
The End Of Solution-Based Selling

by JEFF THULL

Does this presentation sound familiar? “We have the solution to meet your needs. We will tailor our products and services so that they fit your reality precisely. Our price is reasonable and we’ll provide excellent customer service.” It’s the move from selling products to selling solutions, and it’s what the vast majority of all companies say to their prospects. Perhaps you’ve said it to yours. If you’re still selling that way, you’re missing the boat — the one that recently crossed over the horizon leading to the 21st century.

The way most companies are selling solutions just doesn’t work in today’s business world. Things have gotten so complex that most customers can’t even comprehend what their problems are, let alone distinguish between you and your competitors. And too many salespeople are out there making smoke-and-mirrors claims, simply re-labeling a collection of their products as “solutions,” when in reality the customer is not able to connect those solutions to their business. And if they do buy the solution, 80 percent are dissatisfied with the value results.

Solutions offered by most companies fail to deliver real value for a variety of reasons. Maybe the product or service itself doesn’t deliver on the promise made. Or the customer is unable to properly implement it. Or the customer is able to implement the product or service, but his or her expectations still aren’t met. Not that the reason matters in the end. Unless you can define, address and connect with value on your customer’s terms, you lose.

The answer is to quit selling your solution as you would sell any other product and start selling like a “business advisor,” a job that requires the diagnostic

skills of a doctor. You must help customers unearth and comprehend their most compelling problems. You must help them recognize the pain they’re experiencing in the absence of your solution, anticipate and respond to problems they will face in the future, and help them manage the pain of change they will no doubt go through as they implement your solution. You must help your customers provide greater value to their customers. In short, you become an indispensable source of business advantage.

I call such complex, robust, revenue-building solutions — which fully deliver on the value you promise and often go far above and beyond customer expectations — “prime solutions.” Creating them requires the complete consideration of the following:

- Value outcomes that the solution will generate
- Decisions that will underlie its purchase
- Challenge of implementation and usage

Clearly, this is not your grandfather’s method of selling!

So how can you move away from solution-based selling and toward becoming a prime solution provider? Here are a few thoughts to get you started:

- **Commit to moving into Era Three.** In Era One,

which ranges from 1950 to the mid-'70s, salespeople were persuaders. (This is a great product; you need it, and here's why it is the best.) In Era Two, mid-'70s to the mid-'90s, salespeople became problem solvers.

(Tell me what your problem is and I'll provide you with a tailored solution.) Although this approach lost its effectiveness a decade ago, many salespeople don't realize a shift has occurred. They are still developing, marketing and selling in the style of Era Two.

In Era Three, which began around 1995 and is still in effect today, the salesperson is seen as a source of business advantage. He or she essentially says, "Let me help you diagnose your problem and design, evaluate and implement a solution that provides a high level of value to your customers and sets you apart from the competition."

Operating in Era Three is a daunting prospect. It requires taking on the mindset of a physician and advising the customer, and it really is a deeper, more complex process than most salespeople are accustomed to. But if you want to gain and keep a solid foothold in a time when your customers have an endless supply of choices, you must do it.

- **Shift your thinking about the role of salespeople.** You may be starting to suspect that some professionals steeped in a solution-focused approach to selling are ill-prepared for the brave new world of Era Three. Sadly, this is sometimes true. Today's salespeople must function like general managers. They must have a thorough understanding of the customer's business, but more importantly, the business of their customer's customers. Salespeople must be able to pinpoint where customers may be losing revenue and failing to take advantage of opportunities. In short, they must be highly intelligent, observant, focused and collaborative.

Start paying close attention to the abilities, personalities, and attitudes of your sales team. When you hire new people, look for Era Three characteristics. Selling is no longer about psychological games and forceful personalities. After all, the goal of the

prime solution salesperson is not to get a signed order. His or her goal is a high-quality decision based on an honest, thorough and rational evaluation of the correlation between the customer's problem and the seller's solution. That decision may well indicate your solution is not the best fit. You need salespeople who recognize that as a quality outcome.

- **Change your position at the table.** In the first two eras of selling, the customer sat on one side of the (metaphorical) table and the salesperson sat across from him or her on the other. Today, both parties are on the same side of the table, sleeves rolled up and eyes trained on the customer's problems and opportunities. If you are a salesperson developing a prime solution, you will go through the following four phases:

Discover — Here, you set the stage for a compelling engagement and a continuing relationship based on trust and respect. You push beyond the traditional boundaries of prospecting to create a solid foundation on which to build a long-term, profitable relationship.

Diagnose — You maximize the customer's objective awareness of her dissatisfaction, whether or not that dissatisfaction supports your company's offerings. You assist the customer in understanding her situation and, as a result, reinforce your credibility by refusing to alter the customer's reality to fit your needs.

Design — This is where you help the customer create and understand the solution. It is a collaborative and highly interactive effort to help the customer sort through her expectations and alternatives to arrive at the optimal solution.

Deliver — You begin with the preparation and presentation of a formal proposal, and the customer formally accepts your solution. Next comes the implementation and support of the solution and the measurement and evaluation of results. Finally, the Deliver phase includes the maintenance and growth of the sales team's relationship with the customer.

- **Take steps to end cross-functional dysfunction in your company.** In a process like the one described above, selling doesn't happen in a vacuum. It cannot. Every department in your company — from R&D to marketing to customer service — must work together with sales to create real value for your customers. That means ending "cross-functional dysfunction" — the state in which internal politics and the incessant maneuverings for corporate power and resources cause managers to wall off access to their domains and restrict communication.

Since the salesperson puts himself in his customer's shoes, so must everyone else in the company. If not,

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the salesperson's efforts are wasted. You need to take a good, hard, honest look at the inner workings of your company, and, more to the point, your culture. Successful solution development depends on open communication and broad-based inquiries. If you see any evidence that such information flow is being impeded, do what is necessary to open up these channels.

Okay, you may be thinking. I understand that a solution-focused approach may not work for all companies. But it seems to be working fine for mine. If it ain't broken, why should I fix it — especially when fixing it sounds so difficult? To companies with that attitude, a word of warning.

No one can afford to be complacent. No one. The technological and global changes that have taken us from Era Two into Era Three will continue to unfold, probably in new and unforeseen directions. Your products and services can — and will — be copied.

Only by ingraining yourself deeply and inextricably into every aspect of your customers' day-to-day realities can you escape being replaced on a whim or due to a sudden shift in the market. It's tough, yes, but it's a tough marketplace. Shifting to this new paradigm will not only help you live to see tomorrow, but it will foster in you the agility and plain old street smarts to take your business in completely new, highly profitable directions. Realize that, and you'll see that it's well worth the effort. □



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