



***RAPIDRESEARCH***

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DEVELOPING A GROWTH STRATEGY  
THE FOUR PHASES OF THE RELATIONSHIP  
SELLING PROCESS

## INTRODUCTION

### THE FOUR PHASES OF THE RELATIONSHIP SELLING PROCESS

Selling can be the hardest, yet most lucrative game in the business world. If you let it, the job can be very demanding. Equally, if you let it, the task can be very enjoyable.

You have a choice in selling techniques. One is adopting the more common approach to the selling process which the sales person assumes the role of being an expert with a pre-programmed spiel, based on prices, supply, features, advantages and benefits of what you sell. These are “rattled off” as a list of possibilities with the fond hope that one or a number of points will trigger a response in the prospect that it will fulfil one of their previously identified needs.

Sure, this process works, provided you are selling relatively simple (uncomplicated) goods and services. With this method, the best deal usually wins. There is not a lot of thinking goes into this sales process except to take the lead role in telling the decision maker “what we can do for you” right up front. Such presentations are on the assumption that a need already exists, and this need is essentially the same from one customer to the next. The efficiency of this style of selling is comparatively low. A competitor’s better price or product can quickly destroy any supposed loyalty. Poor sales skills creep in. Pressure mounts with this style being structured around an adversarial sales strategy, the customers usually feel that their real needs and problems are not addressed.

On the other hand, a more efficient selling process uses the skill of “asking” as the best method. This style forms long term partnering relationships with the prospects. The key is to be willing and able to pose intelligent questions about the prospect’s present needs and future plans. That is, not to get bogged down in the process of them justifying why they have not achieved their goals, but to help them open up the possibilities of gaining greater accomplishments or getting the competitive edge by way of purchasing what you have to offer. By simply allowing prospects to talk about themselves, you effectively get to be inside their “goldfish bowl” rather than still be “looking in from the outside”. Customers have a way of staying with sales people who ask the right questions and listen to the answers before working on a range of suggestions designed to keep the interacting dialogue going.

To master the skills of relationship selling, the sales person needs to follow the nuances of the sales cycle. There are four steps. *Prospecting* leads to *interviewing*, leads to *presentation*, leads to *closing*. Each of the steps are linked together through the process of ASKING. Be aware that not every prospect turns into a sale. But every response to the questions posed in the “asking” sales presentation, represents the work you have to do to address and stimulate the dialogue, trust, and decision, to buy what you offer. In reality, the sales process is developed as a joint effort between the prospect and the sales person.

The information in the following pages, can get you the competitive advantage. Each of the four phases forms a template to which you can add your business circumstances and expectations to develop a relationship selling process that is unique to your organisation.

## THE FOUR PHASES OF THE RELATIONSHIP SELLING CYCLE

### Phase One – Prospecting

To be more effective in the sales prospecting process, the person you are cold contacting has to be given a good reason to change their pattern of thinking or experience to do something different that is based on their best interest. In reality, the biggest road block to your sales success, is not your competitors. It's the established *status quo*.

If the prospect concludes from a gabble of sales stutter on initial contact that there is no need for what you offer, then he / she has not been stimulated enough, with a strong enough benefit that would change their status quo. Why did the prospect come to this conclusion?

To explain this, let's assume you own a nice pair of black shoes. But should you get an equally nice pair of black shoes as a gift, you may think, "That was a nice gesture" but the shoes I have are still okay. These aren't much different." If it were up to you, you would not have gone out and bought a second pair of black shoes. In fact, you didn't even hint that you would like a pair of black shoes as a gift. As far as you are concerned the *status quo* was okay.

But if your friend had done a little research and bought a pair of new shoes, that co-ordinated perfectly with the new suit you recently bought, your reaction to this gift maybe quite different. Now you have a reason to change the *status quo* which developed from the new circumstances you created. In all probability, you would react quite differently to the person who gave you these colour matched and co-ordinated pair of shoes – at least think about the gift in a different, more appreciative manner.

A person who wants to give you a nice gift and who gets stuck on not being able to ask if you already "have a nice pair of shoes", misses the point. If they learnt more about what you do, your likely preferences, what is happening in your world, to determine a need, then those responses would help the gift-giver make a better selection. Therefore, it is fair to assume the *status quo* – what the person is already doing – is our **real competitor**.

