

Foreword by Neil Rackham

Bestselling Author of *SPIN Selling*

INSIGHT



SELLING

*Surprising Research on What
Sales Winners Do Differently*

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Bestselling Authors of *Rainmaking Conversations*

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Foreword

A mixed blessing of my job is that I get to review a lot of sales books. Roughly once a week I receive a manuscript from a hopeful author or publisher, asking me for comments and feedback. Of course, what they are *really* asking for is a rave review that will help the book sell. Reading all these expectant winners, looking for good things to say, can be a challenging task. I'm often tempted to reply with the comment often, but wrongly, attributed to Samuel Johnson: "Your work is both good and original. Unfortunately the parts that are good are not original, and the parts that are original are not good." On the plus side, it does mean that I see a lot of ideas before they become public and I get a good sense of current trends in sales thinking. On the downside, for every book that I can honestly endorse, I kiss a whole pondfull of literary frogs.

I ask you to forgive me a moment's bitching if I pick out a particularly unhelpful trend in many of these about-to-become-best-selling business books, especially those in sales, that use what I call the *Armageddon selling* formula. The approach goes something like this: "Everything you've ever learned about sales is wrong and, unless you stop doing it instantly, your sales efforts will shortly die in agony. There is, however, one simple cure that I have discovered. It is . . ." and here the author puts in a pitch for the appropriate magic bullet, such as "my prospecting method," "my selection system," "our funnel management process," or "our trademarked social media analytics"—take your pick. The reason why I mention the Armageddon formula for writing a best seller is that Mike Schultz and John Doerr's new book is mercifully free of it. They go out of their way to show that many, if not most, of the skills, knowledge, and selling methods we have learned over

the years will continue to matter in the future. Admittedly our present ways of doing things will need to be refocused and retuned to align them with the rapidly changing sales world, but existing methods are not outdated and are certainly not useless. Our present processes and procedures are a robust base on which we can build better selling for the future. That's an unusual message in a world where most sales books and sales gurus tell you to start by throwing out everything.

The Armageddon approach to sales doesn't help anyone. When, for example, a serious journal like the *Harvard Business Review* publishes an article titled "The End of Solution Sales," it damages the credibility of all involved. The sales field has been growing up nicely in recent years: It can live without this kind of overstatement. As Schultz and Doerr point out, solution selling (or consultative selling, as I prefer to call it) isn't dead or finished; it just needs to adapt to the new sales world. They set out a convincing road map for how to achieve this.

The majority of experienced salespeople would agree that a lot of our existing wisdom is good while readily admitting that some things have become outdated and must change. That should not be, in itself, a controversial issue. The hard part, as *Insight Selling* explains, is deciding what to keep, what to change, and what to discard. Take relationships, for example. The traditional wisdom has long taught that relationship building is the foundation of all business-to-business selling and much of consumer selling, too. However, particularly since the publication of *The Challenger Sale* in 2011, the Armageddon enthusiasts have been widely putting it about that relationships have become unimportant and that relationship selling is in its death throes. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. What has changed is the way customers form relationships. In the past, the sequence was for salespeople to build the relationship first and then to sell. Today few customers have the time or the inclination to build relationships before the sale. Instead, the relationship is the reward that customers give to salespeople who have created value for them. So, the sale comes first and the relationship building starts from there. That's very different from the Armageddon selling position that relationships are unimportant, just because they are no longer built in the same way before the first sale.

Schultz and Doerr lay out a convincing case for which parts of current practice must change and which need gentle retuning to work better in the new selling world. They base their recommendations on research and, better

still for me, on the kind of research design I like. Too much sales research rests on the black-versus-white methodology of comparing extremes. So, top performers are compared with poor, good practice with bad, successful companies with unsuccessful. In my experience this method reveals much more about failure than about success. Give me research any day that compares winners with those who almost won. That's how you learn about those all-important little extras that separate those who make it to the top. In testing the models and recommendations in *Insight Selling*, the authors have used a research design that separates the winners from those who came in a close second. I like that, and I like that they based their research on customers rather than on salespeople. Too many sales models, even today, are about how we want to sell rather than how our customers want to buy.

The model that they propose is fairly simple—again, music to my ears. Most of the books I review rest on deplorably complicated models. I asked one author why she needed a 14-step process in her book. “Because it’s nearer to reality,” she responded. “Anything less than that would be a simplification.” For her, the best test of a useful model was how close it came to the real world—and most people who haven’t given the issue much thought would probably say the same. I believe otherwise. If the real world was that great, we wouldn’t need models; we’d just use reality directly. The sad fact is that the real world is noisier, messier, and far more complicated than we can handle. That’s why we need models. The perfect model simplifies reality but retains validity.

The authors of *Insight Selling* explain their research on what sets the winners apart through a three-step model.

Level 1 of the model is *connect*. It explains how winners have a different way to link customers, products, and solutions.

Level 2 of the model is *convince*. It shows how the winners do a better job of differentiating, showing return, and—for my mind, an undervalued set of sales skills—handling the customer’s perceived risks.

Level 3 of the model is *collaborate*. It covers how the winners educate with new ideas and perspectives, set shared goals, invest in customer success, and create a customer perception of working as partners.

Within this mercifully simple framework, you’ll read detailed reasons for why some salespeople win while others come in a close second. Also, you’ll probably find, as I did, that you’ll sometimes kick yourself, remembering

sales where you came so close and how, if you'd just done that one thing differently, you could have walked off with the prize. And you'll find yourself thinking, "Ah, yes! That explains it!" Equally valuable, this book will give you insights into those times when you came in first but didn't quite know why. Either way, you stand to learn something useful from *Insight Selling*.

