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# Traps Of Selling Conventionally In A Complex New World

by JEFF THULL

**P**rospect, qualify, present and close. These are the basic elements of the conventional sales process that most sales organizations and salespeople still follow today. The conventional sales process is the most widely used selling paradigm for good reason — it works. That is, it works if you have a simple sale. Problem is, the world in which we sell has changed. We must deal with complex problems and correspondingly complex solutions that involve multiple decisions and multiple decision-makers — most of whom are having an increasingly hard time understanding their own problems and the solu-

tions that will best resolve them.

When you follow the conventional sales process in a complex sale, you run head first into a series of traps that grow progressively more difficult to avoid, and that make a positive outcome for the sale ever less likely. They are as follows:

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## The Assumption Trap

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How many times have you heard or perhaps said yourself: “My customers just don’t get it”? The reality behind that statement of frustration is not too difficult to figure out: Customers don’t “get it” for one of two reasons:

- Either you are overestimating the value your solutions bring to the customer, or
- You are overestimating the customer’s ability to comprehend that value.

Assuming that the solution offered actually has value, the flawed logic behind the “customer doesn’t get it” complaint is that the salespeople who say it are, in essence, blaming customers for being unprepared to buy their solutions. They are implying that customers should somehow be ready to effectively analyze and evaluate custom programs, such as a new product launch, that they may buy once a year or less. Or, even more illogically, that their customers should have a high-quality decision process capable of evaluating leading-edge solutions, which they may have never considered before, or which may be appearing in the marketplace for the first time.

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levels of experience than their customers. They know the products, services and programs they are bringing to market inside and out. In addition, they spend most of their time with customers. They see an entire industry, come into contact with a full range of operational practices, and often become experts in their customers' businesses. The advanced perspective and comprehension of sales professionals experienced in the complex sale stands in vivid contrast to the perspective of their potential customers.

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### The Presentation Trap

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Sales organizations devote tremendous amounts of time and resources to creating compelling presentations and proposals. The irony is that most of this effort is lost on customers. Presentations, too early in complex decisions, are largely a waste of time.

Conventional salespeople hate to hear this; the presentation is the key weapon in their sales arsenal. It is their security blanket, their comfort zone, and they loathe giving it up. "Wait a minute," they protest. "Our presentations are aimed at educating customers. They will not buy what they don't understand." This much is true, and admittedly, a presentation can lift the customer's level of comprehension. But, it is one of the least effective methods for doing so. Why is that? There are three reasons:

- A presentation, even one that includes advanced multimedia elements, is, in its essence, a lecture. The salesperson teaches by telling. The big problem with this method is that hardly anyone re-

members what they hear. The generally accepted rule of thumb among learning experts is that over half of even the most sophisticated presentation is lost.

- A typical sales presentation rarely devotes more than 10% to 20% of its focus to the customer and their current situation. Generally, 80% to 90% of a typical sales presentation is devoted to describing the salesperson's company, its solutions, and the future being sold. While customers may be greatly impressed with the offering being presented, they still lack a compelling understanding of how it applies to their situation and why they should buy it.

- Your competitors are following the same strategy; they are busy presenting as well. Your customers have meetings set up with you and one, two, or even more of your competitors. In each meeting, a sales team is presenting the best side of their solutions. Your team is telling the customer that he needs the solutions that only your company offers, and each of your competitors is making the same argument about their solutions.

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### The Adversarial Trap

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When salespeople start overcoming objections (often raised during the presentation), they are, by definition, placing themselves in conflict with their customers. At best, this sets the stage for polite disagreements and respectful differences of opinion. At worst, it turns the sales process into a battle in which the seller must somehow conquer the buyer to win the sale.

The conflict between buyer and seller is exacerbated by the

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frustration that results from the miscommunication engendered by the conventional process. Salespeople are presenting professionally-packaged data, complete with executive summaries that their prospective customers find either unintelligible or unconnected to their situation. Confused and with no sound basis upon which to evaluate the information, customers respond negatively. Conventional salespeople, who are overestimating their customers' level of comprehension, interpret this as an objection to be overcome and swing into action. "No," they say. "You don't get it. You do need our solution and here's why..." Now the salespeople are arguing with their customers.

What happens next? If the customers don't shut down the presentation altogether, they may offer a second negative response. Another round of verbal sparring ensues. The customers' frustrations turn into exasperation. Now the sale is in doubt and the salespeople know that the customers need the solution, so they escalate their efforts. The downward



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spiral accelerates. The sale has turned into a battle — a battle in which customers will always have the final say.

The three traps described above are the fundamental problems facing salespeople who try to impose a traditional sales process on complex problems and solutions. Quite often, each trap segues neatly into the next. The result is a confused and disheartened customer who ends up going with a competitor's solution because it's "cheaper" — after all, when he doesn't understand his problem or your solution, all he can do is fall back on the common denominator of price, and the unpleasant experience deepens the schism between sales pro-

fessional and customer.

The above problems are what manufacturing quality guru W. Edwards Deming defined as systemic problems. We can't solve them by disciplining individual salespeople who step over some arbitrary line. Instead, it is the process itself that causes the problem. The only effective and enduring way to resolve these problems is to set aside the conflicting elements of the conventional selling process. You must adopt a whole new paradigm: one based on positioning yourself as a valued and trusted advisor who manages quality decisions — one that takes into account the complex new world in which we live and work.

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