

Are You Ready For A Sales Makeover?

MANAGING THE SHIFT FROM PRODUCT SELLER TO PROBLEM SOLVER

BY WALT ZEGLINSKI



Over my many years in the sales performance industry, one of the questions I am most frequently asked is – how do we get our sales people to sell solutions. When I respond by asking them to describe what they mean by “selling solutions”, I am always surprised at how often they are uncertain of what they really want.

Obviously, before making the shift to selling solutions, organizations must agree on what they mean. Based on their market, products, personnel and sales process, they might decide that this transition is not in their best interest. It may take too long or not be accepted by prospects and customers that have become accustomed to a product-based approach.

Webster defines a solution as a method of successfully dealing with a problem. From my perspective, for a sales organization to succeed in selling solutions, they must begin by positioning themselves as problem-solvers. If an organization identifies their value in terms of their products, either on the web or in some other form of promotion, it's likely that their sales people will see their role as persuading prospects to buy something. An organization that identifies its value with the problems they solve will encourage sales people to sell solutions by focusing on client problems.

This is not to say that one is better than the other. It often depends on the value expectation of customers, the expertise of a sales staff, and the potential business impact of the products or services they sell. The Value Enhancement Model below illustrates how these factors might influence a sales organization's decision to migrate to a solution selling model. If their products or services are not sufficiently differentiated as compared to competitors, they will almost certainly get commoditized by their clients and prospects, making it difficult to position their value beyond a “me-too” offering.

Likewise, if their product or service has little business impact (i.e. it can not or has not been linked to a key business outcome), it will probably be handled as a transaction and not be considered as a business solution.

There are obviously many iterations of this positioning that might be explored, however, unless a sales professional can elevate his status to that of a problem solver, he is unlikely to be perceived as a value-add resource, trusted advisor, or partner.

Solving “BIG” Problems

If a salesperson solves a small problem for a customer, is it fair to assume she/he is demonstrating the ability to sell solutions?

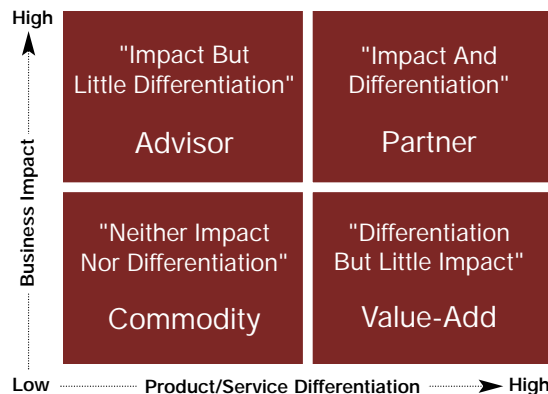
Depending on the value proposition of the company they represent, any sales person might have the potential for solution selling. They might have distinguished themselves as providing added value within an otherwise transactional situation, and demonstrated, through their actions, the uniqueness of their product or service as compared to their competitor's offerings. With this stated, I'd like to suggest a broader context for understanding solution selling. Since the ultimate goal of making the shift from products to solutions is to improve revenue and margins, let's focus on selling solutions that are more comprehensive and more differentiated – solutions that solve business problems and increase sales and profitability.

Every business has its own notion of what constitutes a “big problem” – but it is fair to say any problem that is causing a key operational challenge or directly impacts the achievement of a business outcome is a big problem.

In order for an organization to develop a solution selling capability, it must examine its willingness to address four key factors:

1. Solution Positioning
2. Marketing Support
3. Organizational Alignment
4. Value-Driven Sales Process

Value Enhancement Model



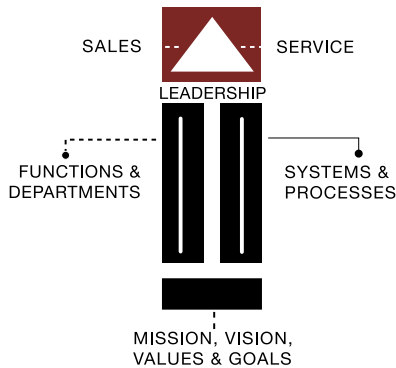
Solution Positioning

If an organization's messaging to the market is dominated by language that positions their product or service, they will not be perceived as selling solutions. Companies that are successful at selling solutions define their value in terms of the problems that they solve – *not the products that they sell*. For example if an organization sells copiers, their positioning *would not* focus on the “bells and whistles” but rather on a solution for improving the consistency and quality of management information and how it can help organizations make faster and better decisions.

Marketing Support

To insure the success of an organization's solution positioning, they must cascade this value proposition to their marketing efforts. Marketing collaterals, their website, events, etc., should focus on specific business issues with messaging that supports a problem solving framework. Their emphasis should be on the "extrinsic" value that exists beyond the product or service's features and functions. One example of this is a website design that is organized to be navigated from an industry perspective (Healthcare for example) and drives customers to the expertise that solves that industry's problems.

Organizational Value Alignment



Organizational Alignment

The entire organization – product development, finance, operations, human resources, and especially customer service – all functions and departments that impact the customer directly or indirectly, will need to support the transition to selling solutions and creating value. Likewise, systems and processes like compensation, performance management, and CRM should support the transition or, at the very least, not become barriers to implementation. The model below illustrates how an organization can maximize customer value and solution selling by focusing on alignment.

Unfortunately, compensation and performance management systems can actually cause misalignment. Often these systems will reward behaviors that are in conflict with a solution selling approach. For example they may undermine adherence to a rigorous problem solving process, rewarding short term payoffs over building long term, mutually beneficial relationships.

To sustain solution positioning an organization must build alignment from its mission, vision, values and goals to the attitudes, practices and behaviors of its frontline sales, service and leadership. .

