“Follow the Yellow Brick Road” - A new spin on selling during the Exploratory Process

At the time of its introduction, Carew’s Positional Selling System suggested a two-part selling process where a sales person identified needs using the Exploratory Process and then presented a solution that satisfies the Customer’s Needs using the Presentation Process as the delivery vehicle. By separating the functions of Exploring and Presenting, the Positional Selling System represented a huge leap forward in selling and remains a preferred methodology for first establishing needs before presenting solutions. The intentional design suggested that most of the “selling” in the classically-defined sense of the word, took place during the Presentation Process when a sales professional was communicating the value of the product or service by describing the Features, Advantages and Benefits, linked to the customer Needs discovered during the Exploratory Process.

The Exploratory Process originally introduced as a part of the Positional Selling System has three purposes:

1) Identify critical concerns as they relate to the customer’s needs
2) Determine whether those needs are being met and to what extent
3) Seek an opportunity to be a resource and respond to those needs

Using five key, data-gathering questions (Overview, Focusing, Realization, Closing and Dimensional questions), a salesperson can better understand the customer’s needs (the Gap between what should be and what is) and potentially heighten the customer’s awareness of those needs. Asking questions to establish a customer’s needs prior to explaining the Features of a product was a significant departure from earlier sales behaviors.

In the second decade of its existence, the Exploratory Process within the Positional Selling System was amended by the publishing of a new Theory Paper entitled “Fact Finding vs. Gap Finding: Finding Not Just facts, but GAPs,” by Jack Carew. The supplementary tone of the paper suggested that, in spite of the Positional Selling System, sales people continued to receive customer resistance to their benefit statements.

“Why Dorothy,” Glinda said, “you have had the power to go home to your Aunt Em and Uncle Henry since the very first day that you arrived. You can command your ruby slippers to take you anywhere you wish to go.”

Imagine how differently we would remember L. Frank Baum’s novel, The Wizard of OZ, if early on in the story, Dorothy had not followed the Yellow Brick Road but instead, simply clicked her heels three times and uttered the phrase “There’s no place like home.” Besides her friends missing their opportunity to receive their respective brain, heart and courage, Dorothy would never have learned to appreciate home as much as she did upon her return. In much the same manner, there is a change afoot among our customers and it demands we revisit some of our approaches to selling, even those that served us and our customers so well in the past.

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By Ed Albertson, Vice President - National Accounts
Carew International, Inc.
TAKE THE LEAD

during the Presentation Process, causing both frustration and a return to Feature-laden presentations which were even less effective. As the paper identified, “The Exploratory Process is not merely a matter of asking questions, it is a strategy.” The paper continued on to validate not only how critical the use of questions was to help a sales professional uncover needs, but emphasized the real competitive advantage of such an approach is in the customer’s answers. Customer outcomes were the real “Holy Grail” of the Exploratory Process and the strategic value of Exploratory questioning was in recognizing the difference between uncovering facts and a higher level of inquiry which focuses upon customers’ desired outcomes. Though facts are important and necessary for a sales person to know, they possess far less value to customers who are generally more concerned with some set of measurable outcomes they do not yet have.

As a new age of selling has dawned, much has been written and talked about dealing with the notion of customer value. Most conventional thinking defines customer value as being “measured by both the price customers are willing to pay and their satisfaction with products and services.” Armed with this definition, sales professionals have been continually challenged to communicate the value of solutions to customers who have on-demand access to an almost overwhelming supply of technologically provided information. Thus the act of communicating value has been reduced to nothing more than the original sin of “Feature-dumping,” which the Positional Selling System was specifically created to combat. Simultaneously, today’s technology enables competitors to more readily and cheaply enter existing markets with duplicate or improve upon products and services, diminishing the ability to differentiate with products and services alone. This attempt to commoditize everything (yes, everything) has exerted additional pressure on sales professionals and companies who seek to differentiate themselves and command higher margins for their unique offerings and capabilities.

Not to be thwarted in their quest for differentiation and unwilling to be written out of the sales process altogether, today’s sales professional has quickly acknowledged creating value as a vastly superior approach to selling. Recognizing the need to become creators of value has spawned its own collection of challenges, not the least among them being the commoditizing of the very notion of “value creation” itself. Therefore, it is time to once again re-visit the Positional Selling System models and find the appropriate sales approach in response to newer and greater customer expectations.

