

A large, bold, black number '5' is positioned on the left side of the page. The number is solid black and has a thick, blocky appearance. It is set against a light gray background. A vertical red bar is visible on the far left edge of the page, partially overlapping the number's left side.

# Colossal Challenges of Selling Virtually

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 ASLAN

The ASLAN logo consists of a red square containing a white stylized symbol that resembles a lowercase 'a' or a similar character. To the right of this square, the word 'ASLAN' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.



## This is a defining moment for every sales organization.

If you are scrambling to equip a sales organization to sell virtually, this is no small task. And much is at stake. To say your customers are very distracted right now is an understatement. Distractions at home, thoughts of the future, and to make matters worse, every rep and marketing executive has nothing but time on their hands to pump information into the market. Bottom line, there is a lot of noise out there.

Post pandemic, your customers' loyalty will either improve or decline. It won't be static. And how your sales organization responds during this time will determine the outcome. Unfortunately, you have a short window to transition from "racquetball" to

"tennis." While they're seemingly similar sports (i.e. using a racket to hit a ball), the skills and the game are vastly different. The first step is to understand those important differences.

Here at ASLAN, we've spent the last 20+ years training reps to sell remotely. Based [on our experience and research](#), if you want to help the reps make this monumental transformation, you must address "the big 5."

What follows is a brief description of each of those challenges, accompanied by ideas on how to transcend them.

# 1

## PROBLEM 1: Diminished Receptivity

There's a little-known truth that is sabotaging a large percentage of sales professionals. I believe it's the root cause of a five-year slide in the [percentage of reps missing quota](#). The customer's receptivity has more impact on influence than your value prop. Said another way, the customer's willingness to listen is more important than your ability to position your solution.

Research has proven that when someone is unreceptive, the more you try to persuade them, the more closed they become. Let that truth sink in.

When facing strong resistance, if you try to convince them why your recommendation is in their best interest, the decision-maker will become even more closed. But if you leave, you lose all chances of influence. This dilemma has most sellers scratching their heads and losing faith in their craft. And it's getting worse.

Receptivity begins before you ever pick up the phone, write an email, or send a LinkedIn request.

Because of all the noise in the market and availability of information, receptivity to sellers is at an all-time low. Now let me kick you when you're down. When selling over the phone, it's even worse.

There is good news. This problem can be solved, but you must throw away the traditional selling mindset, stop selling, and ensure the customer's receptivity before you deliver your recommendation. In other words, like a farmer, you focus on creating a fertile soil before you ever plant the seed.

Receptivity begins before you ever pick up the phone, write an email, or send a LinkedIn request.

## PRE-CALL MINDSET

What you do before the call will have more impact than what you do during the call. Here's why: Your motive is ultimately transparent.

If your true intent is about your survival and you are calling out of sheer desperation, then your tone, word choice, and your behavior will reveal your motive. Therefore, stop before every meeting and make a simple but powerful decision: who is first?

If you fail to do so, you will default to self. The gravitational pull is just too strong. If you aren't intentional about answering this critical question, you will unwittingly become the hero of the story.

Conversely, if you resist reaching out because you feel like an "ambulance chaser," spend the time necessary to answer the question, "Why is it in the customer's best interest to meet with me? How can I help them in this crisis? What problems can I solve?"

Once you see yourself as the "ambulance driver," a calm and confident demeanor will replace a tentative, "Sorry to call you, but I'm supposed to be selling remotely" vibe.

## DROP THE ROPE®

Instead of playing tug of war with the customer by attempting to pull them into a meeting or conversation about a new solution, release the pressure and "drop the rope." Genuinely communicate that you aren't sure what they need, should do, or if they have time to talk right now. Your goal is simply to serve, not force your way into a meeting or get an order.

This approach eliminates an adversarial relationship and allows both you and the customer to relax and work together to solve real problems (virtually) or agree to meet after the pandemic crisis is over. Either way, you will distinguish yourself from the pack, moving from the "rep to avoid" category to someone they will always want to meet with: friend, partner, and trusted ally.

These are just a few tips on driving receptivity. Here are a few resources on how to [Drop the Rope® and Make the Sale](#) and [effective strategies to enhance receptivity](#).

