

## The Lost Art of Selling

### In the face of a global recession, we need real selling skills more than ever.

“Nothing happens until somebody BUYS something” seems to be the new mantra of too many companies...

“Customers aren’t buying anything so let’s just cut heads, slash budgets, hunker down and shrink our way to greatness!”



Interviewing customers to properly identify real problems and opportunities and then collaborating with them to find appropriate (and sometimes creative) solutions seems to be a skill set lost to an entire generation.

### How did this happen?

Two major shifts drove this change. In the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, virtually every company had a sales force that was steeped in product knowledge, application knowledge and selling skills. The sales team was the engine, leading the charge, driving revenues. Suddenly, sales teams were deemed too expensive to maintain, and the responsibility for driving revenues shifted to the marketing department. The theory was that if we could create demand for our products and services through advertising and promotion, we merely needed to harvest the flood of incoming orders in our call centers or order desks. The second major shift was from traditional marketing to Internet marketing, providing real time global reach for our marketing messages.

### But, what happens when customers stop looking and the phone stops ringing?

Both of these shifts created breakthroughs in the ability to reach greater numbers of potential customers and the ability to “tell our story” in greater depth and breadth. But these vehicles have shortcomings. First, they are “one way” vehicles, allowing the customer to learn a lot about us but enabling us to learn very little about our potential customers. This requires customers to become applications specialists, determining on their own how best to use our products and services.

The second problem is that these marketing methods virtually eliminate the ability to collaborate with our potential customers to create and deliver new and unique solutions for them. This is a critical problem in a recession, when customers simply shut down. They stop looking for new products and services, and therefore are immune to the wiles of marketing and promotion. Their focus is on cutting expenses and unless your product or service can help them do that without any investment, they simply won’t pay attention. Search engine optimization is useless when potential customers stop searching.

### Why we need trust more than ever

What we have lost is the very human connection that engenders trust between a company and its customers. Trust is the basis for all business transactions. We have recently seen firsthand, what a lack of trust in the banking system has done to the global economy.

As customers tune out marketing and promotions, we need a human connection to tune them back into the critical decisions they should be making to ensure that they are profitable and healthy for the long-term, and that is where a great sales force comes in. A great sales person can help customers gain a clearer understanding of their long-term goals and priorities and can collaborate in ways that no website ever could, to help customers move forward in the face of adversity and fear.

## The call center can't cut it

As sales forces have disappeared they have been replaced by call center employees or order desk staff. These folks, while trying their best, do not have the sales and collaboration skills necessary to reach out to customers in an effective way. Nor do they have the authority or training to design and negotiate the special programs, pricing and solutions that will be necessary to get customers unstuck in the worst recession since the great depression. America has always produced the best salesmen in the world from Zig Ziglar to Jack Welch to Steven Jobs, but look at the age of these exemplars.

Many of the executives who are leading our largest corporations began their careers in sales. Many of them mistakenly believe that their people possess the same skills they possess. It is simply not true. At its zenith, Xerox put new hires through months of sales training before they ever called on a customer. In the computer, insurance, real

estate, chemical, automobile, software, furniture, appliance, security and many other industries, superb sales skills were critical for career success. Yet, the sales training curriculums that built these companies have virtually disappeared.

If we don't adequately train the next generation of sales professionals, these skills and the first hand experience of the best generation of sales trainers ever, will be lost to the American business community. And just to be clear, I am not talking about teaching trickery or 101 ways to close the sale. I am talking about the ability to ask the right questions at the right time in the right way to create a sale where none would have existed without that conversation. I am talking about the ability to consistently deliver significant revenue quarter after quarter in any business climate. Companies need that skill set right now, more than ever. Can you name a single company or industry that would not benefit from better sales skills right now? How about yours?

**Start recruiting immediately.** If you don't have a proactive inside or outside sales team, now is the very best time to create one. You'll be able to get top talent with a bargain basement compensation package. Be sure to talk with past customers, sales managers and peers before believing everything on the resume. Have prospective sales candidates call you on the phone for an appointment to sell whatever they are selling now and then schedule a sales call with them to see their sales interviewing, presentation and collaboration skills in action. If they can't sell you, they won't sell your customers either. A strong sales person should be getting tangible results (new accounts, actively engaged prospects or significant sales increases in existing accounts) within 60-90 days.

**Hold Weekly Sales Meetings.** If you aren't having weekly sales meetings, start this week. Monday morning or Friday afternoon mandatory sales meetings are critical in changing markets. The team needs to share success stories and best practices, be honest about what is not working, coordinate with marketing for better alignment, and brainstorm new ideas for getting clients unstuck. Most importantly, they need get regular practice and coaching on their sales skills. And don't forget to tell them how valuable they are to the organization. Sales people get a lot of negative feedback from prospects and clients. They need as much positive input as you can provide. They also need to know that you believe in them and value them enough to spend your time coaching and training them.

**Invest in your team.** Bring in a professional sales trainer to work with your team on a consistent and regular schedule. High quality sales trainers can quickly spot shortcomings and create breakthroughs for your team. They will also provide the double espresso shot of new sales skills and motivation. One without the other is useless. Sales training done right delivers a very high return on investment. One new account or one breakthrough in methodology can often pay for a year's worth of training.

**Use the same trainer consistently.** It is common practice to rotate sales trainers "so the sales team doesn't get bored and to expose them to a variety of ideas" In fact, rotating trainers confuses your team since each trainer has their own approach, methodology, philosophy, skill set and language. Sales people hate "the program of the month." Sales training is NOT about entertainment. It is about skills transfer. Consistency pays because your team will learn a comprehensive set of skills and their confidence will grow as they learn. Your sales trainer will also learn more about your products, services and customers over time and that will translate into better training.

**You can sell your way out of this recession and take significant market share in the process.** The perfect time to charge ahead is when your competitors are retreating. You'll be controlling your own destiny and adding another potent weapon to your revenue generation arsenal. Revenue isn't at the top of the P & L by mistake. It is at the top because it is the most critical measure of your long-term viability and success. You can only cut costs by 10-20% without impacting customers, but you can grow revenue infinitely. Revenue is where you must focus to win.