
The Decision To Buy

by JEFF THULL

How often has a sale been lost after we believed the customer clearly understood their problem and would make a logical, quality decision?

As sales professionals we have been taught that we must seek out and uncover our customer's decision process. We are to clearly determine who will be involved, what they are looking for, what criteria they will be using to evaluate the situation, how much money they will be willing to spend, etc. Once we have uncovered the customer's decision criteria, we are then advised to present our solution strengths, our added value, to match that decision process.

But what happens when your customer does not have a thorough decision process or seldom, if ever, buys your type of solution? You may find yourself presenting good information into a sub-optimal process. All too often, after the presentation, we find our-

selves shaking our heads in disbelief and saying to ourselves or our team, "I just don't understand! We clearly had the best value," or "They just ignored the superiority of our service," or "We thought they understood the flexibility of our software," or "The (insert your best feature here) — they just didn't get it."

Research tells us why they didn't understand. In the absence of a high-quality decision process, the customer is unable to sort through their complex problems and the competitive clutter surrounding them. Consider this question: "What percentage of your customers have a high-quality process to make a decision regarding your unique technology or services?" As we survey customers, the overwhelming answer

is "Not very many." The lack of a good decision process appears to be the norm, not the exception.

Comprehending Value

There are three primary reasons why your customers may not have a thorough decision process and may not be able to comprehend the true value of your solution.

The first is the ever-increasing level of complex products and the similarities of the top highly competitive solutions. In a complex business arena, the customer may lack the technical sophistication to differentiate between options that look similar on the surface. Additionally, the problems to be solved and the solutions being offered today are constantly evolving in their complexity. It's difficult or simply impossible to keep up.

Second, the customer is likely to have limited experience in making major decisions regarding this type of product or service. The more critical or significant the purchase, the less frequently the customer is going through

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the process. Down-sizing and re-engineering of organizations has left many junior managers to cope with decision responsibilities once held by seasoned and experienced managers. Simultaneously, in other organizations, decisions are moving higher and with more people involved that now influence areas of their business that previously were not their major concern.

The net result of these factors is that your high value solutions are presented into a less-than-optimal decision process, resulting in the customer being unable to discern the respective value of various alternatives. In this environment, the decision outcome is, at its best, random and unpredictable. At worst, decisions will degenerate to the lowest common denominator, which typically is a combination of price and specifications.

A solution provider can solve this predicament by guiding the customer through a process that will help them make a high-quality decision. This process will bring together both the customer and the seller to make a sound business agreement. Note the emphasis is on a decision process, not the selling process itself.

Consider for a moment a correlation between the sales professional and their customer and the physician and their patient. One of the major values a physician brings to the patient is a diagnostic decision process. The process is designed to position the physician and the patient to make a quality decision regarding the patient's condition and an agreement on the treatment. Again, the objective of the diagnostic

process is not to "sell" surgery, it's to guide the patient. Similarly, it is the responsibility of a sales professional to diagnose their customer's situation and together they will make a quality decision about the product or service to fix the problem.

The Decision Process

There are many advantages to building your strategy around the decision process. First of all, you will be differentiating yourself by your approach. Customers themselves will tell you why. While interviewing our clients' customers in the area of differentiation, we frequently received feedback that they seriously considered the solution presented and eventually bought from the account manager

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who appeared to "really know what he was doing" or "had the most thorough approach" or "asked the questions we hadn't considered."

Sales professionals should pay serious attention to this feedback. Your questions should support the customer's decision process by inviting them to think about areas of the problem or the solution they would not have considered without your guidance. You will, after all, gain



Top-performing sales professionals are guiding their customers through a high-quality decision process.



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more credibility through the questions you ask than the stories you tell.

So, how do you guide your customers through a high-quality decision process that will help them understand the value of your solution and be willing to invest in it?

The first step is to assemble a group of people within your organization and, if possible, a few of your best customers. This group should include those who understand the critical characteristics of the types of problems you solve and are able to understand the unique way in which your solution addresses those problems.

Next, explore the six major focus areas required to arrive at a quality decision process. They include thoroughly diagnosing the problem, determining the financial impact of the solution, establishing measurable outcomes, understanding solution alternatives, defining investment parameters and establishing the decision criteria. In each of these areas ask the following questions to help prevent decision mistakes:

1. What types of mistakes do customers tend to make while making this kind of decision? Make sure the decision process avoids these mistakes.

2. What do customers most

frequently overlook or not consider? Make sure the decision process brings these elements into consideration.

3. What are the most difficult things for a customer to understand? Determine ways to communicate these elements precisely.

4. What must a customer understand to reach a fully informed decision? Make sure the decision process brings these to the customer in an orderly fashion.

5. What level of professional education or experience is required to understand each specialty area of the decision? Make sure you engage people in the decision process that have the required experience or professional background.

If you observe and model what the top 10 percent of professional salespeople are doing, you will find this approach is the norm, not the exception. Top-performing sales professionals are guiding their customers through a high-quality decision process.

You will find qualified opportunities sooner and spend less time and money on the "resource drains." You will also find your cost of sales dropping and your sales revenues and proposal to sales ratios increasing. The end results are very profitable sales and completely satisfied customers. □

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