# HERE COMES THE
# BANDWAGON
## *The Internet's Real Impact on Salespeople*

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Lately a lot of people in the sales-training industry have been making some pretty remarkable claims. As a jumping-off point, they usually start with this premise: Because customers now have so much access to information on the internet, the role of the salesperson has changed.

Hard to argue with that one, isn't it? Things quickly get bizarre, however, because after pointing out so helpfully that the internet exists, these deep thinkers proceed to use the fact of the net's existence to justify practically any claim that suits their purposes.

In the sales-training industry, like everywhere else, catchy headlines grab attention. The more provocative, the better. Never mind if the provocative idea is wrongheaded or even absurd; if one sales-training company starts to see success with a new claim, others will hop on the bandwagon.

Here are a few examples of hot headlines found in recent issues of the Harvard Business Review:

*Never mind if the provocative idea is wrongheaded or even absurd; if one sales-training company starts to see success with a new claim, others will hop on the bandwagon.*

*The End of Solution Sales*

*Selling is NOT About Relationships*

*The Dismantling of the Sales Machine*

*The Trouble with Salespeople*

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These stories urge that salespeople be taught, as a first principle, to tell their customers something that the customers don't already know. This is being touted as the salesperson's optimum response to the "highly educated buyer" that we all face today because massive amounts of information exist on the internet. Training companies on this bandwagon have coined terms like Challenger, Insight Selling, Selling with Insight, and others to refer to this "new" approach.

What's wrong with it? To begin with, we are told that before the internet came along, effective salespeople were those who simply recited their product brochures to customers or who responded only to obvious needs for their product. In other words, the model for the "successful" seller of yesteryear is, in fact, a crappy salesperson who never was very valuable or effective, then or now. With the deck stacked like that, it isn't hard to make your new, improved model sound good.

But here is the fundamental flaw: If the problem you want to solve is that the internet affords customers more access to information, then turning salespeople into "tellers" instead of listeners is precisely the wrong solution. I think that the "teller" recommendation is deeply mistaken for several reasons.

### Where the Bandwagon Breaks Down

**1** It assumes that the salesperson can out-Google customers and prospects, arriving at an insight (about the customer's own business!) that will strike the customer dumb with awe at the salesperson's brilliance. That's quite a presumption.

**2** The notion that a good sales rep should bring an idea to the table isn't new at all. Most salespeople worth their salt have done this for decades to get in the door, to reengage with a past customer or prospect, or to add value to the sales relationship. Those who can do it in every single sales interaction have always been topnotch. To claim that the idea is new is tedious. To claim that it actually replaces the salesperson's duty to find and sell valuable solutions to the customer's unique personal needs? That's absurd.

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**3** Since when is it a good idea to try to be the smartest person in the room? If this is a "skill" we're trying to instill in our salespeople, we are on the wrong track. A far better answer is to have an intelligent dialogue in which you add value on a consistent basis by helping customers better understand their unique business challenges. Then walk arm-in-arm with the customer toward the right solution. When you allow the customer to participate in identifying the problem and in creating a solution, you'll be far more successful.

**4** "Inform the already too-informed customer"? "Stop selling solutions to needs you uncover and start pitching something the customer doesn't already know"? It makes no sense at all. How do you know what insight the customer doesn't already have? It's pretty risky to just throw something on the wall and hope it sticks. But then again, maybe you are extremely gifted at recovering when the customer says, "What makes you think I don't already know that?"

The "teller" approach is one example of a surprisingly popular training strategy that promotes nonsense as a necessary response to the Internet Age. Here, more briefly, are a few other strategies promoted by training companies that rely on faulty logic to arrive at misleading conclusions.

**1** **Strategy:** Because so much information is available on the internet, 57 percent of the buyer's decision is made before the salesperson even says hello. Therefore, we need to sell to multiple buyers in a company.

*When you allow the customer to participate in identifying the problem and in creating a solution, you'll be far more successful.*

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**Flaw:** No, I don't understand the basic logic there either, but that's the assertion made by the CEO of a major sales training company. Even if it made sense on its face, what on Earth is new about the need to sell to multiple buyers? Great salespeople forge relationships at multiple levels. They do it to win business and they do it to keep the business. This has been a reality for decades. To claim that the internet is a trigger for the idea is silly.

**2** **Strategy:** In the opening minutes of an executive conversation, decision-makers expect you to identify and clarify an issue that puts their business at risk. (This expectation somehow follows, again, from the internet's fiendish practice of predetermining 57 percent of the buying decision.) You must explain the current peril facing the business, then pivot quickly to describe how your company's offering will change the way the customer's company operates.

**Flaw:** Even if you were completely sure of a need this big, it's dangerous to start a conversation this way. Suppose you sell website design services. You start your conversation by telling the prospects that

their website is losing ground to the competition because it is dated and poorly constructed. Then you "pivot" and tell them how you can fix that. What's the danger?

Even in the unlikely event that you are 100% certain of your ground (you know for sure that the prospects didn't just update the site that you're insulting as old and outdated; you know that the site is not, in fact, performing brilliantly and crushing the competition), when you hit on a need like this with your "insight" statement, the prospects are going to push you to discuss your product solution too soon. Since they aren't completely sold on you or your company this early in the call, they'll likely be looking for reasons to NOT buy from you rather than reasons TO buy from you. That's when resistance begins, with all of its associated stalls and objections.

Why not first understand a little bit about the goals these prospects have for their website, how it is performing compared to those goals, and what strategies they are considering for improving performance? Why not have an intelligent conversation with the prospects and collaborate on

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creating awareness of the challenges that exist? Why not do that before you start throwing out potential solutions that could offend someone, damage your credibility, or create unnecessary objections?

Why would companies even consider these bandwagon approaches as viable sales-training options? My hunch is that faulty logic gains traction because sales executives are frustrated by their people's inability to create lasting relationships that result in consistent sales and true customer loyalty.

*...sales executives are frustrated by their people's inability to create lasting relationships...*
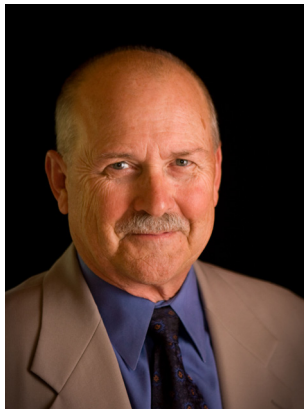
**Here is the reality:** The path to creating those loyal relationships leads through the collaborative process I just described. That was true before the internet existed, and it's true now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duane Sparks is chairman and founder of The Sales Board, a Minneapolis-based strategic sales training company that has trained and certified more than 400,000 salespeople in more than 3,500 groups in the system and skills of Action Selling™. Sparks has guided companies through every phase of business development, from start-up, turnaround, survival and rapid growth.

Having written five sales books and personally facilitated more than 300 Action Selling™ training sessions, he continues to engage in the business and art of the strategic sales process.

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