

Put Prospects Front and Center

If you really want to serve your customers and move them from potential residents to tenants, you must put them, not your company, first. By Donald M. Davidoff



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OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I'VE LOOKED AT MORE THAN A DOZEN SALES models and/or sales training programs in the industry. Despite being framed as caring about the customer, the reality is, these programs are all very process oriented—in a very “me and my processes” kind of way.

They're all about what we, the salespeople, want. It puts us and our processes front and center, with the prospects themselves merely actors going through our play.

Why should we care about putting the prospects' needs at the center instead of our own need to sell? As Stephen R. Covey notes in Habit 5 of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, if we seek first to understand and only then to be understood, we are much more likely to be successful. And as Daniel H. Pink notes in *To Sell Is Human*, “attunement” is one of the new keys to success in selling to an informed prospect base.

If we want an approach that truly puts prospects in the center, we need to think seriously about the processes they go through as they make their decisions.

ALIGNING WITH THE PROSPECT'S JOURNEY

Research has shown that there are four clear stages prospects go through as they make their decisions:

- **First, they *imagine* all of the possibilities.** They dream about what they might get and begin their search.

- **Next, they *refine* their approach.** They learn about the realities of what's available and what the costs are.

- **At this point, they're ready to *examine* what's out there.** They now look more deeply into their options. This is also when they'll visit communities in person.

- **Lastly, they *commit*.**

Our job is now to align our processes with the prospect's journey, and we can do that with a four-segment model of our own, detailed below. Doing so puts the prospect at the center of everything. It lets us help prospects make good decisions rather than “sell” them on anything.

- In today's world, prospects are often 65% or more of the way to their decision before they ever talk to a salesperson. Our job in **discovery**, then, is often to catch up to them as quickly as possible.

- The most important segment is **inquiry**, where we learn about our prospect's needs and wants—and, more important, the difference between the two.

- **Advocacy**, next, is when we connect our products and services to the prospect's needs and wants.

- **Implementation** starts with asking for the lease and is also where we deal with any reluctance.

A key principle in this approach is that leasing associates should never enter a new segment until they've completely met the exit criteria for the previous one. Let's say we're presented with a couple and we ask the open-ended question, “So what's most important in what you're looking for in a new home?” They answer, “Well, we have a 6-year-old about to enter first grade, so being in a really good school district is important.”

We know we have an excellent elementary school, and we just can't help ourselves in responding about how good the schools here are, and the pattern repeats itself with subsequent questions. The problem with this approach is we keep flipping back and forth between inquiry and advocacy. We think we're building credibility by giving good answers, but the truth is we gain credibility by asking really good questions.

Thus, the better approach is to “ask ... listen; ask ... listen; ask ... listen” and then, when we've asked all of our questions and know everything we need to know, only then do we move from inquiry into advocacy.

There's much more to building out an entire sales system based on this approach, but hopefully this gives some practical insight into what needs to be done if we really want to put prospects at the center of the sales process. **MFE**

CUSTOMER-FIRST SALES MODEL

