



EXCEPTIONAL SELLING: MINDSET AS A DIFFERENTIATOR





What if, instead of caveat emptor (“let the buyer beware”), those of us in sales borrowed a page from the medical field and made a commitment to “first, do no harm,” to operate with the utmost integrity, to treat our customers the way we would like to be treated? The concept of genuinely caring about your customer – wanting what is best for your customer, putting that above what is best for you and allowing that to guide all aspects of your relationship, with the exception of negotiations (where there must be an equal focus on what is best for both parties) in my experience, is rare, and yet, very effective, making it an important differentiator.

Several years ago, I was working with a customer where I had a significant opportunity to expand the relationship by building a week long training curriculum (a “boot camp”) that addressed multiple topics. We responded to the RFP for the entire curriculum and were awarded the entire curriculum. Shortly after we started the design process, I learned that another organization had developed a program the prior year to address one element of the curriculum, a program that had already been delivered for a number of key teams and had been well received. I asked to review that content so that I could build upon it and integrate language from it into the new work. In doing so, I determined that the original program was virtually identical to what we had proposed and I suggested that the customer not award that one piece of the curriculum to us, instead continuing to work with the existing provider. We certainly could have done the work and it would have been relevant – but it was not in the customer’s best interests to pay us to create what would have been virtually a carbon copy of what they had paid for the prior year. Yes, I gave away revenue – a recommendation that paid off tenfold. It helped solidify me as a trusted partner/strategic partner to my customer – and enabled me to create an excellent relationship with the other provider. Our relationship with that customer steadily grew from training for one function (salespeople) to several functions (salespeople, sales leaders, and engineering sales support), from one division (enterprise) to several divisions (enterprise, commercial and channel management), and ultimately to every region in the world. That would not have been possible without establishing complete trust – and of course, delivering on what was promised. I have had similar experiences with other customers throughout the years.

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I often say to customers – before the sale has been made, “If I understand what your budget is for the initiative, I can help you determine how to allocate it most effectively.” Gaining access to that level of detail isn’t easy and is virtually impossible if you aren’t trusted—and you can’t be trusted if you aren’t focused on what is in the customer’s best interests.

Genuinely caring about what is best for your customer transforms multiple aspects of the relationship and sales/buying process. For example, imagine the impact of genuinely caring when asking questions. When approached in a customer-centric way, they become a true open exploration vs. a means to your predetermined end to sell the customer X. How about genuinely caring when responding to customer objections and concerns? I have seen too many people become combative – or annoyed and frustrated that yet again they are dealing with an objection or concern that has been voiced by other customers, thinking to themselves, “When are these customers going to ‘get it’ or worse, ‘get over it?’”. They forget that while they have addressed that same concern countless times, for this customer it is still new – and deserves to be acknowledged and respected and addressed in a way that communicates that we care about the customer’s perspective, where we come alongside the customer and collaboratively talk through the issue(s). The same is true in customer service, where on many teams the focus tends to be on the length of the call rather than the content of the conversation. Too often, arrogance, immaturity, being self-absorbed or leadership pressure gets in the way. If we adopt the mindset that we are there to support our customers as they work through their *decision process* (vs. driving our *sales process*) in order to identify the best possible solution for them, we are much more likely to gain our customers’ trust and with that in place, the sales process becomes immeasurably easier – and is often accelerated.

At the same time, it isn’t always easy for companies to adopt this customer-centric mindset. From an operations perspective, much has been written about the challenges and benefits of a customer-centric organization and how to structure the organization to support a customer-centric approach¹. This excerpt from a July-August HBR article helps put it in perspective:



“The new conventional wisdom on corporate structure is that companies can do better by organizing themselves around customer groups. The logic sounds compelling: A customer-centric structure, as the approach is known, can help a company understand its customers better, develop deeper relationships with them, and improve customer satisfaction. Some 30% of Fortune 500 firms, including Intel, Dell, IBM, and American Express, are already on board, and the numbers are growing all the time.

But customer alignment doesn’t work for everyone. Cisco and Xerox, for example, have seen poor results. And even when it does work, a company can go through years of poor performance before the benefits kick in. Is there a flaw in the logic?

Our analysis of Fortune 500 firms shows that the strengths of the strategy are real: Customer-centricity does allow divisions to focus on specific customer segments, and this narrower focus increases their knowledge of those groups. But it introduces greater complexity into communication and decision making and leads to duplication of certain functions across divisions. Details of the competition and of customer segments determine whether the positives outweigh the negatives, and years can pass before customer-centricity bears fruit.”

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However, even if the entire organization does not restructure to become customer-centric, the sales team can shift its own mindset. Yet, if we are going to be completely honest with ourselves, beyond the operational challenges, there is a cultural hurdle to be cleared before an individual, team or organization can become truly customer-centric. The concept of caveat emptor is deeply ingrained in society – and has been for centuries. Sadly, there is no clear moral obligation to behave with complete integrity in business. Focusing on what is best for your customer – and putting that before what is best for you – should not be a revolutionary concept – and yet, unfortunately, in today’s short-term, profit focused business environment, long term benefits are too often abandoned for short term gain.



