

## **INSIDER: Challenge the Common Conceptions - Become a Sales Challenger**

By Mark Tarro, MBA Candidate

Today's customers are savvier than ever before, largely thanks to growing accessibility to information through technology. Selling to these customers has become a challenging task. "Traditional" sales processes, including walking a client step-by-step through the features or amenities of a particular product, are no longer necessary. When customers arrive for sales meetings, they are well informed about the product they wish to purchase. In fact, consumers today have access to 57% of the information needed to make a purchasing decision prior to speaking with a sales representative (Marketing Leadership Council/Sales Executive Council 2011).

*The Challenger Sale* by Brent Adamson and Matthew Dixon offers a revolutionary view of the sales process, which suggests "challenging" the way the customer thinks about his/her buying decision. Born out of two separate studies on salespeople and consumers, the book features research conducted by the Corporate Executive Board on the customer/salesperson dynamic.

The first study focused on customer tendencies and why customers purchase from one retailer over another, keying-in on factors such as loyalty, value, company brand and the sales experience. Overwhelmingly, the sales experience was identified as the key factor that determines why consumers purchase products or services.

The second study focused on how sales representatives excel, even in tough economic times. The sales sample reflects 10,000 sales professionals around the world -- from virtually every single geography, go-to-market model, and industry. No matter what is sold, how it is sold or where it is sold, chances are pretty good that the sales process is well represented in these data of business-to-business sales exchanges. Sales managers reported on 10,000 sales representatives across 55 different dimensions, skills, attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and activities. It is important to note that the sales professional sample does not include rookie reps (who have been selling for less than six months). In addition, the authors take the necessary statistical controls for industry, company and sales experience. What they have defined as **star performers** are typically those in the top 20% of the company's sales force. While the definition varied a little company-by-company, *star performers consistently meet or exceed goal year-over-year*. The authors compare the star performers to the *core performer, who are the middle 60% of the sales force*. (In a practice that is commonly used in identifying high-performance behaviors, the authors ignore the bottom 20% of the sales force, making the comparison **star** versus **core** performers).

What emerged from this research were five categories that salespeople typically represent: the *Hard Worker*, the *Challenger*, the *Relationship Builder*, the *Lone Wolf* and the *Reactive Problem Solver*. A *Challenger* typically rises above all other salespeople in two important contexts: sales

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in difficult economic times and complex sales. As such, real estate agents have an opportunity to leverage the strategies offered in *The Challenger Sale* to excel in the markets they serve.

## THINK POINT #1: Challenge Through Positive Differentiation

Deb Oler, Vice President at Grainger Brand, posed a question to workers at her company: *Why should our customers buy from us over anyone else?* Consider the same question for your business: *Why should home buyers enlist your services as opposed to your competitors?* Almost all companies in an industry will claim to be “customer-focused” or “at the top of the market.” As such, this does not serve as a strong point of differentiation for your business. Differentiation in an industry can be established more effectively through teaching, or by offering insights and unique perspectives that your competitors do not provide. For example, research shows that on average, retiring Baby Boomers are more concerned with health care costs in the locations they retire than with other geographic features, such as the climate (Neeley 2011). Presenting additional insights, such as information about the economic landscape of health care in a particular market, could be an important point of differentiation for you.



Adamson and Dixon show that most buyers care more about the sales process than what is being sold. The book challenges agents to convey different aspects of the home buying process that other agents may not be offering. The best conversations a seller can have with the customer provide insights that the customer would pay for, regardless of the sale at hand. *What part of your business differentiates you from others in your market? What insights can you offer your clients that other agents are not providing? Would your customers pay you for the quality of the insights you present?*

*The Challenger Sale* offers a six-step process to help sales representatives and real estate agents effectively establish positive differences:

1. **The Warmer** – Showcase what you know about the buyer. Establish any problems he/she may be facing and empathize with him/her.
2. **The Reframe** – This is the most important step in this process. The buyer expects you to talk about your solution; however, take this opportunity to expand on the problems previously established and show how they could lead to an even larger issue. The response the salesperson looks for here is not agreement, but rather causes the customer

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to say, “I hadn’t thought of it that way.” This shows that your insight resonates and holds value with the customer.

3. ***Rational Drowning*** – Quantify the problems. Use data that supports your claims and emphasizes your reframe. The combination of reframing and rational drowning expands the buyer’s way of looking at buying a house and challenges the buyer to think differently.
4. ***Emotional Impact*** – Paint a picture of a story that resonates with the buyer’s own experience. Using examples from experiences with other clients will allow your current client to see the problem unfold in his head. Consequently, he will recognize that he does not want the same outcome for himself.
5. ***A New Way*** – Present a step-by-step solution for how your client’s issues can be addressed.
6. ***Your Solution*** – Present how you will find your client a property that addresses all of his/her issues. As you will have helped identify your client’s key issues, having specific properties in mind to address her problems will support the case you have made.

## **THINK POINT #2: Decision Makers vs. Influencers**

Each message you deliver to a client should be tailored to the audience being addressed, considering factors like whether the audience is an individual or a larger group (e.g., a family). While customers may share similar traits or demographics, they do not necessarily always look for the same thing. When tailoring your message, it is important to note that there are two types of people who may be receiving your messages: decision makers and influencers.

*Decision makers* are most concerned with the sales experience and widespread support for their decision. Consider this concept from a real estate perspective: if a husband or wife is the primary decision maker, he/she will require support from a spouse, children, parents or anyone else who may be living with them. While the decision maker will ultimately complete the purchase, *influencers* tend to affect the outcome of the decision. Research presented in the book shows that influencers are interested in professionalism and the unique perspectives offered by the sales representative. For example, influencers will remember that John Doe sold them their house, not necessarily that the agent represented XYZ Agency. Does this mean that you need to paint a different story for each influencer or decision maker? No, it simply means that they all must be involved in the story and feel that you truly understand what they are looking for.

## **THINK POINT #3: A Matter of Money: Finalizing the Sale**

Challengers exhibit a strong level of comfort when discussing money. This comfort stems from understanding the value that his/her solution will bring the buyer and the price that ultimately represents this value. In the closing of the sale, the objective is to take control of the sale and not

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to negotiate. In order to finalize the sale, an agreement must be reached. Negotiation often serves more as a hindrance than a help and strays away from the objective of establishing an agreement. In the Challenger Selling Model, positive differences have been established and a picture has been painted to quantify the value of the solution. The last step simply puts numbers to the solution.

The Challenger Selling Model is not mastered overnight and must be practiced over time. However, when used properly, the model can be extremely effective. By understanding the importance of differentiation and establishing positive differences, the Challenger has the opportunity to teach the buyer how his product is different from the competition. Learning to tailor messages to both decision makers and influencers supports the salesperson's value proposition, and encourages the message to resonate with the client. Finally, in order to finalize the sale, a Challenger will take control of the sale by being comfortable speaking about money.

Consider how becoming a Challenger can impact your effectiveness in the real estate industry.

## **Recommended Reading**

Adamson, Brent and Matthew Dixon (2011), *The Challenger Sale*, New York, NY: Penguin Group.

## **References**

Marketing Leadership Council/Sales Executive Council (2011), Washington, D.C. (accessed April 16, 2012), [available at [www.sec.executiveboard.com](http://www.sec.executiveboard.com)].

Neeley, Concha (2011), "Health Care, Health Care, Health Care: Planning for the Baby Boomer Retirement," *Keller Center Research Report*, September, (accessed April 16, 2012), [available at <http://www.baylor.edu/business/kellercenter/index.php?id=82322>].

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