So the first step in the sales prospecting phase is to "position" yourself properly. This happens when you identify and categorise those prospects who would have the most propensity to buy what you offer – goods, services, ideas, concepts

solutions etc. The prospects will want to judge whether what you offer can generate a superior performance or advantage, which could be perceived by the prospect to be important to them and that such advantages are sustainable.

Your objective is to talk to the “right” prospects rather than gabble off to those prospects who aren’t interested or able to buy which ultimately wastes time and reduces your sales strike rate.

We’ve covered the first step of prospecting wherein we generally position ourselves in relation to the “general” *status quo*. It is when we address this real competitor and get our prospect to change their position and we will gain a buying decision that is to both parties win/win advantage. Should we not make the effort to determine the status quo and why it is the way it is, we can not expect our prospect to consider the advantages to take action to change it. That decision to take action is the prospect’s, not your’s. The prospect will only change a current situation because there is a persuasive advantage for them to do so. This understanding is the central issue to master to become more effective in this relationship selling process.

Effective prospecting drives the entire sales cycle. One part that keeps good people out of the sales profession is “rejection”. Therefore, the trick is to minimise the chance of rejection. We’ve already covered one part as the “external” element of the process. The second part is to help you rationalise the process as a more “internal” process. That is, to accept that money, or the lack of it, has a strong motivating impact on our attitude and self-image. Let us explain this further.

That means, with every rejection you get during your prospecting work, it is worth cold hard cash to you. Every rejection you get, means that you are one closer to getting to meet a higher quality prospect. Part of the sales process involves what is known as the “strike rate”. That is, for (say) fifteen people you talk to, to set an appointment, the average number who appoint is five (15:5) and from those appointments one person buys.

So in sales jargon, the equation is 15 leads to 5 leads to one sale.

So far so good! Let’s say your sale is worth \$1,500 to you. Therefore, each of the fifteen prospecting calls is worth \$100 as you approach your one sale target. Therefore, it can be argued that your fourteen rejections are worth \$1,400! In reality you earn \$100 every time someone turns you down. Why is this so? Because sales don’t materialise out of thin air.

Does every prospect turn into a sale? Of course not! But every prospect contact represents the work you have to do to get a sale! Therefore, the more strangers who don’t want to talk to us about our offer, the more “inactive leads” we get out of the way, the more actual “prospects” we have in our sights to deal with. Each step in the sales process is linked to the others. It may take a number of

encounters or the whole cycle can happen in one meeting which will stimulate the prospect to take action. But without a strong initiating prospecting phase, the following and final phases of a buying decision will very rarely happen.

All too often sales people prospect incorrectly. The objective should be not to sell over the phone, but to start by just setting the appointment – nothing more, nothing less. As the caller, we just need to briefly introduce ourselves, make a short statement or two about what we do, and offer to establish our credentials, and then ask to set up an appointment for a face-to-face meeting. It can also improve your chance to get an appointment to be able to mention that you have been referred to the prospect by a close friend, colleague or family member. Such a referral must be genuine and there is a close relationship enjoyed by the two people. Remember the adage, “any friend of your’s is a friend of mine”. Therefore, as you leave every sales presentation, it becomes a very profitable habit to ask your prospect if they could refer you to a close contact who would also enjoy what you have to offer.

## **Phase Two – Face to Face**

This is the interviewing phase with one or more people. They could be also representatives of a target company. This is part of the sales process where we want to expand on the information we had originally developed when we were establishing the list of prospects we wanted to contact. Our objective is to get to know anything and everything about the needs, goals and problems of the prospect, as they would relate to our particular product or services.

This face-to-face interview phase is a *fact gathering* stage. It is not the *sale closing* stage.

We should not expect or ask for a buying commitment, until we fully understand what our prospect does or desires. Regrettably many sales people fail to devote enough time to this interviewing stage. They fail. Most start by reciting some word for word predetermined pitch. There is no spontaneity. In fact, the sales pitch may not have anything to do with what the prospect wants to accomplish. Part of your success will be how you differentiate yourself from your competitors who use such high pressured sales effort.