# 2



## PROBLEM 2: It Is More Difficult To Get a Meeting

If your sellers are used to prospecting, other than a shift in messaging, there's no new challenge here. But if you have a field salesforce of predominantly account managers, they can no longer just stop by. The casual, "Just checking in to touch base and see how things are going" won't cut it right now.

"Thanks, we are good right now, but thanks so much for calling... Family's fine. Look forward to catching up when this thing blows over..."

In the absence of the intimacy that naturally occurs face-to-face, they must learn new ways to connect.

*Here are a few tips for getting more meetings:*

## LEAD WITH THEIR WHITEBOARD

Picture the person you are about to call sitting in their office or cubicle. Now picture a whiteboard, with their initiatives, list of key action items. What does it say?

Lead with that.

If you are not calling about a problem that's on their whiteboard, don't call. In other words, if you can't find a way to be essential to their business, right now, find a way before you reach out. And lead with that.

Once you have a tightly crafted position that starts with the customer's problem and your unique way of solving the problem, you can deliver that message via phone, email, text, or in a social meeting. But it all starts with your position. Nail that, and response rates will soar.

Obviously, there's much more to be said about how to capture the decision-maker's attention and response. To learn more, here's an article on the [Five Steps to Getting More Meetings](#).

## ASK PERMISSION

By asking permission, you not only eliminate the tension (i.e., Drop the Rope®), there is a higher commitment to the conversation. Until they decide to meet or not to meet, they will be distracted (and boy are people distracted right now). But once a decision is made, people are wired to honor the commitments they make.

In the classic book Influence, The Power of Persuasion, Dr. Robert B. Cialdini's research proved that [when people verbally commit to something, they are 400% more likely to follow through](#).

## USE EMAIL

This is far too great a topic to address here, but a channel that must be utilized. And candidly, most sellers are well below average in their ability to craft effective emails.

Seller's need help with subject lines, flow, how to articulate value, and what supporting information to attach or link to. The best solution is to offer the sellers several templates for the most common scenarios. [Here is an article on 30 templates to get you started](#). For more information on how to craft an email to cold prospects or dominant customers, here's an [in-depth resource](#).

# 3

## PROBLEM 3: You're Working with Less Information, Much Less

To influence, to sell, you need the truth. You need the truth about what people want, really want, what they fear, who is really driving the decision, and how the decision will be made. Unfortunately, when selling remotely, the truth is harder to discover.

There is a barrier created when communicating at a distance that we all intuitively feel, similar to driving. Think about how you interact with other drivers versus when you're standing in line at a grocery store. I've never passed someone standing in line that was moving a little too slow. I'm much more polite, more human... but in a car? That's a completely different story. No one has ever screamed at me in a line if I don't move forward fast enough or paused in a grocery store aisle if I get a little lost as to where to go next. But add a few extra feet of distance, sealed in by steel and windows, we all appear a little less human and, therefore, behave differently.

For the purposes of this article, the reasons are less important. The barrier exists, and the greatest casualty is the amount and quality of information. Without face to face interaction, it's harder to read body language, and people are more guarded about what they share.

Bottom line, ensuring the same level of disclosure over the phone requires sellers to up their game in two areas: how they ask questions and how they respond to the customer.

## POSITIONING YOUR QUESTIONS

Studies have revealed that only 13% of customers believe sellers can understand their needs. The keyword is can. This reveals how customers and prospects enter into the selling process – skeptical that what they need to share will be understood.

The deck is stacked against you. The rapport and intimacy granted when talking eye to eye doesn't exist when selling remotely and the customer's belief that the seller not only doesn't understand, but can't understand, leaves little hope that the unfiltered truth will be discovered.

The most effective way to quickly sidestep this barrier is to focus on how you set up your questions. Begin your question by first demonstrating you have needed expertise to solve their problem.

### HERE'S A FEW EXAMPLES:

*"Three things drive employee engagement: autonomy, meaning, and mastery. How are you ensuring engagement, especially with your Millennials, by communicating the "why" – the real purpose of your company?"*

*"Ninety percent of social media strategies fail because they invest in content and channels that don't reach the intended audience. How would you assess your current social media strategy?"*

*"Dramatic change happens one-to-one and not in a classroom. How are you planning to invest in developing your leadership team once the training initiative ends?"*

### BY ATTACHING A DISRUPTIVE TRUTH OR INSIGHT TO A THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTION, YOU CAUSE THE DECISION-MAKER TO TAKE NOTICE:

*"This is no ordinary conversation with a product pushing sales rep. There may be something for me to learn."*

Therefore, think about the most important questions you need to ask and determine how you can position those questions in a way that will instantly change the engagement level of the person you are meeting.