A good place for refining the Positional Selling System and, more specifically the Exploratory portion, is to re-emphasize the importance of understanding the customer’s perception of their Needs. As noted earlier, with today’s information proliferation and just-in-time availability, most customers believe they can self-diagnose their needs and self-prescribe from the range of solutions that are known to them. In many instances, they certainly can. However, if self-diagnosis was a feasible option in every case, there would be no need for the venerable sales professional and, in fact, that role would add an unappreciated and unwanted cost to the entire sales process. A host of current purchasing models have made just such a business case for removing the sales person from their buying process with the expectation of a corresponding reduction in price reflecting the sales person’s absence and, by definition, lack of value in the buying equation. Reverse auctions and free-market, online auction houses are good examples of how the sales person is eliminated from the selling process. As a matter of fact, one could argue in those instances, there is no selling process, with only a buying process taking place.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions Glossary of Marketing Definitions defines “perception” as the cognitive impression that is formed of “reality” which in turn influences the individual’s actions and behavior toward that object. Carew International research has famously pointed to the term and associated model “Odds Are” to represent a person’s individual psychological reality and to further suggest the propensity to see the world in those terms at an average rate of 67% of the time (thus, the “Odds Are Factor”). Accepting these definitions as a given state, to effectively create value while we sell, we must allow for the filtering process activated by both the customer and salesperson and therefore seek to align...
the two views into one. Said another way, when we are Exploring the Customer’s Needs, we need to continually and consistently validate the value the customer attributes to their Ideal (the future results they are seeking) and their Actual (current results they are achieving).

Lacking a thorough and aligned view of those two dimensions, we run a grave risk of our customers being able to comfortably settle into what Thomas Homer-Dixon labels consequential denial, a state of buying paralysis which negates a sale of our solutions. Homer-Dixon describes a situation where “…we don’t have to do anything if we can convince ourselves that our problems won’t have serious consequences,” and, “…we can also deny the consequences of our problems by convincing ourselves that we can deal with them once they get really bad.” Either case can lead to inaction, penalizing both the customer who misses a useful solution and the salesperson who loses a sale.

With that concept as a beginning, we have the impetus to apply a newer, Value-creating sales strategy for planning and executing our Exploratory questions. Beginning with the questions we ask to establish the customer’s Ideal, we can create customer value by searching for the desired Outcomes behind the Ideal. That is to say, we explore what outcomes might there be beyond those initially stated by our customer, what additional benefits might result, why these matter, and how they can best be measured. Likewise, as we surface the Actual (results our customer is currently achieving), we can plan and ask questions that bring to light the problems behind-the-problems. With this approach, we are creating value for our customers as we help them recognize desired outcomes and current problems not immediately apparent to them, often based upon our experiences and knowledge from our work with many customers in many different circumstances. In each of these instances, the differentiating aspect is the expertise and knowledge of the sales professional, not the features and advantages of the product or service about to be sold. This approach requires the sales person to take a leap of faith in the questioning process and allow for a fair amount of self-discovery on the part of the customer, with that customer self-discovery verified by the sales person along the way. This new spin on the Positional Selling System offers greater differentiation by creating value with the questions that are asked during the Exploratory Process rather than depending upon the features, advantages and benefits that are extolled in the Presentation Process.

In The Wizard of OZ, Glinda (the Good Witch) could have very easily and much earlier told Dorothy how to solve her problem of returning home at the first mention of that need by Dorothy. But the solution had much more of an effect (and made for a better book and movie) after Dorothy had the chance to explore (with Glinda’s help along the way) how nice her home with Auntie Em and Uncle Henry really had been and how dangerous her “Somewhere-over-the-Rainbow” fantasy world really was. Dorothy’s real need to follow the Yellow Brick Road was motivated by her personal perception of what “home” represented to her when she decided to run away from home in the first place. Only after uncovering the entire situation behind the world of OZ (and behind the curtain) did she really appreciate the solution and her own conclusion that “there’s no place like home.” That better and stronger set of “Impacts” and “Outcomes” were of real value to her and her new-found friends in a way they had never imagined.

Today our “ruby slippers” of sales skills build upon the Exploratory Process we’ve had all along and if we “click our heels” these three times, we might just be able to follow our own yellow brick road to greater results:

1) Plan and ask questions to identify measurable Outcomes behind the Ideal customer situation.
2) Plan and ask questions to surface measureable Impacts behind the Real customer situation; and

3) Let the Customer state the Needs in their own words and with their own energy ("Odds Are") for more effect (because people tend to support what they help create and have less of a tendency to dispute the value of the Needs they confirm).

Adding value as a sales professional is not restating the obvious or sharing facts known to all and valued by few. It is the unique capability to help the customer understand and realize the measureable Impacts and Outcomes they desire as well as the measureable Outcomes and Impacts the customers’ customer desires! And more importantly, realize the outcome “their customers” desire. Selling has shifted forward in the Positional Selling System to include the ability to “sell” with differentiation during the Exploratory Process and even Dorothy would agree, that is a “horse of a different color!”

Footnotes

1 The Wizard of Oz: L. Frank Baum; p. 181; (Copyright 2001, 2002 Kidsbooks, Inc. 230 Fifth Avenue New York, New York)

2 “The Positional Selling System: The Exploratory Process” theory paper; © Carew International

3 “Fact Finding vs. Gap Finding: Finding Not Just Facts, but GAPs”: theory paper; ©Carew International


6 The Wizard of Oz: L. Frank Baum; p. 181; (Copyright 2001, 2002 Kidsbooks, Inc. 230 Fifth Avenue New York, New York)

Ed Albertson, Vice President of National Accounts

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