

REPRINTED FROM

agency sales magazine

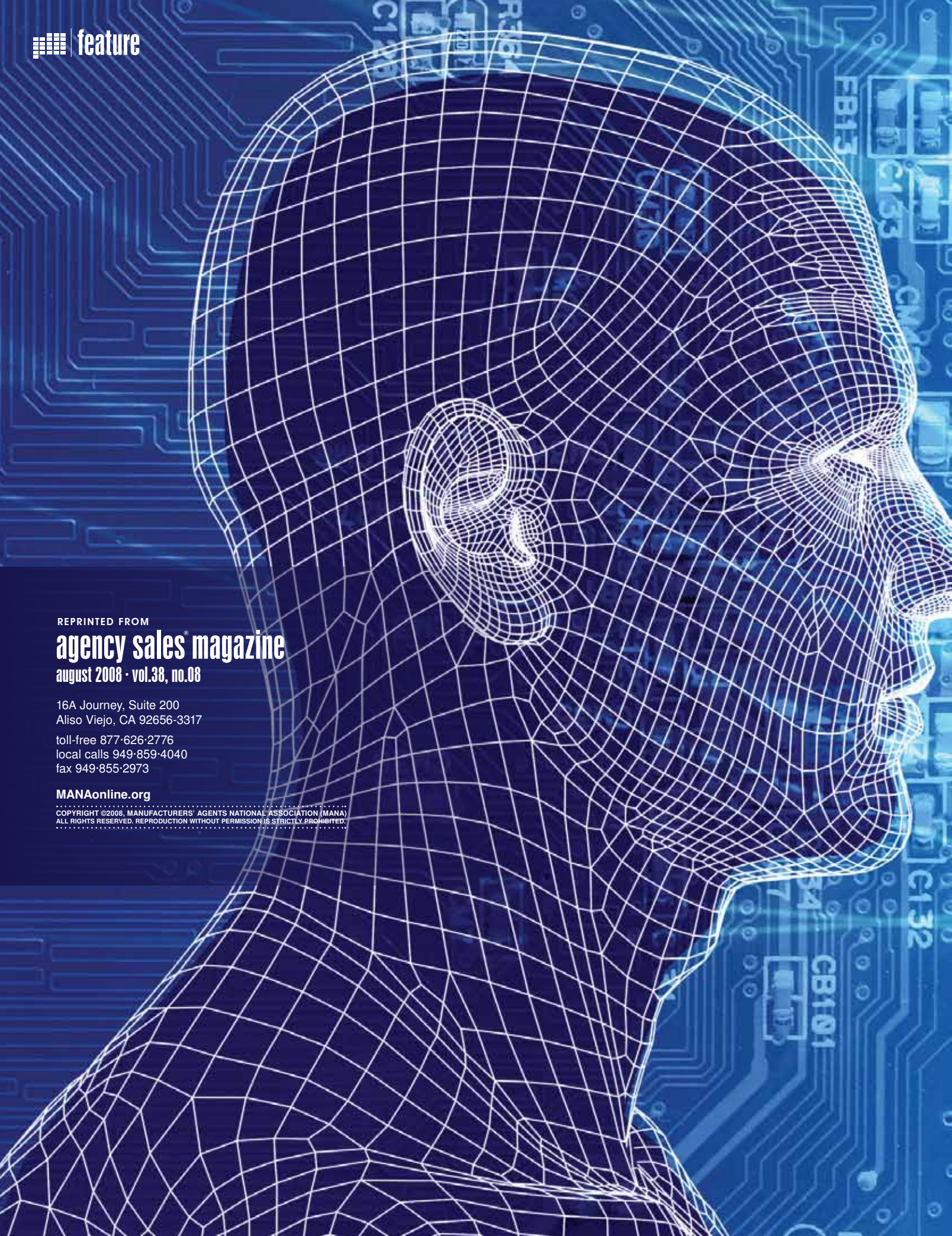
august 2008 • vol.38, no.08

16A Journey, Suite 200
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656-3317

toll-free 877-626-2776
local calls 949-859-4040
fax 949-855-2973

MANAonline.org

COPYRIGHT ©2008, MANUFACTURERS' AGENTS NATIONAL ASSOCIATION (MANA)
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.



CRITICAL SKILLS FOR SALES SUCCESS

EDITORIAL | JEFF THULL



JEFF THULL

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; primeresource.com.

