

DEFINING CONSULTATIVE SELLING

by **Linda Richardson**

Today Consultative Selling is almost a household word. It is an approach to selling in which customer needs are used as the basis for the sales dialogue. When the word Consultative was applied to sales in the 1970's, it was revolutionary. It marked a major transition from the salesperson as the purveyor of information and the customer as the recipient to a much more collaborative interaction — one in which the customer's needs, not the product — was the focal point of the sale. By the early 80's, the term Consultative Selling began to be misunderstood as a long, arduous sales process that focused on needs at the expense of closing business. In fact, effective Consultative Selling, because needs are clear and recommendations, therefore, are more likely to be on target, actually accelerates the sales cycle.

To really understand Consultative Selling vs. the approaches to sales that preceded it, it is helpful to think about Steinberg's poster of the U.S. In his map, New York occupies the majority of the country ([click here to see Steinberg's U.S. Map](#)).

The two most abused, misused, and overused words in selling are the words consultative and solution. It is interesting that these two words hold this distinction because without being consultative, the so-called solution is usually little more than a standard product pitch.

The transition from product-focused selling to need-focused selling was the direct result of market changes. Increased competition and customers' greater access to information and sophistication began the shift of power in a sales call from salesperson to buyer.

There are three primary differentiators that mark a Consultative Salesperson:

- They ask more questions.
- They provide customized vs. generic solutions.
- Their calls are more interactive.

Consultative Selling is all about the dialogue between the salesperson and

the customer. The word dialogue comes from the Greek and means "to learn." In Consultative Selling, the salesperson learns about customer needs before talking product. Product knowledge is transformed into a tailored solution when the solution is delivered and positioned based on the customer's needs and language.

With Consultative Selling, the customer's needs come first. Needs are identified through a combination of preparation and effective probing and drilling-down into customer answers. Consultative Selling took the hard edge from product selling and replaced it with the strong but flexible edge that is custom fit to the customer's needs.



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