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(Consider the well-known and wide spread tactic of sacrificing a larger opportunity with a longer sales cycle in order to push a shorter-term sale through at the end of the quarter to make your numbers – even when it is not the best approach for the client, or using highly experienced team members to win business, then assigning less expensive junior level team members to actually do the work in order to increase profit margin.) With executives in their roles on average for only a limited period of time², it is *almost* understandable – they need to make a quick mark or they’ll be gone. Given that, many leaders believe they cannot afford to demonstrate the patience required to permit their teams to treat customers the right way, others lack executive level endorsement – essential for successfully creating a customer-centric organization. Fear and greed too often drive individual actions. And yet, consider the damage being done to the customer relationship – and to employee motivation when we operate in a way that is not consistent with our values. It is far more difficult to establish a new relationship than it is to expand an existing one. Are you genuinely willing to push product and/or make the short term sale if it means risking those hard won relationships? With regard to employee motivation, if you believe that people are inherently good and want to do the right thing, imagine how destructive repeatedly pushing products and selling something just to meet quota is for the psyche. Support for behaving in a customer-centric way must come from the executive team – they set the tone for the rest of the organization. Many sales organizations have extremely aggressive revenue targets with daily and weekly commit calls focused on short term wins and/or set and aggressively measure product adoption goals, both of which promote counterproductive internally-focused vs. customer-focused behavior, as well as a short term emphasis that erodes longer-term growth – and quality.

Aggressive sales targets and operating in your customer’s best interests are NOT mutually exclusive – but it takes finesse and open-minded leadership to keep them in balance. Product adoption goals are trickier. Working toward those goals while operating in your customer’s best interests leads to a sales team that is confused at best and disingenuous at worst – and choosing to operate in your customer’s best interests in an unsupportive environment can be career limiting. No wonder so many salespeople resort to pushing product and end up adopting other ineffective sales behaviors.



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Despite those internal pressures, when it comes to sales leadership, the continued emphasis on short term sales and product adoption over and above what is in the customer’s best interests is surprising given the success stakeholder focused or customer-centric organizations have achieved. One great example: Salesforce has experienced tremendous success and has been lauded and awarded for its Ohana culture,³ which includes and goes far beyond what we mean here by being customer-centric. The Ohana culture is “a spirit of being genuine, inclusive, caring, and compassionate, enjoying a healthy dose of fun and treating those around you like family (or, as they say in Hawaii, “Ohana”). It’s an outlook that emphasizes the importance of interacting kindly and honestly with those around us.” As a result, Salesforce has been named the Best Place to Work/Most Admired Companies/Happiest Companies to Work for by multiple surveys and for many years running. As CEO, Marc Benioff, says, “I run a company based on stakeholders, not shareholders” – an approach that is paying off – Salesforce has also experienced impressive year over year growth for many years running. Salesforce is not alone. According to that same July-August 2015 HBR article: “A good example of customer-centricity is Tumi, the innovative U.S.-based maker of suitcases, which has been customer-centric since its founding in 1975. Each division focuses on one customer group—premium customers or young adults, for example—and, through research, designs products for that segment. Surveys commissioned by the company show that it does a good job of satisfying customers by matching their needs. Intel, whose top-level divisions had been organized around product groups or functional areas, adopted customer-centricity in 2005, and its improved knowledge of and commitment to customers has resulted in greater customer satisfaction.” A customer centric approach also works in customer service. Consider Nordstrom, an organization in a very challenging industry (retail sales), renowned for its customer service. Nordstrom takes customer service to a unique – customer-focused – level. It’s guidelines are simple: “Use your own initiative to provide customers with exceptional levels of service. You’ll never be criticized for doing too much for a customer, only for doing too little. If you’re ever in doubt, err on the side of doing too much rather than too little.”



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As one story goes, a shopper was looking for an item by a designer carried by Nordstrom that appeared to be out of stock in the customer's size. The salesperson conducted a thorough search for the item and informed the customer that unfortunately, neither that store nor any other Nordstrom store had the item in question in the required size. She then suggested that the customer try the designer's own store that had just opened in the same mall, suggesting the designer's store might have or be able to find the item in question. In other words, a Nordstrom salesperson sent a customer to another retail store. She did this rather than trying to sell the customer a similar item that Nordstrom had in stock in the correct size because she was focused on doing what was best for that customer. Rhetorical question: If you were that shopper, how likely would you be to return to Nordstrom's? Ritz Carlton similarly empowers its team members, delegating authority and accountability to local front line employees. They have the freedom to anticipate and address guest needs, working within broad corporate guidelines to compensate guests in the moment in order to resolve concerns. According to research from Deloitte and Touche, customer-centric companies were “**60% more profitable** compared to companies that were not focused on the customer” – making a customer-centric approach not only the right thing to do ethically, but also a sound business decision. To quote a customer who has struck the right balance, regardless of what is expected and measured – I believe that if you “sell the right products to the right people, the revenue will follow.”

After 25+ years of partnering with sales teams in the leading organizations around the world, it is disappointing that the concept of a truly customer-centric sales approach remains a challenge for so many teams – and surprising considering that I have experienced firsthand, on multiple occasions, the powerful positive impact a customer-centric approach can have on a relationship – and the bottom line – an observation backed up by anecdotal evidence and research. As far as I'm concerned, it's the only way to sell. **What are you waiting for? Go ahead, first, do no harm.**



¹HBR July-August 2015: <https://hbr.org/2015/06/customer-centric-org-charts-arent-right-for-every-company>; PWC: <http://www.strategyand.pwc.com/reports/customer-centric-organization-from-pushing>

²According to a Feb 2016 *Fortune* article, the 500 largest companies in the U.S. have a median CEO tenure of 4.9 years and according to [BlueSteps](#) 2013 Executive Mobility Report, 44% of senior executives will stay in their current position for 2-5 years.)

³ Salesforce's Ohana Culture : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpcbejAnOxM&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>

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