Validate their point of view - even if it's not what you want to hear.

## DIG FOR THE TRUTH

Why dig? Because most of the time, it's buried. A few days ago, a very competent seller was presenting a solution to our marketing team. During the presentation, the seller stopped to ask, "Tom, you sound a bit skeptical, what do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?"

I told her my concerns; information I wouldn't have shared if she hadn't asked. Later in the meeting, she asked us all to rank our perspective of the presentation on a scale of 1 to 10 and then followed up to discover why it wasn't a 10.

Her objective was clear: to remove ambiguity. She understood that if she can't read our body language, she had to work harder to dig out the truth. And if she didn't have a clear understanding of what our concerns were, she couldn't address them. Her response was perfect, and we moved forward. Brilliant.

When selling remotely, it's critical to identify the areas where it may be more difficult to discover the true story.

*Here are a few areas where "digging" is required:*

### CONCERNS

Most customers have learned that sharing concerns leads to conflict. Therefore, gently probe to determine their fears about moving forward (e.g., value you offer, ability to deliver, experience).

### RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMPETITION

Most don't enjoy sharing bad news, and positive information about your competition is certainly not good news.

### DECISION-MAKER

People don't jump at the chance to tell you they have less power than someone else.

How we respond to what is shared is as critical as the questions we ask. In fact, how we demonstrate that we understand and accept the other person's point of view, typically determines if the customer will embrace our recommendation.

How we demonstrate that we care about them and what they have to say will determine whether they listen and care about our recommendation.

So how do we accomplish this? Head nodding and empathetic eye contact doesn't work. Over the phone or online, almost all validation occurs verbally. And the most effective way to ensure the listener feels understood, that what they say is important, is to acknowledge not only what was said but also what was implied.

For example, if I ask my wife about her day and she responds, "The morning was great." I can respond in four ways:

- 1. Ignore her.*
- 2. Offer a lazy, one-word retort, "great."*
- 3. Repeat back what she said, "Sounds like you had a great morning. Glad to hear."*
- 4. Acknowledge what was meant by what she said, what was implied: "What happened in the afternoon?"*

It's easy to see which response has the greatest impact and encourages a more open dialogue. Sellers with advanced virtual skills know they must work hard to tune into what is implied, to set aside their agenda, and listen for what is not being said. And when they do, they send an even louder message than an empathetic look; they prove that they really care.

The second most powerful way to open the flow of information is to ensure they are comfortable with sharing anything – especially if it's bad news. Bad news such as:  
"We've used your \_\_\_\_\_ before, and we didn't find it valuable."

"We've been working with (your competitor), and they seem to be doing a great job."

"Now's not the time to explore this. We are currently working on \_\_\_\_\_, and that's our greatest priority right now."

If your response is, "Tell me more," information flows more freely, and the truth is exposed.

If your response is, "Yeah but...", "the message to the customer is clear: there is a consequence to sharing negative information. So, they learn to just keep things on the surface. Like what you might say to a waiter at a restaurant you never plan on visiting in the future when asked about your meal: "It was great. Thanks."

# 4

## PROBLEM 4: It's More Difficult to Demonstrate Value

Before addressing this challenge, let's pause for a second to talk about the inherent problem of motivating people to act.



Have you ever attempted to sell someone on an idea, either a customer or a friend, and were completely baffled at their unwillingness to change? Your logic was compelling, they genuinely agreed with your recommendation, but they did nothing?

A great example of this phenomenon is retirement. Most everyone believes they should save for retirement, but studies have shown that less than 15% have saved \$10k or more toward saying adios to work. What's happening here? If we believe we should save, why don't we?

## The Truth is Captured in a simple formula: Logic + Emotion = Action

For people to make a dramatic change, they not only have to believe they need to change, but they must emotionally experience the benefit. In other words, until you know what it feels like to be broke and 70, we will not change how we manage our money.