Your task is to clearly demonstrate just how compatible you are with your prospect. You need to get a clear understanding of your prospect’s position and a keen interest in what they are trying to accomplish. By asking what they want to have or need to happen, you’ve cut down on a lot of time, that could be wasted through uninformed presentation. By contrast, common selling tactics are adversarial. These inefficient “let me tell you” sales oriented techniques are usually based on a presumed (on your part) need. Such methods require high effort and energy for a low return. This style of selling makes sales people work far too hard and all too often, the outcomes benefit neither party.



For an average sale, allow that some 75% of the time, should be spent in this interview phase asking questions, and clarifying a mutual platform. When combined with your prospecting phase, some 80% of a salesperson's time needs to be spent gathering the facts, before structuring a range of suggested solutions, which would be most certain to meet the needs of the prospect. Regrettably, the high pressured sales people spend that same 80% of the sales call trying to "ear bash and close" without first establishing what has to be achieved. They only accomplish comparatively limited results.

Trust is a key value in this interviewing phase. The only way to build their trust in us, is to be trustworthy. Not only to appear trustworthy, but to actually prove yourself worthy of such trust through acting in the responsible way throughout the interviewing phase. This trust can be readily identified in the way you ask questions that probe for what objectives are to be accomplished, and how you can help the prospect achieve those goals through properly using what you have to offer. At this face-to-face stage you are not necessarily closing the sale, but work more to serve as a pipeline for the two way flow of information and solutions which will in the long run generate sales income for your business. To do this more effectively, we need to find out *new information*.

By this we mean, that we are receiving more indepth information, not simply asking that the sales information we have presented in a more general form be confirmed or rejected by the prospect.

The next aspect to decide upon is the amount of time you need to invest in this interview phase. Your own time is very valuable. It's what you use to create your income to accumulate wealth and generate prosperity. It then follows that you must make careful decisions on how you use every minute of your working day and to look closely at how your efforts are achieving your objectives. The majority of sales representatives spend more time on ineffective work, and chasing prospects that are, or would be, for one reason or another, going nowhere. The skill to develop is knowing how to prioritise your activities, which starts by identifying category A leads, to follow up and deciding when to conclude that lead is no longer worthwhile and a good time investment.

This phase also respects your prospect's time, because it minimises the time and effort wasted on blind uninformed presentations. This face to face phase is routed in the asking and then the listening, and then taking responsibility to identify the number of matches or mismatches with what you can offer, by have the prospect's goals and business style kept in mind.

### **Phase Three – Mastering the Detail**

This phase of the selling cycle is the presentation phase. This is where you can formalise your recommendations, and detail exactly what it is you feel your

organisation has to offer the prospect for him to get a new advantage to his *status quo*. In most cases, you'll spell out the cost, the time frame, and any constraints or conditions, to clarify your position. The most effective presentations are not usually set up ahead of time in your office. They are composed in a more collaborative way on your prospect's territory. The idea is to take the information provided by the prospect and bring about a unique, highly customised document or proposal which your prospect is more likely to accept because he or she or they helped to write it.

This simple process, when properly applied, will smooth out the sales presentation every time. It is dynamic. It can produce some incredible outcomes. This is because people enjoy talking about themselves, their organisations, their aspirations, and their problems, and are very appreciative of all the help they can get.

By allowing prospects to talk during the interview stage, you slowly and carefully move into the phase of acting like a conduit of information and solutions. It is important for you to find out about the problems and challenges your prospect faces, source their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, together with their market realities and expectations.

From this point, you slowly and surely channel all that input into a preliminary proposal, one that you encourage the prospect to change and revise. This eventually results in a final document or proposal that both the sales person and the prospect take responsibility for implementing and directing. With this approach, you uncover most of the problems before you make the final, formal sales presentation. You spend most of your time talking to the decision maker who is truly interested in doing business with you. In fact, they will become so involved that they even help you write a good part of the final presentation.