I'm frequently asked, **“What are the most important skills a sales professional must have to succeed in today's competitive market?”** The first step in acquiring the skills for success is recognizing that a sales professional is a professional, just as physicians, attorneys and commercial pilots are professionals.

There are three critical components that form a solid foundation for professional skills development and result in exceptional performance for all professionals. They are systems, skills and disciplines.

The system is a set process or organized procedure that leads to a predictable result. Skills consist of the individual's knowledge and their ability to execute the system, and discipline, probably the most critical component, is about the mind-set of a professional — how they think. Discipline is about the quality of execution, and it includes the individual's emotional or mental stamina required to achieve the highest standards of performance. In short, these three areas represent knowing what to do, how to do it, and having the emotional strength to actually carry it out at a quality level.

That being said, the most important skills required to achieve exceptional results today involve the ability to:

Research and prepare: Before you engage with a new customer or a new opportunity “you must be prepared to not be prepared.” You should be so prepared that you are able to be relaxed, open-minded, and ready for any path this conversation may take you and your customer. Even highly experienced sales professionals don't just “wing it.” They make sure they understand their customer's industry, their customer's business and the job responsibilities of the individuals they will be working with before they walk into someone's office. They also recognize the characteristics of a high-quality opportunity and understand they need to be ready to guide their customer through a quality business decision.

So, as challenging as it may be, the exceptional salesperson does his homework to understand the very real, very complex problems that customers face. They are prepared to assist them in sorting through all the available alternatives, and create a solution that the customer would not have been able to come up with on their own.

Diagnose: The amateur salesperson “prepares to present,” but the successful professional prepares to “diagnose.” Quality diagnosis is the ability to guide the customer through

a conversation in a manner that brings awareness, clarity and ownership to the problem they are experiencing or the opportunity they are missing.

Within the customer's organization, the problem to be addressed may materialize in a number of places. Each individual impacted by the solution to the problem is responsible for a different function within the organization and each will have a different perspective on the problem, different kinds of information to offer, and different motivations to change or do nothing. Accordingly, while the diagnostic conversation has a generic framework, no two are the same. You will need to craft a unique conversation with each individual. The true professional is able to create and follow a diagnostic map and acquire the raw information needed to make an accurate diagnosis and design an efficient solution. They will ultimately understand how the absence of their solution might be affecting their customer in both business performance and individual job performance. Through this process they become true business advisors.

Dollarize: The key skill required to accomplish this is having the ability to help the customer quantify the financial impact of the situation. They will likely need assistance in understanding how much it is costing them not to have what you are about to propose. There are three possible outcomes top professionals are prepared for:

- ✦ They could find that the financial impact is large enough to justify the investment required for your solution, and you move forward and do business.
- ✦ They could find that the financial impact of the problem to be solved is not as great as other issues the customer is facing. In this case they plan when it will move to the top of their priority list.
- ✦ They could find that the financial impact is not enough to justify the solution. Given this situation, they may have to scale back the proposed solution to match the financial impact, or it may be more lucrative to find a greater opportunity elsewhere. They are always willing to walk away from poor quality business.

You can make the greatest leaps in sales performance... by simply changing your mind.

Collaborate: A fourth critical skill area is the ability to collaborate with the customer to “co-design” the solution to be proposed, in a manner that leaves the customer with pride of authorship and the confidence to invest. This process, which began with a thorough diagnosis, expanded with input from the salesperson’s extensive knowledge about the industry and having addressed related issues more often than the customer. In fact, the customer may never have faced solving these problems before. Collaborating through a problem solving relationship with open and honest communication creates trust. The professional salesperson knows that in order for the solution to be accepted, their customer must thoroughly understand the problem to be solved, take ownership, and champion the change for successful implementation.

“You’ve got to get your mind right.” You can make the greatest leaps in sales performance and raise your results from average to good or good to spectacular by simply

changing your mind. How we think precedes how we behave, and our mind-set is without a doubt the critical foundation for success. What top professionals have taught us is that the foundation of their mind-set is first and foremost an intense focus on bringing value to their clients. In other words, they believe and behave as if their success is an automatic by-product of their clients’ success. Our mind-set forms the stance we take with respect to our customers.

The Hippocratic Oath of a physician? “First do no harm” is at the heart of the thinking of the most successful sales professionals. They believe that their success will come from taking care of their customers and helping them become successful. They approach their customers thinking, “How can I help them succeed?” rather than, “What can I sell them?” They think like a businessperson, rather than a salesperson. They see it as a process done “with” the customer rather than “to” the customer. They know how to succeed — together. 