This truth is captured in a simple formula: Logic + Emotion = Action  
Connecting this formula to our topic du jour, making the emotional connection is significantly more difficult from a distance. We are more dependent on our words than pictures. Even if you're making a presentation, people consume information differently online. Success is found in developing pictures with our words: Word Pictures.

### WORD PICTURES

Word Pictures are analogies to simplify the complex, to help the customer picture or "see" something they don't understand and elicit a desired emotion by drawing on a past experience.

For example, a few months ago, I was talking to a participant in one of my workshops when he pulled out a vapor cigarette. To strike up a conversation, I said, "So what's up with vaping? Is it the same as smoking a cig?" As if I had just smoked a pack of cigarettes with a few European hipsters' friends wearing skinny jeans.

He explained it to me instantly and brilliantly:

*"You ever tried turkey bacon?"*

*"Yeah, sure," I answered.*

*He said, "Not as good, right?"*

*Agreeing, I said, "Yeah, it's kind of like bacon, but I would much rather have the real thing."*

He just nodded.

By focusing on what I understood (taste of turkey bacon), I was the central character in the story. And when the listener is the hero of the story, they listen. Secondly, he leveraged something I already understood to explain something I didn't understand. Vapor cigs were explained to me in five words: "Have you ever tried turkey bacon?" I instantly remembered the feelings associated with the taste of turkey bacon – less pleasurable, blah, less satisfying, rubbery. Even though the only idea being sold here was negative aspects of vaping, it's a good example of how Word Pictures can have an instant impact on our emotions. They can conjure up feelings of what life would be like with or without the benefits of what you offer.

For example, if you sell a high end, very expensive product, you need a Word Picture to help the listener experience what quality feels like, the cost of shortcuts, or why the expensive materials used in manufacturing the product really matter. If you sell an intangible service, like marketing or consulting, you need Word Pictures to differentiate you from the competition or to simplify the complex.

If you sell a product or service that, in the mind of the customer, is a commodity — or maybe what you offer is simple to understand and therefore, it all looks the same or is easy to be misjudged (e.g., insurance, medical supplies) — you need a Word Picture. To build your library of Word Pictures, here are a few ideas to get you started.

#### **BUILDING EFFECTIVE WORD PICTURES:**

1. Figure out and rank the most difficult but important concepts required to sell your solution.
2. Set aside time to develop 3 to 5 Word Pictures for your most critical but complex concepts. Why so many? Some people hate sports analogies but love cars. Some hate cars and sports, but love cooking or wine or music or politics. Therefore, develop a few Word Pictures that will appeal to every type of customer.
3. Lastly, test it. Some of the seemingly best Word Pictures fall flat when delivered live. Like all good comedians, find a few friends to test out your material and refine your analogies accordingly.

### **DON'T DEPEND ON THE SLIDES TO TELL THE STORY**

Keep your slides and graphics simple. If you lean on the slide to tell the story, you will lose the audience. The purpose of the graphic or picture is to set up your point, not prove it.

To help the listener understand and embrace your recommendation (the logical side of the brain), here's what all the best communicators, top Ted Talks, and top sellers have in common when they want to make a point, present a concept, or sell an idea:

1. Start with the listener's point of view, their perception about the topic at hand and view of the problem.
2. Share a disruptive truth, a fact, principle, or best practice that surprises the listener about a better way to solve their problem.
3. Focus on a proprietary benefit, a benefit that only you can offer related to a solution that only you can offer.

Great communicators begin, not with their big idea, but with the listener's point of view. If you want to grab someone's attention, talk about their favorite subject – them. Said another way, if I show you a picture of you, you will look at it.

Therefore, when you need to make a critical point, begin the sentence with "Because you..." There isn't a better way to grab the customer's attention and keep you tuned in to the hero of the story. Next, resist the temptation to pitch your idea, but share a disruptive truth – a principle, research, or best practice that challenges conventional wisdom and helps the customer think about a new way to solve their problem.

Consider Simon Sinek's Ted Talk, [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en) the third most viewed in history with over 49 million views.

#### **HIS DISRUPTIVE TRUTH:**

“People don't buy what you sell, they buy why you sell it.”

Instead of selling a book or consulting services, he got us to think differently about how we sell. The unique way he thinks about the customer's problem sold the book.