This style of selling is geared towards allowing if not encouraging the potential customer to correct us. It accepts the decision maker's point of view of the as the only one worth considering. It sets out solutions, and strategies which make it more likely that our final offer will be the accepted way to improve or resolve their status quo position. This selling method allows the decision maker to have the last word. However, let us accept that we have done a certain amount of prompting and steering to ensure that our expertise is firmly ensconced within the prospect's mind set.

It is important that you counteract your natural human tendency to assume that what might be true in your own past experiences, is the best reference to what is true for the prospect's current situation. The point is with this selling method, you are guiding the sales cycle without attempting to control the outcome at any individual point of the sales cycle. Being far from the game of having to be always correct, this style of relationship selling, allows you to make inevitable mistakes, in your assessment of your prospect's situation, and be willing to allow, and expect the prospect to correct you and point you towards the right answer.

They innately know that together you are on the right track, and the only thing to decide is the price, time, and resources required.

In psychological terms this willingness to be corrected represents an opportunity for the sales person to gain significant stature in the prospect's eyes. At the same time, you will gain further information which may prove even more crucial to preparing a more informed proposition and thus gain the buying decision in your favour.

On the other hand, pressure selling techniques are geared mainly towards the sales person, demonstrating the breadth, height and limits of their product knowledge. All too often a "we know everything" approach can be challenged, and the sales person suffers the risk of being alienated. The point is, every prospect does have a need, but a 'one solution fits all' response can be wasting everyone's time. Therefore, the best sales method is to build a bridge and forge long term partnering relationships with the prospect. Posing intelligent questions about present and future plans, rather than form short term alliances, and failing to ask those questions which could lead to new initiatives.

Relationship selling techniques will always prove to be of greater benefit to the customer in the short and long term.

#### **Phase Four – Asking for the Order**

This final phase of the selling cycle is commonly known as the *close*. In most cases, it is an agreement in some formal stylised format which signifies the buyer's acceptance, which could be by way of their signature or verbal agreement. It formalises the transaction and gives a structure by which the business is to proceed. With such formalities being completed, we say the sale has been "closed".

To describe this process of commitment by the two parties, to undertake a specific range of actions, by using the word "closing" can summon up any number of wrong images. For instance, to close a business means to shut it down, whereas in the sales jargon, the opposite is true. When a purchase agreement is made, making a commitment for mutual opportunity often requires the mechanics to be open, adaptable, and flexible. In simple terms, when the extent of the offer has been concluded, (under phase three), you simply ASK for the order. You simply formalise the prospect's agreement for you to proceed.

Asking for the order does not require trickery or mumbo jumbo. All it requires is that you do the work up front, get agreement that the suggestions will work, and then straightforwardly ask for the prospect's commitment – which is rather fitting because you've been asking for information right up to this stage of the process. The asking process has driven the entire sales dynamics right up to this point of



closing. Therefore, it could be understood that closing is simply a continuation and natural outworking of what was started at the outset of the sales process.

If you have followed the process of handling the first three phases of the relationship selling techniques correctly then this final phase of asking for the order is simplicity itself. Simply, you ask for the business. Should the first three phases have been processed properly, wherein you listened to what the prospect had to say, and allowed for a whole raft of unique and customised input about how the prospect can do better what they do best, then all you have to do in this final phase is to ASK!

Say something like this... "This makes sense to me. I think we should get started! What do you think?" If you have structured your sale process correctly and stayed mindful of the degree of pace and energy, you put into the guidance and presentation then this ask phase of the sale, like the first phase of prospecting, is very brief indeed.

Most of the time is usually spent in completing the paperwork.

A lot of people have great difficulty in making the buying decision. This is emphasised if the sales person has assumed the role of an expert, as does a "pressure salesman". These sales people figure there is a certain amount of bluffing and setting the record straight in their style of offering standard responses as rebuttals to the prospect's objectives. It's a game people play. It's understandable the prospect is looking for help, to be able to directly address underlying concerns or specific queries. There is a purpose in what they do. They are testing that the sales person can be relied upon to deal forthrightly should a buying decision be made. After all, if the sales person has shown no willingness to talk about problems and requirements unique to the prospect's needs, why should he or she be expected to develop a sudden interest in the topic should something go wrong?

Obviously, the sales solution is to avoid this "push and shove" and take the time to build the trust in the rapport and dialogue with the customer as outlined in phases two and three of the sales process.

