
How To Prevent “Unpaid Consulting”

Timely Advice For Today’s Sales Professionals

by JEFF THULL

If you’re in sales, you have probably encountered this scenario. You’re trying to convince a potential customer that your great products or services will solve their most pressing problems. To prove the point, you explain precisely how your solution will work. Mr. Potential Customer listens carefully, asks many questions and takes copious notes. Everything seems to be running smoothly. The customer nods and says all the right things and you leave convinced that the sale is in the bag. The problem is, when you call to close the sale, Mr. PC is nowhere to be found. Later, you hear that he has decided to buy from your top (and less expensive) competitor. Frustrated, you find yourself asking, “Where did I go wrong? Why didn’t I see it coming?” You realize you’ve fallen prey to an all-too-common trap: unpaid consulting.

Unpaid consulting starts when we cross the line between diagnosing the problem and explaining the solution. When we start designing solutions, we start acting as unpaid consultants. In past decades, this was not a monumental issue. Generally, there was lim-

ited competition in complex sales. If you figured out the problem and designed a unique and valuable solution for a customer, the sale was almost guaranteed and the salesperson was rewarded for his consulting effort. Today, there is an ever-increasing proliferation of competitors in complex sales, and once a solution is designed, the customer can easily shop it to the competition.

Why the change? It is the outcome of the technology explosion our world has experienced in the past decade or so. Simply put, no matter how sophisticated your products and services are, chances are there are numerous competitors offering the same thing. And because geographic location is no longer a critical factor — due in large part to the advent of the Internet — a manufacturer in New York can easily access a supplier in Los Angeles (or in China for that matter) just as easily as it can the one across the street.

So, what’s a sales professional to do? In today’s complex business arena there are no simple “band-aid” solutions. What is required is a systemic approach to an en-

vironment characterized by long sales cycles, multiple decision-makers, and numerous perspectives that may cross national and cultural borders.

A system called Diagnostic Business Development provides a navigable path from the first step of identifying potential customers through the sale itself and onto expanding and retaining profitable customer relationships. These are the four phases in this system:

- 1. Discover** — The sales professional researches, prepares and sets the stage for a compelling engagement and a continuing relationship based on trust and respect.
- 2. Diagnose** — An in-depth determination of the existence, extent and financial impact of the customer’s current situation is pursued. Diagnosis is meant to maximize the customer’s objective awareness of their dissatisfaction and determine whether or not that dissatisfaction supports the salesperson’s offerings.
- 3. Design** — The goal is to get the sales professional and customer working together to identify the optimal solution to the problems that were uncovered and quantified in the “diagnose”

phase — even if it involves alternative solutions offered by competitors. This phase is the “dress rehearsal” before the final presentation is made. It is here that many salespeople make the mistake of giving away valuable information and becoming an unpaid consultant.

4. Deliver — This phase begins with the presentation of a formal proposal and the customer’s subsequent formal acceptance of the solution. Implementation and support of the solution are next, followed by maintaining and growing the relationship with the customer.

This process is a 180-degree turn from conventional selling. To avoid the pitfalls of using outdated methods — pitfalls that include but are not limited to the unpaid consulting trap — consider the following suggestions:

- **Prevent Premature Presentations** — How can you present a solution to the customer’s problems before you clearly understand what those problems are — and more to the point, before the customer fully comprehends the problem and recognizes that you do, too? While most salespeople devote the majority of their face-to-face time presenting and handling objections, the most successful salespeople spend the majority of their time collaborating with customers, diagnosing their situation, designing or creating a desired solution, and building their resolve to actively solve the problem.

- **Don’t Lead the Witness** — The traditional salesperson draws conclusions for the customer — often prematurely — and presents them to the customer before the customer is prepared to hear them. It is important that the customer discovers and takes owner-

ship of the problem before deciding to seek a solution. If you move ahead of the customer, he or she is likely to interpret your actions as pushy or manipulative. This leads to a lack of trust, and creates a confrontational rather than cooperative atmosphere.

- **No Pain, No Change, No Sale** — Dissatisfaction is the most basic human motivator for change. It is the natural defense mechanism that tells people that if they don’t change and deal with a problem, they will face consequences. Change itself is painful. As a result, change will not occur until an individual or company recognizes that it would be more painful not to change. This is why it’s so critical to do a thorough diagnosis that uncovers the pain of the current situation, and the lack of the future outcome. As you know, nothing less will motivate the customer to change.

- **Go For the “No”** — One advantage of a thorough diagnosis is that it allows the salesperson to quickly identify the 20-30 percent of their prospects who have the immediate reason and resources to make a change. It is the difference between an intellectual conversation about a desirable future and an objective observation and

Unpaid consulting starts when we cross the line between diagnosing the problem and explaining the solution.

measurement of real indicators of an unacceptable present. The traditional salesperson wastes time arm-wrestling with a prospect that has no pain and hopes to win the sale by sheer tenacity. This has its roots in the theory that the good salesperson never takes “no” for an answer and the salesperson’s view that “no” equates to personal failure. You should always be asking yourself, “Is there someplace better I could be?”

Clearly, the role of the salesperson has changed dramatically. The often-ignored reality is that customers need outside expertise to help them understand the problems they face, design optimal solutions to those problems, and implement the solutions. It is up to you to provide the help your customers need. See yourself as a project manager for your customer’s decision. That is the secret behind succeeding at the complex sale.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

For the past 22 years, Jeff Thull, CEO/President of Prime Resource Group, has gained a reputation for his expertise in the arena of sales and marketing strategies for companies involved in complex sales. His wealth of real world experience has made him a leading authority and valued advisor for executive teams of major companies worldwide. Contact Information: Prime Resource Group, Inc.; (800) 876-0378; www.primeresource.com.