—Neil Rackham
Executive Professor of Professional Selling
University of Cincinnati

Preface

One of the best Henny Youngman one-liners goes something like this: “I told the doctor I broke my leg in two places. He told me to quit going to those places.”

If you sell, you go to those places every day. We know sellers who have worked on deals worth tens, even hundreds, of millions of dollars, for multiple years—and lost. More than a few of them might have preferred the broken leg than coming in second place. Even when sales are much smaller, it’s no fun to lose.

However, if you don’t go to those places and risk the broken leg, you miss the chance to feel the rush of winning a sale and making customers’ lives better because they made the right decision and bought from you. There’s no question, however, that you win some and you lose some.

The idea, though, is to win as many as you can and win as big as you can. At the same time, although you can never avoid them all, you should direct your energies away from those places that might as well have a sign over the door that reads, “Today’s special: broken legs.”

Just a few weeks ago, we were speaking with the leader of a multibillion-dollar global consulting firm. His top-performing strategic account managers were selling triple what the average strategic account managers sold and growing their accounts at a much faster pace. We asked him, “In your observation, what do you think sets apart the top performers from the rest?”

After a long pause, he said, “They make the magic happen.”

He’s right. They do. It would be fabulous if we could take a set of sellers—be they full-time salespeople or leaders, professionals, and entrepreneurs who also sell—and just tell them, presto change-o, “Go make the

magic happen,” and have that be enough. We haven’t yet figured that one out. Fortunately, behind every amazing magic trick is a detailed and meticulously planned set of actions a skilled magician executes in just the right time and sequence to make it happen. We’ve made it our mission to figure out and break down what’s really going on to make the sales magic happen and to teach sellers how to do it in a deliberate way through education, coaching, and practice.

If you want to sell at your maximum potential—if you want to make the magic happen—don’t listen to Henny’s doctor. Listen to Bilbo instead: “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” he used to say. “You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

For those who take the lessons presented throughout these pages to heart, and are willing to do the hard work of becoming an insight seller, our research and our experience tell us the place you’re most likely to be swept off to—is the winner’s circle.

Like sales, to write a book, you have to make the magic happen. We certainly didn’t make it alone. First, thanks to Mary Flaherty because without her passion and perseverance on the research behind *Insight Selling* and the book itself, neither would have ever come alive. With much appreciation, we’d like to acknowledge our colleagues at RAIN Group: Kaitlyn Bissonette, Jon Carlson, Bob Croston, Michelle Davidson, Steve Elefson, Ted Hill, Cynthia Ironson, Beth McCluskey, Deniz Olcay, and Erica Stritch. Not only does their dedication allow us to take the time needed to write, but they also supported the heavy lifting required to conceptualize, research, and produce a book of this nature. Thanks to Ago Cluytens in Geneva and Jason Murray and Andy Springer in Sydney, for their work every day helping clients win with RAIN Group’s intellectual capital and training.

The primary research on which *Insight Selling* is based includes study and analysis of more than 700 corporate purchases and more than 150 conversations with buyers regarding their buying experiences. A number of these buyers, many of whom are or have been C-level executives at multi-billion-dollar corporations, agreed to allow us to quote them directly about their experiences in making major corporate purchases. Thank you to Gerry Cuddy (president and chief executive officer, Beneficial Bank), Jack Kline (president and chief operating officer, Christie Digital Systems USA, Inc.), David Lissy (chief executive officer, Bright Horizons Family Solutions),

Jeff Park (executive vice president and chief financial officer, Catamaran), Steve Satterwhite (founder, Entelligence), Leonard Schlesinger (Baker Foundation professor of business administration, Harvard Business School, and former chief operating officer, Limited Brands), Jeff Somers (principal, Rothstein Kass), Dr. Wayne Tworetzky (director, Fetal Cardiology Program, Boston Children's Hospital, and associate professor of pediatrics, Harvard Medical School), and Sandy Wells (executive vice president, Employer Services, Bright Horizons Family Solutions). Thanks also to Professor Neil Rackham for a lifetime of insight in the world of selling and for writing the foreword to the book.

To our valued clients, thank you for the privilege of working with you and accepting us as members of your teams. Finally, we are both grateful for the love and constant support of our families. You make it all worthwhile. (Most of the time.)

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Sales Winners Sell Differently

The New World of Selling

It's old news that buyers have a lot more information about everything than in decades past. Primarily through the Internet—but also through increased availability of research and use of consultants—buyers know more about your offerings, market, and competitors, and their issues and problems, industry, and options for action, than ever before.

Also fairly well established is that today's buyers are harder to reach, buying cycles are longer, and more decision makers are involved in every sale. Buyers are also more skeptical. Although the great recession is largely in the rearview mirror, the psychological scars will remain for years to come.

Yes, buying has changed a lot, yet from the 1970s until recently, not much changed in the world of sales methodologies. The prevailing thinking in recent decades has been sellers could study and learn traditional solution or consultative selling approaches, apply them well, and produce excellent results consistently.

Not anymore.

Given the changes in buying, the commoditization of many products and services, and the radical intensification of competition in many industries, it's no surprise that solution sales concepts aren't working as they once did. We at RAIN Group are not the only ones seeing this trend either. Articles in the mainstream business press, including the *Harvard Business Review*,¹ routinely raise the specter of the death of solutions sales.

