

# Driving *Great* Sales Performance

By Brent Burgoyne, Red Vooma

Sales is often described as the second-oldest profession – and often confused with the first. This mildly amusing sentence masks deep dysfunctionalities which are embedded in the sales philosophy and sales processes of so many organisations. In this article my intention is to lay out not just a modern way of thinking about sales, but also to give some practical direction, and to suggest next steps.

In many organisations we have come a long way from the traditional view of the sales guy as someone with a shoeshine and a smile, whose professional development runs to reading books with titles like, ‘How to Sell Anything, to Anyone, Anywhere, at Any Time.’ But in many organisations, although a transition to a more modern view is underway, it can be a slow process. The sales organisation in many businesses has traditionally thrived on ego-based approaches: ‘We make target, no matter what.’ Training metaphors related to going to *war*, going into *battle*, and *crushing* the opposition are quite common.

No wonder the term ‘vendor’ is a pejorative in many companies acquiring goods and services! The battle lines are drawn by the need for Procurement to play the role of a necessary buffer against the personal aspirations of an aggressive sales team wanting to make their targets at almost any cost. In this contest between buyer and seller there are usually winners and losers – and the criteria for establishing who the winners and losers are can overshadow in complexity the nature of the sale itself.

There are better, wiser ways to do this!

What if our underlying purpose in engaging with the market and selling to clients was to provide solutions (and these could be commodities as

products, wrapped in services, delivered by your company alone or by a consortium of partners) that exactly meet the client’s needs?

Hmmm ... *Solutions that exactly meet the client’s needs*. Well, that’s what companies actually want to buy. They want to buy and implement solutions that satisfy their aspirations or alleviate their pain. Not just some square-peg-in-a-round-hole product that you happen to be selling, but what will *actually* help to relieve some piece of pain they are currently experiencing.

This first step towards a different way of thinking about sales isn’t just a warm and fuzzy way of wrapping what we have always been doing in a different covering – it is a fundamental shift from dysfunctional approaches and mindsets, towards a way of engaging with clients that has the potential to build deep partnerships, and to unlock the value that can occur as a result of true mutual collaboration.

So the first conclusion to draw is that sales is not something you do ‘to’ a client, but something you do ‘with’ a client. It requires much greater levels of transparency from our sales people, and wiser ways of authentically encouraging openness on the part of our clients. When this is manifested, clients are *much* more open about how much money they have, where else they might get their hands on budget to pay for your solution, who in the organisation is trying to torpedo the partnership you’re trying to build - and a whole host of other issues that are essential to address before getting the deal done. Sales guru Mahan Khalsa goes so far as to say, “Let’s get real, or let’s not play!”

While the ego-based, previously-acceptable way of selling worked in the short term, it has passed its sell-by date. Client organisations simply have more choices and much more wisdom, and given that your competitors are



remaking their sales philosophy and sales process according to these new, wiser ways of functioning in the world, what is needed in as-yet untransformed organisations is a complete transformation of the sales force. From the worldview and mindset of the sales director to the client-engagement process of the newest consultant, there are smarter ways to keep sales results, the lifeblood of the organisation, alive, healthy and growing.

The implications of all this are very practical. What follows in this article is an abridged version of what I would tell a sales team – perhaps a sales director, his national sales manager, and the regional sales managers – in a day-long seminar. This would be particularly relevant if your organisation has an underperforming sales force – if, for example, they are behind the curve in making sales target, or if they are leaving business on the table, or if they are not selling your whole range of products (it's so tempting to focus on the easy ones to sell), or if they are struggling to navigate the complexities of the client's organisational landscape, or if they are just plain unfocused and disorganised.

First some *principles*, and then some practices.

The *first principle* is almost counterintuitive: 'Leave your ego at the door.' Why would you *do* such a thing? Surely, people try to persuade me, ego is needed to overcome objections, to keep us going when we are discouraged, and when we need to beat out competitors. Not really. Not if we are to create the kinds of open relationships – business deals done in a container of trust and safety that allow much more value creation than if we are simply carving up a pie and trying to get the largest share for ourselves. In many cases, unruly egos can be gotten under control by simple awareness. And by repeated practice.

*The second principle* will likely make much more sense, but is not something that many sales professionals are used to doing: 'No guessing.' One of the biggest pieces of work we do in our consultancy is to bridge the gulf of

mutual incomprehension between the sales forces we are helping and the clients they are trying to sell to. This takes deep exploration of the client's business landscape, strategic intent, pain points, constraints, decision-making processes, ways of thinking about money, criteria for selecting a partner/supplier, and so much else. It also demands adherence to the principle of seeking first to understand (and only then to be understood). This explains the importance of the first principle – when we are operating out of our egos we are much more inclined to be talking rather than listening, and we tend not to learn much about our clients – and how could we hope to learn what we think we already know? 'No guessing' is a principle with profound implications. Given that the single greatest enemy of communication is *the illusion of it* (we *thought* we had communicated ...), to be constantly checking in with ourselves that we are *not* guessing - almost like a virus checker in the background on our PC is scanning our files even as we're working on them - is a practice of profound significance. In our professional practice, we have had clients come back to us after they have installed the 'No guessing' principle as part of a 'sales operating system' and say, "Our clients are amazed by the difference in how we are engaging with them. They say it feels different – and better - and they are wondering why we didn't do this earlier."