Let's face it, the customer does not need you, your product, or your company. Therefore, your task is to discover what the customer is doing and help him or her do it even better with what you've got to offer. Ask them! Ask them what is happening. Listen! Listen twice. Then get your suggestions across succinctly through using a fair degree of your prospect's input to the point they've got to owning the ideas. Then the asking for the order phase is as a simple continuum of a highly efficient selling process.

## ATTITUDES AND TRAITS OF COMPETENT SALES PEOPLE

How do you think of yourself in a sales career? How well does your attitude supports and leads to openness and keeping things in perspective when dealing with prospective customers.

01 **Effective salespeople know they are a different “race” apart.**

They don't look, sound, act, or get paid like other workers. They're alert. Their capability to pull off the impossible sales feats are legendary. They can handle high stress levels. Excellent salespeople are never out of work. They enjoy higher financial rewards and perks. They are not normal, like the rest of the pack.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO

02 **Competent sales people are committed to keep trying.**

They have the tenacity to stick with a new idea or fresh way of looking at things to achieve the better outcome.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO

03 **Efficient sales people believe their work is more of a cause.**

They just don't have a career or a job. They live their work, product or service. They are committed to customer service duties as a firm set of principles which guides their selling efforts which assist to satisfy those people whom may benefit from the goods, services, and personal interactions on offer.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO

04 **Enthusiastic sales people are self motivated.**

They know that successful achievements comes from personally channelling every ounce of energy, time, and attention towards identifying with the people and situations, helping them compare and decide to make sure that the contact, purchase and experience is enjoyable and beneficial. They don't look for someone else to “light their fire”. They consider that would be a waste of time and effort.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO

- 05 **Committed sales people are accountable.**  
They don't avoid taking responsibility for their actions – don't avoid issues, blame others or construct elaborate excuses. They know that deception draws energy and excessive politicking, polarises situations.  
*How?* Lo Hi  
OOO OOO
- 06 **Capable sales people can think for the long term**  
When circumstances or a relationship with a prospect or a customer requires them to go above and beyond the normal call of duty, these people can do so, without fear or favour and always seem to achieve a positive result.  
*How?* Lo Hi  
OOO OOO
- 07 **Effective sales people don't get lost in detail**  
They don't otherwise lose sight of the fact that their objective is to propose solutions. Effective salespeople don't hesitate to delegate routine tasks to others to support people to get a result.  
*How?* Lo Hi  
OOO OOO
- 08 **Competent sales people are optimistic**  
They tend to make optimism happen. They're proactive which is quite the opposite to waiting for things to happen. And their results generally show the advantage of refusing to get side tracked by downward shifts in their fortunes.  
*How?* Lo Hi  
OOO OOO
- 09 **Capable sales people are enthusiastic**  
They love what they do for a living and have a way of getting a little worked up about their plans, aspirations, and strategies. They love to learn of new facts, features and markets, share ideas and pointers, keep in contact; and generally fight the good fight. They know customers won't buy a product in which a sales person is not enthusiastic about. Showing genuine excitement about an idea, product or solution, is the one good way to win people over to their way of thinking. Enthusiasm is the best

means of overcoming a buyer's resistance then resorting to rational argument.

Deeply felt enthusiasm usually translates to the human quality known as charisma – the ability to excite and invigorate other people through the sheer force of personality. Sales people know they are likelier to get honest information about their prospects' expectations, if they themselves build rapport by coming across as similar, sincere, likeable, upbeat and straightforward. People, who become excited and invigorated by someone else's enthusiasm tend to want to think of themselves as being on your side.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO

10 **Superior sales people recognise the need for prospecting and interviewing.**

Highly efficient sales people know full well, that putting their emphasis on identifying and listening to potential customers gives them the edge. They have niched out their target market and focus more on that aspect as their success criteria, rather than worrying about persuading and converting people to their way of thinking. Spending all their energy in the "closing mode" using conventional sales techniques can often prove to be a recipe for disaster. Better quality prospects can improve their sales strike rate by up to 80%, from the lower category prospects.

**How?**

Lo      Hi  
OOO OOO