In any case, it's a new world in selling. As is the way of things, with the sunset of one paradigm comes the sunrise of another. Those sellers still living in the old paradigm, however, are losing sales. It's not surprising, then, that the pace of companies calling us saying, "How we used to sell isn't working anymore" has been accelerating for years and seems to have reached a tipping point.

Yet as these sellers report more losses, buying is still happening! This means *someone* is winning. This raises a fairly obvious question: What are they doing to win?

Analyzing What Sales Winners Do Differently

What's Actually Happening

An obvious question, perhaps, but it seemed like a good one to ask, so we did. We wrote this on our whiteboard in big red letters:

What are the winners of actual sales opportunities doing differently than the sellers who come in second place?

To find the answer, in late 2012 and into early 2013 we began studying actual purchases in industries with complex sales, such as technology, consulting and professional services, financial services, industrial products, and a variety of other business-to-business (B2B) industries. The results of this study focus on more than 700 B2B purchases made by a broad sample of buyers. In aggregate, these buyers were responsible for \$3.1 billion in annual purchases. Along with our survey research, we've now spoken to more than 150 corporate buyers about their recent purchasing experiences.

Here's what we found:

1. Winners sell *radically differently* than the second-place finishers. In many ways, what sales winners do differently is both surprising and fascinating.
2. There's a specific combination of behaviors that sales winners exhibit and outcomes they achieve that the second-place finishers don't.
3. Several key factors that set apart the winners are rarely discussed in the world of selling. These now demand attention.
4. With all due respect to the *Harvard Business Review*, solution sales is definitely not dead. However, although solution sales concepts are still necessary, they're no longer sufficient to win sales. Also, fundamental solution sales concepts need reimagination and relabeling. They need to evolve.

Before we share the specifics of what we found, it's important to note we did not have preferences for what the results would show. Our intent was to find out what's really going on and proceed from there. We expected the results would influence our thinking, our sales consulting, and our RAIN Selling training process and programs, requiring us to make updates and changes. Indeed, this has been the case.

Research from the Buyer's Perspective

One of the interesting things about reading sales books and articles is that much advice seems to make sense on its face, even to us after 50 collective years living in the sales training and enablement world. Although, with a few exceptions, most selling methods sound fine, the reality is that some of them are wrong, or at least wrong for certain businesses and people. It's not, however, easy to suss out the good advice from the bad.

There are a lot of ways to do the sussing, too. Not all of them are helpful. Sales research methods often focus on asking sellers, sales managers, and company leaders what the top performers do versus average performers. Unfortunately, people's perceptions of what they do—and what they actually do—don't tend to match up.

For example, Hinge Research Institute recently studied buyers and sellers across several B2B industries about the buyers' perceptions of seller

companies' selling and marketing practices. Dr. Lee W. Frederiksen, managing partner of Hinge, told us, "Across the board, sellers and buyers think tremendously differently about what's important. For example, sellers vastly overestimate the role of price in closing the sale. They see it as more than twice as important as the buyers view it."* We see the same incongruity in buyer and seller perceptions. We recently polled several hundred sellers on some of the same questions we asked the buyers in our study. What the buyers perceived about what sellers did, and what the sellers perceived what they, themselves, did, were markedly different.

The primary research on which *Insight Selling* is based looked at sales from the buyers' perspective. As mentioned, our objective was to find the answer to the question, What are the winners of *actual* sales opportunities doing differently than the sellers who come in second place? We looked at it, however, through the eyes of the buyers. This approach allowed us to get past sellers' perceptions of themselves and their colleagues and concentrate on the buyers' perspective and what actually happened in the field of play. After all, buyers make purchase decisions based on their perceptions. This is what matters.

Six-Prong Analysis Yields Fascinating Story

We asked buyers to consider recent major purchases and rate the winner (the seller who won their business) and the second-place finisher (the other seller they most seriously considered in the buying process but who ultimately came in second place). Our objectives were to see:

1. What winners *do*: Simply, what are the behaviors they exhibit and impressions they make on buyers?
2. What winners *do more often* than the second-place finishers: The idea here was to understand what *most separates* winners from second-place finishers.
3. What the buyers told us the second-place finishers should *change* to make the buyers more likely to choose them; in other words, we wanted

*Although 58 percent of sellers identified cost as a selection criterion, only 28 percent of buyers did.

to know what the buyers perceived to be the most important factors in their decision making.

We also looked at the statistical key drivers* of buyer:

1. Satisfaction with the buying process
2. Likelihood to buy again
3. Likelihood to refer the seller

The first three categories are the keys to winning the current sale. They're what the sellers do to win now, so to speak. The latter three help to win now, but mostly they are the keys to win later.

Each of these six categories turned out to be pieces of a puzzle. When we viewed all six pieces together, an elegant and fascinating story emerged. It turns out not only do the winners sell radically differently than the second-place finishers, but they also sell *similarly to each other!* In *Insight Selling*, we've done our best to codify what the winners look like and explain what they do. The idea is that—for those sellers willing to make changes to how they sell—they can maximize their current wins and their ongoing selling success. We call this model 3 Levels of RAIN Selling.

As you begin reading about the 3 levels, note that sellers should learn and apply them not separately or in sequence, but as a combination. Applied in combination, there's a compounding effect as the various areas build on and reinforce each other. At the same time, leave a level (or piece of a level) out, and you introduce barriers to winning competitive sales and increase the odds of losing to no decision.

3 Levels of RAIN Selling

We categorized our findings into 3 levels of selling behaviors and outcomes that set the sales winners apart from the second-place finishers. Following are the highlights.