The ideas regarding listening to the client and understanding client needs are not new. Many sales consultants have been doing this for a decade or more. It's common sense, even if not always common practice. The *new wrinkle* is how this plays out differently because of our intent. Jack Welch, former Chairman and CEO of General Electric, who at the time of his retirement had presided of the greatest increase of shareholder value in history said, "I find that when I focus on the financial well-being of my client, that money and success flows to me in a completely natural way."



If our intention is to help our client succeed through our engagement with them (not *selling* to them), the potential exists to create value-generating partnerships that could never exist if we are trying to force and manipulate clients into buying from us.

So, naturally, the *third principle*: Differentiate yourself by how you engage with your clients. “How you sell, indicates how you will solve.”

One way of thinking about the nature of our relationships in the sales space is to contemplate what we call the ‘Six Levels of Relationship.’ At the lowest level, the client (well, potential client) *doesn't even know your name*. So it is really easy to move up a level, just by contacting them. Then you are at the second level, where *they know your name*, but not much else is happening. At the next level (level three), they are *friendly* to you. How many contacts have our salespeople made in organisations where the people were friendly to them, but nothing else happened? That's because they tried to do the sale on the back of being at level three. Level four is when *they actually like you*. Their interaction with you has pleased them, and there is now some warmth. But they can like you and *still* not buy from you. Because you didn't get to the next level up: Level five - Where *they respect you*. And respect is bred of the sales consultant's fundamental trustworthiness and professional competence. You can't fake this. Many sales teams do huge amounts of work at this level. And many do not even know that there is one more height to scale: To move to level six - where *they cannot live without you*. At level six, we are the preferred provider, we and our client are partners, we are the trusted advisor, and our competitors will find it difficult to replace us. At this level, clients pay



premium prices, annual renewals are very close to automatic and we are ‘behind the firewall’ in the organisation, with access to other opportunities and all the information surrounding them.

Now to some related *practices* ...

The practical application of this pyramid is that we should sell to the right level in the organisation. Many consultants pride themselves on the strength of their relationship with a mid-level contact in an organisation. Having responded to an enquiry from a middle manager in a client organisation, they mentally lock themselves in and think ‘this is the client.’ All well and good as a place to start – but you cannot sell to people who do not have the authority to make the final decision and you certainly cannot sell to people who don't have a budget to spend.

To reach the top of the pyramid means to be the supplier they can't live without – and you want those with both decision-making authority and access to budget to be the ones who can't live without you.

So many consultants will do some preliminary listening and then pull a team together to write a proposal that contains lots of guessing - especially because the information we have about the client's need comes from this one person - and then they submit it to their middle manager contact – their only contact – and hope that this person will be able to sell it to the decision-makers who typically sit high in the organisation. A more modern way of engaging with our client is to map the organisation from a political perspective: To understand who are the people who have an interest in the solution, what their relationships with one another are, what their buying roles are, and then to engage with them one by one. One of our colleagues likens this to tightening the nuts on the wheel of a car when replacing a flat tire - we go round and round, until the work has been done on every nut.



Engaging in structured conversations, to explore the strategic intent of each of the people we engage with, to understand their pain, to know what they have tried in the past, to understand what their idea of an ideal solution is, is to enable us to avoid the cardinal sin: “Writing proposals for people whose criteria for deciding are not known to us.”

If we understand what our client is trying to achieve in her business and can then align our product, service or solution to what they wake up every morning thinking about, the sales process is a more natural one, and then closing the deal is easier – we do not have to depend on manipulation, on forcing a decision, or asking closing questions that get the client to do things they don't want to do.

Our recommended process for the first structured conversation is:

- Understand the client's business landscape.
- Understand the client's strategic intent.
- Understand pain relating to achieving this intent.
- Establish *Evidence* (“How do you know you have pain?” and “Where does it show up?”) and *Impact* (“What metrics would be impacted if you solved this problem, and in what way?”)
- Understand other dependencies.
- Understand the client's view of what the solution would look like.

In this first conversation we also explore the political landscape with our contact (“Who else has an interest in the solution or an influence in the decision-making?”)

This is much more about listening and exploring than telling: Remember, clients don't care too much about *your* stuff. They care about *their* stuff.

From here, it's a very short jump to the process of co-creating your proposed solution with your client – based on the principles that if they build it with

you, it's *theirs*. Even if you're selling a commodity, answering the question of what services can it be wrapped in, is a co-created process - done by exploring deeply with many in the client organisation to make sure that as much pain as possible is being alleviated.

A shift to a modern way of thinking about sales, with its attendant principles and practices, can enable a sales force to reinvent itself as a much higher-performing organism. Instead of vying with the oldest profession, it will have the landscape of business-to-business value creation all to itself.

#### About the author and his company

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*Red Vooma ([www.redvooma.com](http://www.redvooma.com)) is a corporate advisory firm with a sales performance advisory practice with a focus on driving great B2B sales performance. We subscribe to the notion that in ratcheting up sales results, we should start with what the people in your sales force already know. Our speciality is in bringing the best of our thinking and blending it with the best of your thinking to create a sales performance solution that exactly meets your needs.*

*Red Vooma consultants work with clients who need help in the sales space and craft sales performance solutions that exactly meet their needs, from sales strategy review, to sales force assessment, to coaching and developing of sales leaders and managers, and to field work in both developing individual consultants and pursuing specific opportunities.*

