prospective buyer,
2. Initiates a trust-founded relationship,
3. Diagnostically discovers the buyer’s vision (needs, wants and goals) and the present or projected challenges/problems relative to the buyer’s desires,
4. Helps to define the pain and other implications of the indicated deficiencies,
5. Designs positive change recommendations,
6. Proposes value-enhancing product- or service-based offerings to successfully overcome the identified deficiencies, and
7. Delivers mutual long-term benefits.



Furthermore, today’s highly informed customer and commodity-based marketplace necessitate salespeople “team” with their representative product or service providers in a system-oriented manner to foster the building of potential buyer-seller relationship value.

This system view emphasizes highly effective personal selling to objectively be a continuously improving buyer-seller nurturing experience, not simply a transaction – the making of a sale or the obtaining of an order. It is not to be executed in a linear-designed process with a beginning and an end, but through a cyclical and continuously evolving relationship journey. To succeed, personal selling organizations will need to employ a

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systematic outside-in perspective that enables them to nurture mutually beneficial relationships with all stakeholders to the customer relationship, including suppliers and employees.

So what's the goal of highly effective personal selling? It's always to make money and to do so in the context of seeking to maximize long-term buyer-seller relationship value. To accomplish this goal, most organizations and their sales representatives will need to rethink their core personal selling strategies and the mindset and skill set needed to achieve them.

The Necessary Mindset: Think Interdependently

Learn to shape your “outside-in” reality by building competitive advantage habits from the “inside-out.” In his 1989 published self-help book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey presented an “inside-out” character building framework for achieving personal effectiveness in an interwoven world. Most personal sales success literature focuses on change in issues such as skills and techniques. Covey refers to these changes as essentially personality or tactical in nature, and although they are valuable, they are secondary traits to the deeper primary traits that are character in nature. To illustrate the difference between primary and secondary traits, Covey offers the following example. Suppose you are in Chicago and are using a map to find a particular destination in the city. You may have excellent secondary skills in map reading and navigation, but you will never find your destination if you are using a map of Detroit. In other words, getting the right map is a necessary precedent condition before the secondary skills can be used effectively.

Covey's approach centers on changing oneself from within, for he believes our character (*or the culture of a business*) is a bundle of beliefs and habits that define our resulting behavior. To do so, Covey recommends working through his seven key character-defining habits, thereby progressing from a natural state of dependence (relying on others to take care of us) through a stage of independence (making our own decisions and taking care of ourselves) to the desired stage of interdependence (cooperating/collaborating to achieve something that cannot be achieved independently). One cannot achieve an interdependent mindset if you have not gained a state of independence. As he emphasizes, most personal success literature tends to promote independence, encouraging people to become liberated and do their own thing, as the desired character/habit outcome. Covey concludes, however, that the independent model is a necessary, but suboptimal mode of thinking for use in what is our interdependent, relationship-driven world.

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Closely paralleling Covey's seven habits, the following is a habit-based model for the personal selling interdependent mindset:

Habit #1 – Be Proactive and Positive

Make decisions, anticipate and initiate change thinking to improve your business development role and overall relationship with customers – be solution-minded rather than simply responding reactively to external forces and thereby being more often than not a part of the problem.

Habit #2 – Begin with the Desired Customer Relationship End in Mind

Have a clear principle-centered customer relationship mission statement and develop consistent short- and long-term goals.

Habit #3 – Put First Things First

Prioritize your time based upon your mission statement and maintain a good balance between your relationship productivity and building productive capacity for future relationship growth.

Habit #4 – Think Win/Win

Seek to achieve integrative agreements and relationships that are mutually beneficial, and the customer should realize the first win.

Habit #5 – Seek First to Understand Others, Then to be Understood

Covey highlights this habit as the most important interpersonal relations habit for it requires putting oneself in the perspective of another.

Habit #6 – Synergize

Through mutual trust, honest communication, transparency and understanding, find ways to leverage relationship differences and create options for mutual gain whereby the net value-produced whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Habit #7 – Practice the Discipline of Continuous Improvement

Take time out from production to build additional production capacity by overcoming high impact production-draining constraints and avoiding inertia.

The Necessary Salesperson Skill Set: Heart Selling

How do you see the salesperson role in the typical buyer-seller relationship? Do you perceive it to be largely a process of “selling others” or is it more a process of “helping others to buy”? The role differences seem subtle, but they can auger significantly different relationship results. Selling from a “helping others to buy” mindset is an integral component to Heart Selling. Each salesperson must learn to manage what could be termed The Salesperson's Dilemma – When does the salesperson compete (win/lose thinking to claim value) versus when does the salesperson cooperate/collaborate (win/win thinking to create value)? Both are necessary, but a strong “selling others” perspective

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will usually foster a short-term “what’s in it for me” sales approach with too many long-term relationship burdening side effects. We tend to see things not as they are but as we are pre-conditioned to see them. Once we adopt a “helping others to buy” sales perspective, we can open the door to a paradigm shift in the way we “sell.”

The highly regarded motivational speaker, Zig Ziglar, has said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Central to the concept of selling and building long-term relationship value the nurturing way is one’s ability to focus on the heart of the buyer’s value definition, measured primarily in affective terms and only secondarily in financial terms. Basically, people don’t make their buying decisions for logical or financial reasons, but rather for emotional ones.

There is an acronym that highlights the critical salesperson interpersonal skills necessary to achieve this buyer-seller nurturing priority:

Listen actively for good questions delivered in a counselor/diagnostic communication mode will best get to the heart of the buyer’s needs and wants while minimizing the buyer’s natural “fear of being sold” and resistance to change.

Overcome the “diagnosed” buyer challenges/problems through empathetic understanding of their perceived pain in their current state, why they desire to change, and how they envision and measure solution success – ultimate value is in the eyes of the beholder.

Validate/legitimize proposed jointly-designed changes or solutions with third-party generated proof or evidence, including value summaries, to minimize buyer performance, process and personal risks.

Exceed, if financially feasible, customers’ expectations of your performance and service; expectations must be clearly defined and systematically revisited for customer satisfaction (expectation fulfillment) is the acid test of business, and any unhappy customer is a waiting-to-pounce competitor’s quality prospect.

Relationship-driven companies and their salespeople think in a distinctively different mindset from those that are either business- or transaction-driven. For personal sales organizations, there are four key drivers to building long-term relationship value:

1. Cultivate the creation of sustainable mutually beneficial options for relationship growth,
2. Operate day-to-day based upon a disciplined and systems-oriented approach to relationship building,
3. Build on relationship health as a competitive advantage, and
4. Galvanize a business culture committed to relationship integrity and transparency.

How relationship focused is your company or your personal sales team? To achieve highly effective personal sales success in our interwoven and interdependent business marketplace, nurture, nurture, and nurture will be the three most important words to

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remember. In closing, the final stanza of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," comes to mind:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

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After 33 years in sales with an emphasis on financial services, Professor Fifield has spent eight years teaching undergraduate and graduate courses including Professional Selling and Communications, Negotiations and Conflict Resolution, and Operations Management. He serves as the coach for the Baylor Sales Team and coordinates the Music and Entertainment Marketing Degree. He holds an MBA in Finance and International Business from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and a BBA in economics from Southern Methodist University.