*A key driver analysis is a statistical technique that identifies the factors most likely to influence a specific topic. For this study, we analyzed the key drivers affecting buyer satisfaction with the buying process, buyer loyalty, and likelihood to refer.

Level 1 Is Connect.

Winners *connect the dots* between customer needs and their company's products and services as solutions more often than the second-place finishers. Winners also *connect with people*. They're perceived to listen and connect personally with buyers more often.

Connecting with people and connecting the dots—this sounds a lot like relationship and solution selling to us. Not only is connecting still relevant (and not dead!), but it's also critical. However, sellers used to win on level 1 *alone*. Now it's the price of entry.

Level 2 Is Convince.

Winners convince buyers that they can achieve *maximum return*, that the *risks are acceptable*, and that the seller is the *best choice* among all options. Many sellers are not good at convincing buyers, and a large portion of sellers aren't even willing to convince. When they can and do, they win more sales.

Level 3 Is Collaborate.

Winners collaborate through behavior—they are perceived to be responsive, proactive, and easy to buy from (i.e., collaborative in *how* they work). At the same time, it's not just *how* sellers interact; it's *what* they do. Buyers believe that the winners actually collaborate with them during their buying process, in other words, collaboration in the sense of working with the buyer to achieve a mutual goal. Buyers perceived collaborative sellers to be integral to their success.

Connect, convince, and collaborate. This is what sales winners do both more often, and better than, second-place finishers (see Figure 1.1).

Level 1: Connect***Connecting the Dots and Solution Sales***

Sellers who win connect. They *connect with people* and *connect the dots* between needs and solutions. This is a surprising finding—sort of. Given

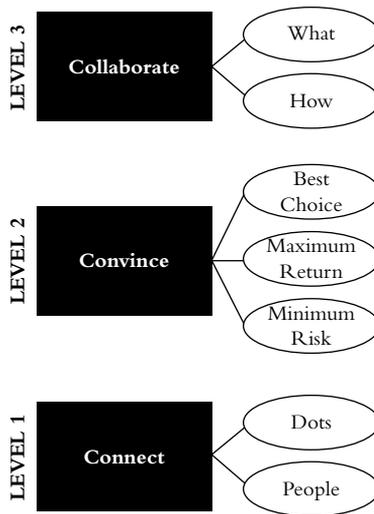


Figure 1.1 3 Levels of RAIN SellingSM

that the end of solution sales was announced in the *Harvard Business Review* and that they also published articles recently about how selling is not about relationships,² we expected to see that winners had abandoned these tried-and-true sales concepts, and that they are, indeed, dead.

Not true.

In fact, we found the opposite was the case. Solution sales is not dead—not even mostly dead. But it has changed in two important ways:

1. It's *no longer sufficient by itself* for success.
2. People need to *think about it differently* than they might have in the past.

Although people define solution sales in a number of ways, at the core of the solution or consultative concept is connecting the *pain* of the buyer with the products, services, and overall capabilities of the seller as *solutions*. There's typically a heavy emphasis on the seller diagnosing the needs of the buyer.

The need for diagnosis implies the buyers don't have a thorough concept of why they find themselves in their current undesirable situation or what to do differently. Through diagnosis, the seller figures this out like a doctor might with patients who feel sick but don't know what they have or what to do to get better.

These days, *diagnosing* needs isn't nearly as important as simply demonstrating *understanding* of needs. Of all the factors buyers experienced with the sales winners, "deepened my understanding of my needs" fell near the bottom of the list (ranked 40 of 42 factors). Winners barely did it at all compared with the rest of the factors, yet they still won the sale.

The second-place finishers focused more often on diagnosis than the winners, yet they still lost. Situationally, diagnosis can be important. If the buyer wants to make improvements but doesn't know what the issues are, diagnosis is necessary. But at a macro level, it's not as important as it used to be.

However, although sellers may not have to diagnose as often or deeply anymore, they do have to demonstrate *understanding* of need. This is critical. The terms may seem similar, but throwing the *understanding* baby out with the *diagnosing* bathwater is not a good idea.

Looking at the differences between the winners and the second-place finishers, "understood my needs" represented the fifth-largest gap (Figure 1.2). In fact, the winners demonstrated they understood the buyer's needs 2.5 times more often than the second-place finishers.

On top of that, of the 42 factors, "understood my needs" was the fifth most important factor buyers said the second-place finishers should change to win their business.

Diagnosing versus Demonstrating Understanding

Here's an example. After a first sales conversation, sellers often summarize their thoughts and an action plan in a document for buyers. However, we recently saw a situation where the opposite happened. The *buyers* sent the *seller* a document outlining what they understood their challenges to be, why they thought the challenges existed, what they were planning to do, and what they wanted from a seller. The buyers had this prepared beforehand to send to sellers who passed the buyers' sniff test in a first call.

Sometimes a buyer's perception of what's happening misses the mark. But, in this case, it was thoughtful and on-target. Thus, the seller didn't need to spend much time diagnosing the needs. Rather, the seller focused on

provider. This turned out to be a very important decision criterion to the buyers, and the seller won the business.

This isn't to say that buyers have it all figured out all the time. With the Internet and other sources of information readily accessible, buyers are just typically further along in the process than they used to be when they engage sellers.

