

Introduction

Wrong strategy? Why didn't you ask?

In this book you will meet six fictional characters who tell the tale of a business-to-business sales process, each from his or her own point of view. But let me begin with a story that is not fictional but real.

On August 1, 2007, the heavily trafficked I-35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed and fell into the Mississippi River. When the initial shock of the tragedy wore off, the Minnesota Department of Transportation hurried to replace the bridge. The contract to construct a new one went out to bid.

The business was won by a Colorado outfit, the only bidder that had never built a bridge in Minnesota. Its proposal carried the highest price tag and one of the slowest delivery times. Its local competitors were so outraged that they filed an unsuccessful lawsuit.

How did the out-of-state firm win the \$250 million contract? The committee that made the decision explained that price and speed of delivery were not the only criteria it considered. Eight other factors were on the committee's wish list. The competitors cried foul. "You never told us that!" they roared.

"You never asked," the committee replied. "The winning bidder did."

In other words, the outsiders clinched a huge deal for one simple reason: They asked the best questions. The competition assumed they knew what mattered to the buyers, and pitched products accordingly. The Colorado people assumed nothing—except that their job was to find out what mattered and why. The insiders saw the deal as a straight bidding affair. The outsiders recognized the situation for what it was: a complex selling environment.

I love that story because it demonstrates what I believe is a great truth about selling. Real professionals don't sell with great pitches. They sell by asking great questions. The more complex the sales environment—with multiple decision makers and multiple buying criteria—the more important this principle becomes.

Here's another truth. When you ask the best questions and use what you learn to create the best sales strategy, "complex" sales get a lot less complex.

How hard does it have to be?

That is the message I have tried to convey in this book. Complex sales don't have to be complex at all. No matter how many decision makers are in the picture, no matter how many criteria arise, a sale still boils down to fundamentals. Those who ask the best questions earn the right to ask more questions. They discover more relevant information than anyone else. And they sell themselves in the process.

That is always your first major task as a salesperson: to sell yourself. If you can do that, you will find it much easier to fulfill the primary duty of every salesperson, which is to gain commitment from customers.

Commitments must be gained at each step in any sales process, up to and including the final buying decision. A "complex" sale in a business-

to-business environment has more steps and more players than a simple person-to-person transaction, but you don't need a whole new set of principles or techniques to gain commitment at each step. The same behaviors that persuaded Decision Maker A to take the previous step will persuade Decision Makers B, C, and D to take the next ones.

Process produces strategy

But what should the next step be? That's where salespeople lose their way in business-to-business selling situations, because very few are really good at sales strategy. Most understand product features and benefits. Some understand how their products serve clients' business needs. But only a handful grasp the real reason why people buy in a complex sale: because their personal needs are met.

A sales strategy that is not based on uncovering and serving the personal needs of the buyers involved is doomed. And when I say buyers, I mean all of them. If your so-called strategy for a complex sale is to brush aside lower-level "influencers" and fight your way straight to the ultimate decision maker, you are going to lose a lot more deals than you win.

When it comes to strategy, what most salespeople lack is a comprehensive process—a system—that provides a reliable way to 1) gather information, 2) uncover buyers' business and personal needs in a way that builds trust, 3) use the information to determine the next logical step on the path toward a sale and, 4) use the trust to gain each buyer's commitment to take that step.

Easy to say, but how does it work? What does it look like and feel like when sellers employ such a process in a complex sales environment? I have seen it many times. This book is my attempt to capture and describe it, from both the buyers' and sellers' points of view.

Like my four previous books, this one tells a story. But it does so in a different form. You will hear from three decision makers at a fictional organization called Amstand Corp. and from three players at GoTeam Unlimited, a company that would like very much to make a major sale to Amstand.

What the sellers do

The system that these sellers employ—and to which the buyers react—is Action Selling. I humbly submit (all right, not so humbly) that Action Selling provides the best available means both to devise an effective strategy for a complex sale and to execute that strategy successfully.

In my earlier books, the Action Selling system is described in some detail. That is not my purpose here. On pages X & XI, immediately following this introduction, you will find a bare-bones explanation of the system's basic elements and vocabulary: its 9 Acts and the 5 Buying Decisions that the Acts are designed to target. Our three fictional sellers will use some of that vocabulary, and readers unfamiliar with the system will find it helpful to see how the pieces fit together.

But my goal in this book is not to explain the system. Instead I have tried to get inside the heads of the people involved in the transaction to show how and why a genuinely strategic sales approach works. After all, it is inside the buyers' heads that any sales approach succeeds or fails.