Notice that the first two steps don't include you. It's all about the customer's problem and a new way to think about the problem. Your solution is where it should be: last. Now it's time to tell the listener how you can, uniquely, solve the problem. The key word: uniquely.

When selling remotely, time is not your friend. People have much less tolerance for meetings and boring information. Therefore, you must make difficult decisions about what to share. What should make the cut? The benefits that differentiate you from the competition. Of course, you will need to demonstrate that you can offer solutions similar to the competition, but the less time you spend on your proprietary benefits, the lower the chance is that you'll win over the audience and win the deal.

To learn more about this advanced approach to presenting your solution, here are two videos: [formulas for getting people to act](#) and [the 3 elements to effectively presenting your solutions](#).

# PROBLEM 5: Managing a Virtual Meeting

# 5

A few years ago, I was voluntold to lead a committee. I didn't feel very qualified, but believed it was the right thing to do. I was passionate about the organization's mission, but up to that point, I had been more of a taker than a giver. So, I signed up for the leadership role.

In preparation for the meeting, the previous leader pulled me aside to share that the format of the meeting I was now heading up was based on the "Robert's Rules of Orders."  
<https://www.robertsrules.com/>

I said, "Robert who?"

He quickly explained that this procedure, created for running parliament meetings in the 1800s, is how most company boards and large organizations run their meetings.

"Cool. Tell me what to do. I'm here to serve."



I took some notes and felt reasonably ready for the meeting. After all, I've been leading meetings for years and years. It couldn't be that hard...

Well, I bombed. Yes, there were people sitting in chairs, and it was technically a meeting, but because of the new format, I wasn't prepared, and the meeting quickly went off the rails.

Transitioning from leading a face-to-face meeting or presentation, to a virtual presentation can feel much the same. It's a meeting. We can all see each other... sort of. But in reality, much has changed.

For example, just ask a question and see what happens. Crickets. No one will respond. That doesn't happen in an in-person meeting.

When you are eye-to-eye, people talk. There's lots of good information out there about lighting, the technology, etc. My goal here is to focus on the top 5 things you need to know to make the shift from leading an onsite to leading a virtual meeting.

## YOU CAN'T WING IT

If you are like most, beginning a face-to-face meeting is intuitive. You know how to introduce yourself, who goes first, what to say, how to meet people, etc. It's fluid and you probably don't prep for it. Those instincts will fail you in a virtual meeting.

Everything needs to be choreographed. How will you start? Who talks next, and so on? How will you get the audience to participate? What questions will be targeted at whom? If not, you might feel as awkward as a preteen on a first date. As if you're making a critical speech, don't wing it. Plan what you're going to say, develop the flow, and practice it

## STOP SHARING SCREEN TO INVITE DIALOGUE

At key intervals, quit sharing your screen and create more interaction by looking at the faces of the participants and asking questions. This breaks up the flow, increases engagement, and allows you to see the customer's expression.

## IF YOU WANT PEOPLE TO TALK, CALL ON THEM

Virtually, questions directed at no one will be answered by no one. Face-to-face, you can't get people to shut up, but virtually, it's much harder to get people to talk. My guess is they are typically doing something else.

Research suggests that they could be doing 1 of 10 things during the meeting. The biggest distractions? 65% are typically doing other work, while 63% are sending an email, and 55% are eating. Maybe that's why they don't answer questions.





## PAY ATTENTION TO THE DECISION MAKER'S FACE

It's easy to get consumed with delivering the message and leading the presentation. While obviously necessary, don't miss opportunities to expand the screen of the key influencers or decision-makers to look for signs of concerns or boredom. This is your cue to stop screen sharing and draw them into the conversation.

## THE COVER SHOULD MATCH THE BOOK

Your personal brand, the way you look, the lighting, the quality of image, the background, all reflect on the quality of product or solution you sell. Simply stated, don't put a crappy cover on a great book. People buy you before they ever buy your recommendation. Therefore, get a good camera, set up your "studio" to make the best possible impression, and dress the part.

[Here are some other great tips about the details of delivering an engaging virtual presentation.](#)

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This is a lot to take in, I get it. Just get started. Use the links to change your mindset, upgrade your tools and set up your space. This is the new frontier. Embrace it. Make sure you subscribe to [our blog](#) and our [newsletter](#) and please [let us know if we can help you](#) think through any of this.



# Simplifying the challenges of selling virtually