As Jack Kline, president and chief operating officer, Christie Digital Systems put it:

We can find information about products and prices ourselves these days, but as our business is becoming more complicated and moving more quickly, we continuously search for ways to apply products and services the right way and in the right combinations. Vendors do their thing thousands of times. We might do it once every three years. We need their ideas, their thinking, to make sure we get the best outcomes. What we want from vendors is to see how all the various unique offerings come together so we can visualize how it's going to change the way we do business and maybe give us a competitive lift in the marketplace.

It's much like when people feel sick these days. They often turn first to WebMD, Wikipedia, and Google to investigate. If need be, they find themselves at a doctor's office, but by that time people are often much further along in their understanding of what might be going on than in years past.*

Aspirations, Afflictions, and Solutions

Another needed change in the solution sales concept is a shift away from the prevalent use of the words *problem* and *pain* in sales methods. These are the two most common terms associated with discovering a prospect's needs. These words all too often drive sellers to employ find-out-what's-wrong-and-fix-it thinking. Let's say the buyer doesn't perceive anything

*Self-diagnosing buyers, like patients, aren't always right or thorough in their diagnosis. When this happens, top sellers collaborate with buyers as a team to arrive at the right answers.

(or anything important enough to act on) to be wrong. Soothe-the-pain sellers find themselves at a dead end: no problems to fix, nothing to sell.

The sales winners, however, don't focus only on the negative (afflictions); they focus on the positive (aspirations). Along with allowing for richer sales conversations, focusing on the positive opens the door to significant opportunity to increase sales. The opportunity is for sellers to drive their own demand versus only reacting to demand that comes directly from buyers.

The sellers most successful at creating opportunities focus on positives—goals, aspirations, and possibilities achievable by the buyer, even if the buyer doesn't know it yet.

Sellers who focus on aspirations as well as afflictions are able to influence the buyers' agenda directly by inspiring them with possibilities they hadn't been considering but should. Indeed, opportunity creation is a core outcome of levels 2 and 3, but it starts here in level 1 with a shift in focus from afflictions only to afflictions *and* aspirations.

Working in conjunction with demonstrating understanding of needs is the seller's ability to craft a compelling solution. This was the seventh-greatest difference between the winners and second-place finishers, and, according to the buyers, it was the third most important factor that the second-place finishers needed to change.

Connecting the Dots Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

Together, “understood my needs” and “crafted a compelling solution” mean the seller connected the dots, drawing clear connections between buyer needs and how the seller's offerings solve them. Again, this is part of the gestalt of mainstream thinking in solution sales. But simply connecting the dots is in *no way sufficient by itself* for sellers to win (see Figure 1.3).

Imagine for a minute someone is selling to you and you perceive the seller *doesn't* understand your needs and *doesn't* craft a compelling solution. The seller's chances of winning business from you are probably pretty slim.

Now consider that the seller connects the dots okay. But you perceive that the seller isn't listening to you and hasn't made any kind of personal connection with you. As long as *any other seller* meets the minimum criteria (and because buyers think many providers can deliver competent products

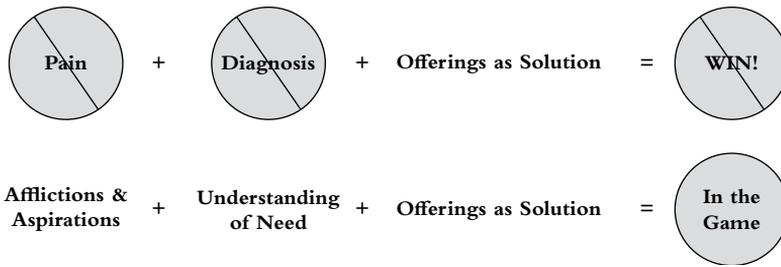


Figure 1.3 Changes to Solutions Sales' Basic Premise

and services), you're likely not going to buy from the unlikeable seller who isn't listening.

Sellers who do a good job connecting the dots and connecting with buyers haven't yet won the sale, but they're in the game (see Figure 1.2). If they're in it to win it, however, they have two more levels to cover.

Level 1—connect—used to be enough. It's now the price of entry.

Level 2: Convince

Sellers who win convince buyers of three things:

- The return on investment is worth pursuing.
- The risk is acceptable.
- The seller is the best choice among the available options.

By themselves these results may not seem surprising. They weren't to us. But as we investigated further, we found (1) the sellers who won achieved these outcomes much more often than the second-place finishers, and (2) sales winners are much more attuned to risk than the second-place finishers.

In our sales consulting and training work, we've encountered a surprisingly strong resistance from sellers against helping clients set an agenda (versus just reacting to one), influencing the buyer too much, and using maximum persuasion.

Yet our research revealed that the winners convinced, and they convinced with gusto.

Indeed, “persuaded me we would achieve results” was the third-greatest difference between winners and second-place finishers. We realize the concept of persuasion in sales is not new; it’s simply that the winners are doing a better job of it.

Marketers and sellers didn’t focus as much on results and impact 40 years ago. The transition away from the basic features-and-benefits approach had just begun. Fast-forward to today, and many companies’ marketing and sales messages promise results—often wild results—as their first foot forward. Yet, although everyone is promising results, buyers regularly report disappointment.

In a study³ by Bain & Company, 375 companies were asked if they believe they deliver a superior value proposition to clients. Eighty percent said yes. Bain then asked the clients of these companies if they agreed that the specific company from which they bought delivered a superior value proposition. Only 8 percent agreed. (Here’s that buyer-seller disagreement again.)

Buyers simply don’t perceive they get either what they expected or were promised by sellers. They’ve been burned in the past and are therefore skeptical of sellers and their claims.

