

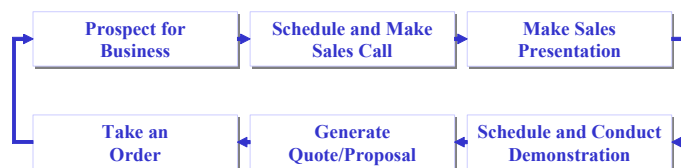
What Value Does Your Sales Process Create?

Most sales executives are challenged to produce better results these days. Jill Stillman, a sales executive I worked with a few months ago, seemed particularly frustrated.

“There are only 100 firms in the country large enough to buy our services. I know them all. Qualification is not my problem. What I want to know is, once I am in the account, what do I have to do to get them off the dime?”

Indeed, Jill’s calendar was filled with activity. Her support department had major proposals in development. If a prospect was willing to talk with him about her company’s services, she got on a plane to meet with them as soon as possible. Her resources were straining, but precious little was being sold. On rare occasions she would get blind-sided by a prospect’s negative decision. Usually, customers simply delayed, and delayed again. Deals went down to no decision.

Sounds familiar doesn’t it? I asked Jill to describe her sales process. Although she didn’t draw a diagram, if she had it would have looked something like this:



Question: “For whom does this sales process create value?”

Answer: The salesperson’s company.

Question: “Does this process create any value for the prospect or customer?”

Answer: Maybe, sometimes. Not intentionally.

If the “sales process” *itself* isn’t valuable to the prospect or customer, is it any wonder they resist it? Well, you may say, customers buy our stuff because they need it. Our products and services themselves are valuable.

Indeed. Then why do you need a sales force at all? As products and services become more complex, it can be harder for customers to distinguish between suppliers and to understand the value being offered to them.

Dealing with this challenge is obviously the job of sales. What may not be so obvious is that for marketing and selling activity to be effective, it must generate *value for the prospect or customer* at every stage. Setting marketing aside for the moment, how can salespeople create value for customers?

- **Appeal**
Salespeople instinctively know they must appeal to prospects through their appearance, personality, and knowledge. They go where the prospects and customers are, they respond to them, and they are easy to deal with.
- **Quality**
Just as not all raw materials meet specifications, not all prospects are qualified. Time and energy can be saved for prospects by working only with those whose problems the salesperson can solve.
- **Knowledge**
Salespeople do their homework on the customer's business and industry issues to better understand how they can help the customer.
- **Relationships**
Building relationships with the right people, generating a track record of reliability and truthfulness, demonstrating productive insight, and helping prospects build consensus and commit to action are all valuable services to customers.
- **Communication**
Communicating effectively, learning the customer's addressable problems, positioning value at the right time to the proper individuals, and using language customers understand are critical.
- **Commitment**
Following up to make sure customers achieve the benefits they were expecting is a hallmark of a professional sales organization.

“Well,” you may say, “our salespeople are expected to do all of those things already. So what are you talking about?”

What salespeople do within their individual span of control is *necessary*, but it is not *sufficient* for maximum success. For example, suppose Jill returned to the office after an initial meeting with an important senior-level prospect, and her boss said, “So, did you sell anything yet?” How long can Jill’s attitude and behavior stay at a high level if her organization doesn’t support and respect her efforts to be valuable to the customer?

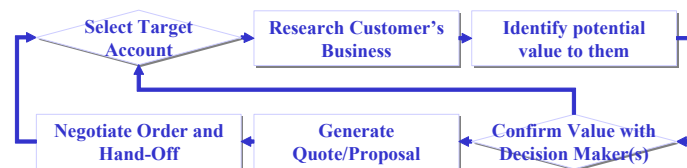
If your company’s sales process creates real value for customers, customers will be more likely to follow it. And, if customers follow your process, salespeople will too! Such a process is the strongest defense against changing markets, technologies, and competition.

Does this mean doing things for customers at your expense? Giving away the store? Not at all. Jill could find a fair number of people willing to see demonstrations and read proposals developed at her company’s expense. But if the right Executive VP in the target account didn’t have a reason to change the way their department operated, there would be no sale no matter how hard Jill tried. For Jill to be successful, the right Executive VP needed to believe that changing the way the department operated was more important than many other potential initiatives.

In this complex sales environment, the kind notorious for unpredictability and cost, reaching the decision maker requires that you earn the right to do so. The salesperson must gain first-hand insight into the decision maker's needs and priorities. Pushing a solution without that insight usually wastes everyone's time.

Instead of jumping at the chance to show everyone her system, Jill needed to be asking lots of intelligent questions and listening to the answers. She needed to learn for herself if the objectives and challenges of the target account's department managers (and the Executive VP) could be enhanced by changing the way the department operated. Further, she needed to understand some of the other initiatives they might be considering.

This was a very different focus for her. Her sales process needed to look something more like this:



Does the customer or prospect see value in a salesperson (or a company) with this kind of approach?

You bet they do! Could her company help Jill to reach the right department managers and learn their prospect's objectives and challenges? With a shift in focus, they definitely could. For example, suppose when Jill returned to her office her boss said, "So which of their objectives and challenges can we help them with?"

Everything your organization does to find, gain, and keep customers ought to create value for them in some way. Your sales environment might not be as complex as Jill's. But if you take a step back and ask how you can help your salespeople create value for customers, you'll be glad you did.

About the Author

Michael J. Webb is President of Sales Performance Consultants, Inc., a leader in helping companies improve sales performance through scientific principles of quality management. He has worked with clients such as American Express, 3M, Marriott, Microsoft Great Plains, Rockwell Automation and many smaller companies to improve their sales processes and results. He also works with sales training firms, such as IMPAX Corporation, to help integrate the best selling practices into client companies' sales operations. His website, www.salesperformance.com, contains a wealth of hard-to-find articles and resources on process improvement for marketing and sales organizations. Mr. Webb can be reached at (708) 383-9309 or mwebb@salesperformance.com.