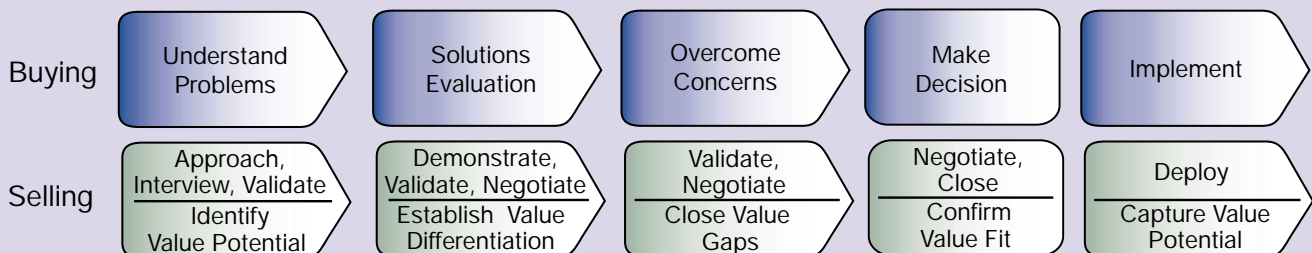
Value-Driven Sales Process

Only a Value-Driven Sales Process can enable a transformation from products to solutions. In order to create value, a selling process must effectively mirror the buying process of prospects and customers in your market. The ability to sell solutions can be significantly undermined by a process that is out of step with how buyers want to buy makes. One way to keep these processes in synch is to delineate the steps of a sales process with key process outcomes, and support them with efficient and effective sales tools. The model below is indicative of a sales process that mirrors a buying process and is identified by step-by-step process outcomes.

Sales professionals that succeed in executing a Value-Driven Sales Process must be able to uncover and articulate the operational challenges and business payoffs of their customers; establish the unique value of their solution to solve the customer's problem; overcome any explicit or implied gaps in value; achieve consensus on the solution's fit; and deploy a solution that meets or exceeds their customer's expectations.

To accomplish this, a sales professional must thoroughly understand the gap between the prospect's current and desired situation and be able to communicate their company's experience in solving similar problems, including sharing some specific results. Finally, an organization serious about shifting to a solution sales process should consider leveraging these capabilities across all channels to market.

Value-Driven Sales Process



Making the Shift

There is both good news and bad news in making the shift to selling value. The good news is that if an organization is committed to moving from product sellers to problem solvers, they can start today. I'll share the bad news later.

The first step is an assessment of their current positioning to develop an action plan that is consistent with their resources and executable within a reasonable timeframe. A methodology that I have successfully applied with clients is the Performance Driver Model.

This model aggregates the key performance drivers into a kind of roadmap for enabling a value-driven sales organization. The Performance Driver Model helps organizations to diagnose the degree of change required in People, Process, Commitment and Support. In order to examine these four components in more detail, let's define what we mean by each.

The Right PEOPLE:

An emphasis on expertise, independent thinking, and a commitment to customers are the keys. Everyone must know and practice a problem-solving methodology and understand their accountable for overcoming customer problems with care, sincerity, and a "can do" attitude. Typically these individuals possess some degree of the four traits of sales success – Goal Clarity, Achievement Drive, Emotional Intelligence, and Social Skills.

The Right PROCESS:

The success of a sales organization to execute on a value-driven sales process is, in large part, reliant on their capacity to support it internally. Once an organization has made the commitment to selling solutions that maximize customer value, it is critical that they reassess their internal processes to insure misalignment will not be a barrier to success.

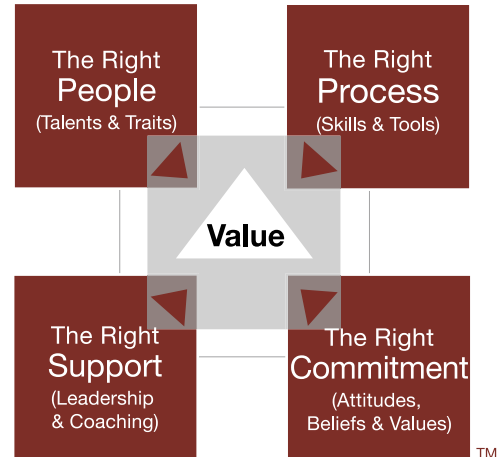
The Right COMMITMENT:

Establishing a solution-focused brand requires a strategic commitment to the business issues they can overcome and the results they can achieve for their customers. However, an organization must go beyond a well-articulated product strategy with differentiated offerings. In order for a solution sales team to succeed, they must be committed to solving customer problems, creating customer value, and achieving measurable impact.

The Right SUPPORT:

A solution selling organization must have a leadership team that supports a flexible go-to-market strategy that focuses on business results. Remember, customers don't need or want an organizations products ... they need and want to achieve business results! Top-down management support is probably the most critical element to successfully accomplish this shift. This is especially true for frontline managers, the pivotal leadership position for results-producing change initiative.

Performance Driver Model



So it is possible to make the shift from product selling to problem solving if an organization is willing to take an unbiased look in the mirror and has the commitment and discipline to engage in a serious sales makeover.

Actually that's the bad news. Although you can make the shift, once you sign up for your makeover there is no turning back!

Walt Zeglinski is the President and Managing Partner for Integrity Systems, a performance improvement firm with that specializes in changing the way organizations acquire and retain loyal customers. Walt has also served as President of Huthwaite Inc, a world-renowned research, training and consulting organization best known as the creators of SPIN Selling. With over 20 years of successful experience in the corporate performance industry, Walt applies his talent and expertise to successfully diagnose, plan and implement practical solutions for complex business challenges.

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