Minimizing Risk

The following factors related to risk showed up as important to the buying decision:

- Was professional
- Depicted the purchase process accurately
- Was trustworthy
- Inspired confidence in his or her company
- Helped me avoid potential pitfalls
- Was respected at my organization
- Had experience in the specific area I have needs and in my industry

These are all confidence builders. In other words, they minimize the perception of risk.

Fallacy of the No-Brainer Return on Investment (ROI) Case

Most every experienced seller has lost a sale to *no decision*, where the seller believes the buyer was crazy not to move forward because the ROI case was so compelling.

Sellers often say things to us like, “The ROI case was a no-brainer. I can’t believe they didn’t see it!”

Oh, they saw it—and they got it—they just didn’t believe it.

As Kline told us, “I’m leery of people who promise great things, such as, ‘We’re going to reduce your IT [information technology] expense by 20 percent.’ How do they know? How can they make that kind of commitment without understanding our internal situation? Vague guarantees and commitments don’t convince me. They need to prove they understand us and our situation. I need to have confidence in them and their solution.”

In these cases, the buyers typically perceive the risk of not achieving results as either too great (buyers: “This is impossible or improbable”), or they perceive the provider to be too high a risk (buyers: “This is possible, but working with this provider is a potential liability because of . . .”).

In other words, when the buyer isn’t convinced of both maximum return and minimal risk *together*, the buyer gets squeamish, and the seller loses to no decision.

Winners Convince They Offer Superior Value

Now assume there is a competitor. The seller not only has to maximize ROI and minimize risk perceptions but also has to convince the buyer he or she is the *best choice* among all alternatives. Winners were more than twice as likely to create the perception that the overall value they offered was superior.

And when second-place finishers didn’t create this perception, it was the number one most important factor they needed to improve to influence buyers to select them. “Overall value was superior” was also a key driver of buying process satisfaction, likelihood to buy again, and likelihood to refer. In fact, “overall value was superior” was the only factor that was a key driver of all three and a top 10 factor in all three winner versus second place comparative analyses.

Now, the term *overall value was superior* to other options is open to interpretation. That's the point! One buyer to the next might value one thing over another, and every buying scenario is different. When sellers figure out what each individual *buyer* believes to be important and works toward that, they win more often.

The other two factors in the *best choice* category are “products and services superior” and “offerings differentiated from other options.” Do the sellers build the product? No, but they are the lens through which the product or service strengths are communicated to the buyer. It's also up to the sellers to differentiate from the other options. When they don't, they leave it to the buyer to interpret their advantages, leaving competitive differentiation to chance.

When sellers succeed with all three components—maximum return, minimum risk, and best choice—of level 2 (convince), they take the groundwork they laid in level 1 (connect) and turbocharge their chances of a win.

Level 2—convince—stacks the deck of winning in the seller's favor.

Level 3: Collaborate

Rising Influence and Value of the Seller

Here's something we didn't expect: The top two things that winners did more often than the second-place finishers are (1) “educated me with new ideas or perspectives” and (2) “collaborated with me.” At first blush, they might not seem to go together, but they do. These two factors both indicate that the seller *personally* brought something valuable to the table.

Why unexpected? With pronouncements in the press that solution sales is dead, one would not expect collaboration to play a critical role in winning the sale. However, there it is in the top two factors that separate the winners the most from the second-place finishers. Let's assume solution and consultative selling as conceptual frameworks are still valid (as we think they are). As they represent the conventional wisdom of what's most important in sales success, shouldn't factors such as diagnosing need, crafting solutions, not talking too much, and such come up right at the top?

They didn't. Education and collaboration trumped them all.

Seller as Educator

Regarding educating with new ideas, when the buyer believes the seller brings something *new* to the table, then, by definition, it's not something the buyer was previously considering. When buyers perceive sellers as providing new ideas, sellers have a huge advantage. By bringing the right new ideas, sellers can shape buyer belief systems and approaches to action. This gives the seller tremendous influence.

Although educating about new ideas is in no way a unique advantage, it's still uncommon. In fact, only 21.5 percent of buyers strongly agreed that the winners "educated me with new ideas and perspectives." At the same time, only 7.4 percent of buyers strongly agreed the second-place finishers "educated me with new ideas and perspectives." So, there's room for almost all sellers to improve in this area. Those who do will reap the rewards.

Sales winners educate with new ideas and perspectives almost three times more often than second-place finishers. Of 42 factors studied, the greatest difference between winners and second-place finishers was their propensity to educate.

It's important to note, however, that the gap between the groups for the factor focused on valuable ideas or perspectives (versus new ideas) was not nearly as stark. It was thirty-fifth on the list separating the winners and the second-place finishers. There's no question that bringing insight to the table that might not be *new* can still be helpful, but it doesn't stand out as a factor that leads to sales wins. It seems buyers want to be *surprised and inspired*. If they've heard something before, even if it's applicable, it's not as impactful as something they perceive to be new.

Seller as Collaborator

The second factor that most separated the winners from the second-place finishers was "collaborated with me." We didn't expect this factor to separate

the winners from the also-rans more than all but one other factor, but it did. The implications for selling can't be overstated.

Once the buyer sees the seller as an important member of the team and sees moving the sale forward as a common goal, the likelihood of buying in general, and buying from that seller in particular, increases dramatically.

When buyers see a provider as working with them as a team to achieve common goals, it's not only a factor in winning an individual sale, but it is also extremely difficult to unseat that provider from the account. Win now, win later.