Let me say this, however, about the framework that guides the sellers' activities. Action Selling is not something I made up one day out of thin air. Here's a bit of history.

Since the need for a "sales force" first arose during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century, a great many thinkers have tried to

figure out the best ways to sell—and to teach people how to sell effectively. I researched more than 500 books on the sales process before I devised Action Selling.

The 5 Buying Decisions that every customer makes? They were identified in 1936 by Burton Bigelow in his book “The Knack of Selling More.” But Bigelow had them out of sequence (his order: Brand, Price, Firm, Salesperson, Time). That error was corrected in 1953 by R.W. Husband in “The Psychology of Successful Selling.” R.W got it right: Salesperson, Company, Product, Price, Time to Buy.

The 9 Acts of Action Selling? In 1898, E. St. Elmo Lewis formulated the idea that the sales process can and should be broken into discrete steps. He was onto something, but he focused on the “pitch,” a word that I hate almost as much as I hate the idea it implies: that selling is mostly about talking, rather than listening.

The emphasis on identifying and then satisfying customer needs, which is the heart and soul of Action Selling? Need Satisfaction Theory, the fundamental basis of all “consultative selling” approaches, was formulated in 1915 by Tipper, Hollingsworth, Hotchkiss, and Parsons. (It took four guys to figure this out back then.)

I tell you all of that only to assure you that the system I am recommending has its roots in a considerable body of thought and research. Knowing the history will not help you sell more effectively in a complex, business-to-business environment. But if I have achieved my goal, reading this book will.

Duane Sparks
Chairman, The Sales Board
Author of Action Selling

ACTION SELLING IN BRIEF

The 5 Buying Decisions

Action Selling is built upon this research-proven fact: A customer's "buying decision" is not really singular but plural. In choosing whether to purchase something from a salesperson, customers actually make five major buying decisions. What's more—this is crucial—they always make those decisions in the same order. And no, price is not number one.

1. Salesperson

You can't sell a product before you sell yourself. Unless customers first decide to buy you, the salesperson, they will not buy anything from you. The decision hinges on whether they find you likeable, honest, credible, and, above all, trustworthy. Selling yourself first is so crucial that the first four Acts of Action Selling are devoted to it.

2. Company

In deciding whether to "buy" the salesperson's company, the customer weighs matters including its reputation, expertise, policies, and whether it is a good match for the customer's company.

3. Product

Which of the customer's needs will the product address? Will it solve important problems? Create opportunities? Does its quality stack up well against the competition?

4. Price

Is the solution worth the cost? Is it a good value compared with competitive offerings?

5. Time to Buy

When does the customer need the results that the product will deliver? How soon must he make up his mind?

A sale is made *only* when the customer makes the first four calls in your favor and decides that the time to buy is now. If any of these decisions go against you, the sale is lost.

The 9 Acts

Though they usually aren't aware of it, customers always make the 5 Buying Decisions in the same order. The 9 Acts of Action Selling are designed and arranged to keep the sales process moving forward by maximizing the odds that the customer will make each decision in your favor. Together, the Acts comprise a step-by-step strategy for successful sales calls.

Act 1: Commitment Objective

The salesperson must have a preplanned Commitment Objective for every sales call. This is a goal to gain the customer's agreement to take the next logical step toward a final buying decision. What must the customer agree to *do* that will keep the process moving forward?

Act 2: People Skills

Open the call by using interpersonal skills to establish rapport with the customer and begin to build a trusting relationship. The single most important "people skill" is effective listening.

Act 3: Ask the Best Questions

Uncover needs and continue to build trust by asking thoughtful questions about problems and opportunities facing the customer's company and the customer personally. How does the company win or lose in its business? What would a personal win for this customer look like? What other decision makers have a stake in the situation?

Act 4: Agree on Need

Ensure that you have understood the customer's answers to your questions and gain explicit agreement that you have identified the customer's most important business and personal needs.

Act 5: Sell the Company

Using what you now know about what really matters to the customer, target those needs directly in explaining why your company would be a good partner to address them.

Act 6: Sell the Product

Present your product or solution, focusing again on its specific application to the customer's agreed-upon needs.

Act 7: Ask for Commitment

Ask the customer to take the step you identified as your Commitment Objective: buy the product, schedule a meeting with other decision makers, etc. Keep the sales process moving.

Act 8: Confirm the Sale

Assure the customer that he has made the right decision, tell him you appreciate the business, and take steps to ward off buyer's remorse.

Act 9: Replay the Call

After every sales call, review your execution of the first eight Acts. What could you do better next time? Perform Act 9 faithfully, and you will never stop improving.