

Consultative Selling: The Three Roles of A Consultative Salesperson

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As we are all aware, getting to know the customer and understanding their needs is not a quick and easy process. Customers possess a hierarchy of needs, which have to be uncovered gradually. This is why we need a new type of salesperson for a new type of customer.

So what does this new breed of salesperson look like? For a start he or she has progressed from the more traditional, 'lone ranger' approach of selling to a more team-based consultative style. Our research shows that a consultative salesperson needs to fulfill three basic roles, that of Business Consultant, Strategic Orchestrator and Long Term Ally.

By combining all three roles salespeople are more able to develop and maintain long-term relationships with clients. At the same time, organizations need to ensure that they provide their salespeople with the vital support systems and training that enable them to make the most of their knowledge and skills

1) Business Consultant

Gone are the days in which a salesperson could simply walk into an office, establish a good rapport with the client, show he/she had thorough knowledge of their products and services and clinch the sale. Nowadays, the emphasis is on establishing long-term, mutually beneficial relationships and in order to achieve this, the salesperson needs to earn the right to continue discussions with his/her client. Before they can proceed to sell their products or services, the salesperson needs to reassure the client of their integrity, reliability and ability to understand and recommend the appropriate solution. They can do this by demonstrating;

Up-to-date knowledge of business news and current affairs Best practices include - reading newspapers, magazines, journals, trade publications and other sources of business information; maintaining membership of appropriate professional organizations; acknowledging gaps in knowledge and taking steps to fill them; locating or developing databases with information on customers, their industries and their own customers.

An in-depth understanding of the customer's industry, company and strategies as well as an appreciation of "the big picture". Best practices include - gaining an understanding of the issues at all levels of the customer's organization including strategic, departmental and individual needs; seeking to understand the customer's perceptions of market trends, company direction, plus potential product and service needs.

A readiness to exchange information and ideas between the supplier and client organization. Best practices include - familiarizing the customer with your own industry and companies; sharing useful business information even if

it does not directly impact on the sales effort; demonstrating the cost-cutting or revenue producing benefits of your products and services.

The ability to listen and absorb information. Best practices include - refining the way you identify customer's needs by asking the right questions and listening actively to customer comments; speaking at the listener's level of knowledge; using stories and analogies effectively; asking for feedback on the clarity of your message. By demonstrating comprehensive knowledge, outstanding communication skills and the proper attitude, the salesperson earns the right to move beyond the role of supplier to that of a valued business consultant

2) Strategic Orchestrator

To fulfill this role, the salesperson needs to be seen as the key person responsible for engineering the appropriate solution. This involves coordinating all of the information, resources and activities needed to support customers before, during and after the sale. It means enlisting support from specialist colleagues and hence the move away from the "lone ranger" approach.

According to our research, effective Strategic Orchestrators have mastered the following competencies:

- Knowledge of their own company's structure
- Expertise in developing and managing a team
- Ability to manage priorities and performance
- Ability to co-ordinate delivery and service to customers
- Efficiency
- Flexibility

Customers of Strategic Orchestrators **express a high level of confidence** in the salesperson and his or her organization. This increased confidence can lead to faster buying decisions, increased repeat business and strengthened links between customer and supplier organizations. Working as Strategic Orchestrator, salespeople are also able to develop their organization's capacity for team selling.

3) Long Term Ally

Since the key to differentiation is in forging closer links with clients, the role of Long Term Ally is a crucial one. Once the salesperson has earned the right, it is important to develop and maintain the relationship.

As the term suggests, acting as a Long Term Ally, involves maintaining contact with the client even when there is no immediate prospect for a sale. It also suggests that the salesperson needs to be committed to the long-term development of the relationship.

Our research shows that top salespeople demonstrate this commitment by continuously looking for ways to:

Build interpersonal trust

Create and maintain a positive image of the sales organization

Inspire respect for their company

Show genuine concern for their customers' short and long-term interest

Identify ways to strengthen the quality of their business relationship

Help the customer meet needs within his or her organization

Deal with issues openly and honestly

Deliver on promises: It is also crucial for the salesperson to ensure that the relationship between the organizations is mutually beneficial. In other words, it is essential to build and honor the expectation that reaching agreements will mean good business for both parties.

At the end of the day, taking a long-term approach proves more profitable since the customer will recognize that the salesperson is taking a committed interest and in so doing is giving honest and open advice. This inevitably encourages the customer to trust the salesperson and to view him or her as a colleague rather than an opponent

In Summary-Long Term Allies and Mutually Beneficial Agreements

Supplier Organizations Must Be Willing To

Elicit feedback from customers regarding overall satisfaction with the products / services delivered

Maintain regular contact with current and prospective customers

Alert customers to new developments in own organization

Review the business relationship underlying each account on a regular basis

Buyer Organization Must Be Willing To..

Keep suppliers "in the loop" regarding the company's strategic direction and needs

Value the record of service provided by supplier organizations above lower cost competitors

Grant access and information about their customers to the supplier organizations

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