And it's not just winning; it's winning with insight. Often it's during *acts of collaboration* that ideas are born and insights come alive. There are reasons that brainstorming is not a solo activity and that professional facilitators earn handsome sums to lead idea creation and strategy sessions. When buyers perceive sellers to be collaborators, they are more likely to work with them *closely*. This is an opportunity for sellers, if they have the skills to make the most of it. When sellers collaborate, they add tremendous value and set themselves apart greatly from those who don't. As with educating with new ideas and perspectives, almost three times as many buyers strongly agreed the winners collaborated with them compared to the second-place finishers.

Level 1, connect, is the price of entry. When buyers perceive sellers *don't* understand their needs and *don't* have a solution that can help—and if the buyers *don't* like them—sellers don't win. Even when sellers succeed here, it's simply table stakes. More needs to be done.

Level 2, convince, increases wins. When sellers don't convince the buyers they'll get a worthwhile return, the risks are acceptable, and they're the right choice, the buyers simply might not buy at all, might buy much less than they should (or only be willing to pay less), or may select another provider.

Level 3, collaborate, is when the *seller* becomes a key component of buyer success. The sellers who are perceived as level 3 collaborators, bringing new ideas to the table, cocreating ideas and insights, and working with buyers as a team, will find themselves in the winner's circle (see Figure 1.4).

Level 3—collaborate—turns sellers into a source of insight and makes sellers, themselves, a key component of the buyer's success.

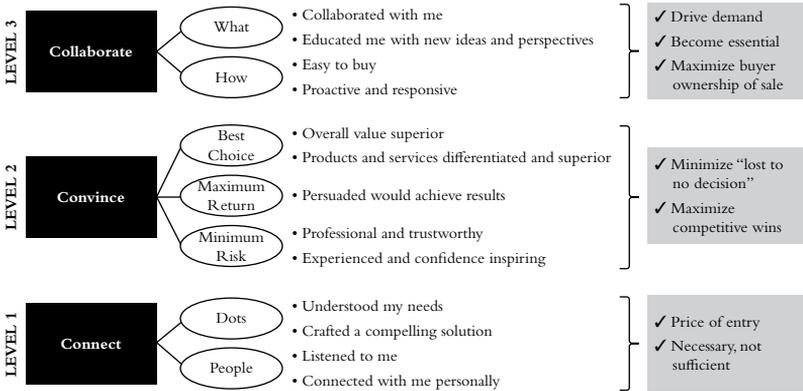


Figure 1.4 Components of 3 Levels of RAIN SellingSM

Now, you might be thinking, “Okay, here is where the insight part of insight selling comes in. Educating brings insight directly to the table. Collaborating inspires new ideas and insights.” If you are, you’re right. These points, however, just scratch the surface of how the concept of insight permeates everything that sales winners do.

Insight in a Sea of Information

Information, Options, and Buyer Decision Making

Let’s switch our attention back to buyers. Although today’s buyers know more than they used to in the presales context, they still struggle with the same fundamental challenges as in decades past. They still must:

- Find new ways to improve and innovate in their businesses
- Choose the right courses of action
- Choose the right partners
- Succeed more, fail less

You’d think that because people have more information and choices than ever that they’d be more decisive and make better decisions. Not so.

In fact, the central argument in the book *The Paradox of Choice* by Barry Schwartz⁴ is that more options and more information have made us more

paralyzed as decision makers and have not made us better decision makers. Neither have more options and information made us happier. Although Schwartz relates these findings mostly to consumers, they're equally true of the business decision maker.

We know the Internet gives buyers a lot more choice and information, but the information is often hyperbolic—everyone promises excellent results, massive ROI, and superior overall value. The information is also often incomplete, conflicting, and inaccurate. It's difficult to sort out what's what.

At the same time, one of the most cited statistics in the sales world these days is that 57 percent of the purchase process is complete before buyers have their first serious interaction with a seller⁵ as if this somehow signifies that buyers are trying to cut sellers out of the process.

But this only tells us buyers put strategies together to make improvements to their businesses. They mostly work on them internally first. They try to figure out what they want to do, what they want as outcomes, and what the options are to help them get there. They get their ducks in a row, to an extent, before talking to outsiders. Seems logical to us.

Yet the need for outside help is greater than ever.

Buyers Want to Talk to Sellers

The fact of the matter is although buyers have more information, they don't necessarily have knowledge. They don't have confidence. What they don't have—and what they desperately need—is insight. Not only do they need it, but they also want it.

A more useful question to ask buyers is when they *want* to engage with sellers. Information Technology Services Marketing Association (ITSMA) and *CFO Magazine* recently asked 270 technology buyers just this question. In fact, 70 percent of buyers want to engage with sales reps *before* they finalize a short list of potential sellers (see Figure 1.5). Even more striking, 47 percent of buyers want to engage with sellers when they are searching for insight on what to do and what's possible for how to get something done.

Perhaps if more than 21.5 percent of the sales winners and 7.4 percent of second-place finishers were highly skilled at educating buyers with

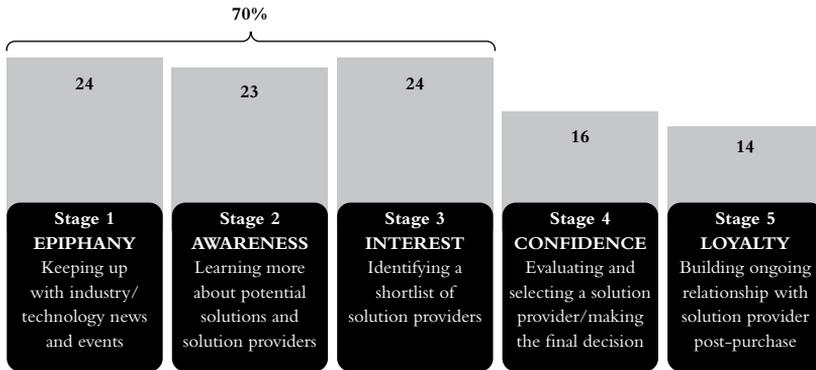


Figure 1.5 At What Stage of the Buying Process Do Buyers Find It Most Useful to Engage with Sales Reps?

