

Solution selling test

Many salesforces think they're solution selling when they're not...

Last week was typical. I met with the sales director of a well known systems integrator who wanted help with getting his salespeople to improve their C-level selling skills. As the meeting progressed, he repeatedly claimed that the "entire sales team have been trained in solution selling" – so that couldn't be an issue. But that was the issue. It turned out that his people had all attended a three-day training programme, but were not practising solution selling in any discernable way.

It is a familiar story. Salespeople are still approaching the task as product salespeople rather than offering compelling business propositions, despite the training. It reminds me of the old cartoon featuring two young women approaching the golf course, where one asks the other, "Are you having a lesson this week?" to which the other replies, "No, I learned last week."

What is solution selling? While all of the consultants have their own opinion, nearly all would agree that it is something to do with working alongside the potential customer to identify and develop "pain" and then mutually agree the solutions. A particularly good definition is that solution selling puts the customer's business at the centre of the buying decision, rather than your offering being at the centre of the sales campaign. It is an approach that can be incredibly powerful, as it focuses on building demand and shaping the buying decision in your favour, rather than hoping to hit lucky with some particular feature, or discounting the price.

There are many aspects to solution selling – a huge number of models, training courses and books (type in solution selling on Amazon and you will get back 260+ hits). In fact solution selling is not a revolutionary concept (despite what the covers of many books say) and has evolved over time.

When IT was in its infancy and selling was only just coming out of the "gift of the gab" phase, vendors such as IBM, Xerox, Burroughs and NCR started to develop concepts such as "need satisfaction selling", which put the emphasis on the customer and what they wanted, but the old feature/benefit approach was still around (eg the famous "Do you want it in green? If I could supply it in green, would you buy it?").



Steve Hoyle

Through the late 1960s and early 1970s various people were starting to look a little more closely at the actual buying/selling process, probably the most famous being the work done by Neil Rackham at Huthwaite Research leading to the SPIN methodology, which was not initially called solution selling, but embodied many of the key concepts of understanding the customer, identifying their key problems, and then building up perceived problems for which you had a solution, before

talking about your offering. This is a central theme of nearly all solution selling approaches – if you have a painkiller, make sure the prospect realises that they have a major, potentially catastrophic pain, before offering the painkiller.

Over the years, these concepts have been developed by people such as Michael Bosworth who opened up the concept more, Mack Hanan, who has trademarked the name Consultative Selling and done a great job of evolving solution selling concepts so that they directly relate to the bottom line, and Keith Eades who has taken many concepts (not just pure solution selling) and turned them into a complete process.

So there is lots of knowledge around, but in the vast majority of cases salespeople are not using solution selling approaches. Why this is, and what is stopping them will be the topic of a further article, but for now you may want to take the simple test designed to indicate the extent to which you are using solution selling principles. **SF**

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ARE YOU A SOLUTION SELLER?

Answer the following truthfully with a 'yes' or 'no', then look at the answer key below.

- 1 The vast majority of my deals start with discussions well before the potential customer knows what they want
- 2 I have good relationships with people at all levels within the technical functions in my accounts (technician to CIO)
- 3 I spend significant amounts of time with business executives and senior managers outside of technical, purchasing or finance functions
- 4 During the sales cycle prospects will usually change their purchase criteria, based on the discussions that they have had with me and my team
- 5 During the sales cycle, I always consciously change the tone and topics of conversation depending on where the customer is in their purchase cycle and in anticipation of how their concerns will shift over time

- 6 I can easily gain access to senior decision makers during the final decision making phase
- 7 Many of the discussions I have with customers and prospects are about possibilities for the future rather than qualified opportunities
- 8 For the vast majority of my contacts, I can readily describe their individual business and personal challenges ("What keeps them awake at night?")
- 9 For each of my prospects I can easily give a succinct value proposition that a CFO or CEO would find compelling
- 10 I can spontaneously describe at least five reference accounts not only in terms of what my firm did for them, but what were the resulting real business outcomes

Key 10 positives: you are a consummate solution selling professional, continue brushing up your skills; 7-9: you are at the upper end of solution selling, but need accelerated development; 3-6: you are showing good traits and would benefit from training/coaching; 0-2: either solution selling is not suitable for your role or you need a major personal development programme.