Source: ITSMA, “How B2B Buyers Consume Information Study, 2012.”

new ideas and perspectives, even more buyers would want to involve sellers earlier. But sellers are not. A recent Forrester Research study asked buyers, “Are meetings with salespeople valuable and live up to your expectations?” Only 39 percent of executives said yes.⁶ Most buyers simply don’t find sellers valuable.

The more buyers see sellers as a *source of insight*, however, the more they see how sellers can help them succeed. This is valuable. The more buyers see sellers as sources of insight, the more the buyers involve them earlier in the process. And the more sellers are involved early in the process, the more likely they are to win.

Buyers want to talk to sellers, but only if they bring value to the table. That value is increasingly taking the form of insight. Insight is a tremendous opportunity for sellers willing and able to take advantage of it.

Insight across the 3 Levels

The most obvious factor pointing to insight is “educated me on new ideas and perspectives.” We categorized educating on new ideas and perspectives under level 3, but it’s just one way sellers bring insight to table. Insight applies to all 3 levels. It’s the theme that ties everything together (Figure 1.6).

Level of RAIN Selling		How Insight Applies
LEVEL 3	Collaborate	<p>Buyers want to be educated with new ideas, and they want to be a part of <i>creating</i> new ideas.</p> <p>Your ideas are, literally, the insights you bring to the table. When you do, and when you involve buyers collaboratively in the process of creating insights, you, personally, become a source of value over and above whatever it is that you sell.</p> <p>Buyers are looking to achieve outcomes and find paths to success. Products alone don't get them there. Buyers need partners to help them see what's possible and to work with them collaboratively to bring ideas to life.</p> <p>When you are proactive, responsive, and easy to buy from and work with, they'll seek insight and interaction with you. (And when you're difficult, they won't.)</p>
		<p>Buyers need to make decisions among available options.</p> <p>Your insight throughout the process will help them make the right choice. In this way, you as the seller add the value. This will best position <i>buying from you</i> as the right choice.</p>
LEVEL 2	Convince	<p>Buyers need to make the ROI case in order to buy. They often don't make the effort to do it, can't do it, or don't do it well.</p> <p>Your insights into the business case will help them make the right decisions for the right business reasons.</p>
		<p>Buyers seek ROI, but often make decisions based more on fear of loss than potential for return.</p> <p>Your insight into what the risk is, and your insight and efforts to mitigate that risk (including building trust), will give them confidence to invest in what you sell.</p>
LEVEL 1	Dots	<p>In a sea of information, buyers are looking for sellers to help them choose the right direction, select the right options, and take the right actions.</p> <p>Their confidence in you grows by your insight into <i>them</i> and your own knowledge of how you can help. They'll be guided by your insight to help them <i>make the right choice</i> across their buying cycle.</p>
	People	<p>Buyers are most willing to interact with, take advice from, and be open to alternative points of view from people they like and trust.</p> <p>They'll accept more insight. They'll <i>cocreate</i> more insight.</p>

Figure 1.6 Insight across the 3 Levels

Not only does insight permeate all the levels, as we noted earlier in this chapter, but the levels themselves also are not mutually exclusive. They work together.

For example, when sellers collaborate, they bring new ideas to the table and work with buyers to achieve mutually beneficial goals. Doing this:

- Helps buyers make the best choices (connect: dots)
- Strengthens your relationship (connect: people)
- Builds trust (convince: minimum risk)
- Helps the ROI and risk reduction cases-making process (convince: maximum return and minimum risk)
- Differentiates you from the sellers who don't do this (convince: best choice)

It's clear that sales winners sell radically differently than second-place finishers and that the value of the insight that sellers bring to the table is the key. However, the question remains, How—exactly—should a seller and an organization implement insight selling? Answering this question is the subject of the rest of this book.

Chapter Summary

Overview

- Sales winners sell radically differently than second-place finishers.
- The greatest difference between sales winners and second-place finishers is the value they provide to buyers through insight.

Key Takeaways

- There's a specific combination of behaviors that sales winners exhibit and outcomes they achieve that the second-place finishers don't.
- Solution or consultative sales concepts are still necessary, but they're no longer sufficient to win sales. They need to evolve.
- Connect, convince, and collaborate. This is what sales winners do both more often, and better than, second-place finishers.
- Winners *connect with people* and *connect the dots* between needs and solutions. When you do this, buyers accept and cocreate more insight with you, and their confidence in you grows.

- Winners *convince* buyers of three things: The ROI is worth pursuing, the risk is acceptable, and the seller is the best choice among the available options. When you do this, your insights help buyers make the right decisions for the right business reasons.
- Winners *collaborate* in how they interact with buyers and by educating them with new ideas or perspectives. When you do this, buyers will seek insight and interaction with you and, you, personally, become a source of value over and above whatever it is that you sell.

Foreword by Neil Rackham
Bestselling Author of *SPIN Selling*

INSIGHT



*Surprising Research on What
Sales Winners Do Differently*

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