



**ENGAGE**

# How to Engage the Empowered B2B Buyer:

## Four Key Selling Skills Salespeople Need to Win Deals

SELLING POWER EDITORS



**SellingPower**

## Selling Challenges in a Digital Age

Today's sales professionals are operating in the age of the empowered B2B buyer. To achieve and maintain revenue growth, salespeople need the right skills that will help them engage effectively with buyers who have vastly different preferences, needs, and buying habits than those in previous generations.

With the right selling skills, your sales force has the potential to stand out from your competition and become a factor of differentiation for your company. To see how this is possible, consider two growing trends in B2B purchasing behavior.

- ▶ **Buyers no longer need to speak with salespeople to acquire basic information about purchase options.** This trend has been on the rise for the past several years, and it's only becoming more entrenched. According to [Forrester](#), currently a full 60-75 percent of customers (depending on the industry) are conducting "more than half of their due diligence research about products and offerings online before speaking with a salesperson." Forrester expects this trend to continue expanding, since revenue from digital sales in the B2B space is projected to grow to \$1.13 trillion by 2020 – up from \$692 billion in 2014.
- ▶ **Buyers welcome interactions with salespeople who can engage in a consultative dialogue centered on value.** As [Forrester analyst Mary Shea](#) has pointed out, 74 percent of buyers currently choose to do business with the salesperson who is the first to add value during the sales process. If your salespeople become known as trusted advisors who can articulate value, your company will gain a distinct competitive advantage in your market.

## Four Selling Skills Salespeople Need to Win with Today's Empowered Buyer

To engage prospects and win deals, sales teams today must have the right set of selling skills. In fact, those skills must go far beyond a basic understanding of the buyer's needs (which is now a basic level of competence for salespeople). To truly capture the attention of buyers and move the sale forward in the age of the empowered buyer, your salespeople need the following four key selling skills.

### SKILL #1

#### THE ABILITY TO IDENTIFY AND ARTICULATE UNIQUE BUSINESS INSIGHTS.

While salespeople still need deep and comprehensive knowledge about the features and benefits of their offerings, that alone will not be enough to help them stand out in the digital era. The salesperson who approaches customer conversations in the same old way – without any research, ideas, or insights – will lose the opportunity to continue that dialogue with the customer.

It's increasingly important for salespeople to have the skills to identify such insights and articulate them without being seen as adversarial or aggressive. The abilities to 1) either validate or challenge the customer's chosen strategy, 2) introduce new insights, and 3) help customers uncover potential challenges are all sophisticated selling skills that require proper training.

For example, many sales leaders are familiar with the way low-to-average performers tend to simply follow the path the customer lays out for them. If a prospect says, "I want to see a proposal with these five elements in it," average salespeople will provide a proposal that does just that. What

distinguishes the trusted advisor is the ability to go above and beyond those five elements. Top performers know when and how to say, “You actually don’t need X and Y, but here’s why you would benefit greatly from Z.”

## **SKILL #2**

### **THE ABILITY TO CULTIVATE DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THE COMPETITION TO DIFFERENTIATE.**

Selling in the face of competition has always been a key skill; however, today’s sales environment is undeniably tougher than previous generations. This is due to many factors, including:

The rise of the empowered B2B buyer, who does not need salespeople in the ways he/she used to.

The vast number of offerings crowding many markets, and the rapid expansion of product development (recall that sales of digital B2B offerings alone are expected to grow to \$1.13 trillion by 2020 – up from \$692 billion in 2014).

The dramatic proliferation of sales-enablement tools that have helped accelerate and enhance nearly every aspect of the purchase cycle. Consider that Salesforce.com’s AppExchange (which hosts many of the sales-enablement apps salespeople now rely on daily to perform essential sales-related tasks quickly and effectively) launched in 2005; it now boasts nearly 3,000 public apps and 3.5 million app installs. Thanks to such tools, the race to win the deal is faster, and victory often goes to the swiftest qualified seller. (Remember, Forrester research says 74 percent of buyers choose to do business with the salesperson who is the *first* to provide value during the sales process.)

To win in such an environment, salespeople must have a deep knowledge of their competition. They must know what other companies do well, where they’re weak, their plan for growth, their marketing messaging, and the features and benefits of their products. They need to know what competitors say when they talk to prospects.

Unless salespeople gather this kind of information about their competitors (and many don’t), they won’t understand how to effectively evaluate the customer’s needs with the strengths and weaknesses of competitors.

Salespeople should also find out everything they can about a prospect’s relationship with competitors, including:

- ▶ Which competitors the prospect is currently talking to, and when those discussions began
- ▶ Which competitive offerings the prospect is considering
- ▶ What the prospect thinks of those competitors and their offerings

Top performers have the skills to discuss the competition in a productive way during customer meetings, whereas low-to-average performers often lack the ability and confidence to have this kind of dialogue with prospects. Most salespeople have a strong desire to operate at this level – they simply haven’t had the proper training to develop such skills.

## **SKILL #3**

### **THE ABILITY TO ASK CUSTOMERS DEEP QUESTIONS THAT FACILITATE A CONSULTATIVE DIALOGUE.**

Customers expect salespeople to do their homework before meetings and find out about their business, industry, and corporate structure. It goes without saying that salespeople should not be asking basic questions about the customer during meetings.

When it comes to asking questions, however, top performers go one or two steps beyond other salespeople and find information that leads to a deeply consultative dialogue. It should be noted that many salespeople believe they're proficient at asking questions, but the reality is that simply asking questions and getting answers is not enough. In the final analysis, the quality of the exchange will show whether or not salespeople are actually leveraging questions to their advantage. Top performers have the ability to ask questions that elicit information and insight, which salespeople then leverage to make more effective recommendations and gain forward momentum on the deal.

One of the ways top salespeople accomplish this is by planning questions in advance. Often a top salesperson will say something like, "I notice you've had a few changes in your engineering work in the past six months. How has that affected you?" This is a good example of industry knowledge and insight that an adept salesperson would be able to unearth beyond general research.

#### **SKILL #4** **THE ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY HANDLE CUSTOMER OBJECTIONS AND RESISTANCE.**

Sophisticated salespeople do not take objections at face value. Instead, they take the time to truly understand the nature of the objection. They promote a customer-focused dialogue rather than a defensive debate. Meanwhile, low-to-average performers have a habit of taking objections personally, and they sometimes even become emotionally charged in their responses.

Top performers view objections as relationship-building opportunities. They also understand how to anticipate objections and strategically think about how to address them. They're better prepared to deal with such objections when they crop up, as opposed to dealing with objections on the fly.

### **Summary**

In a digital world, sales leaders must develop sales teams that understand how to influence and engage with buyers who are in control of the sales cycle. Product information is readily available for customers to find online – and e-commerce channels are taking over interactions that used to be facilitated by salespeople. In this kind of world, salespeople who can go beyond simple selling skills will become highly valued.

Specifically, sales organizations must develop salespeople who are able to interact on a sophisticated level with buyers. They must provide a level of value that buyers cannot find elsewhere. For sales leaders, remaining competitive starts with a sales training approach that develops salespeople into trusted advisors.

## Four Types of Sales Roles: Which Ones Will Your Organization Need?

In light of its own prediction that many sales roles will be replaced by technology over the next decade, analyst firm Forrester has formulated four different archetypes among salespeople. Each type can be understood in relation to the complexity of the salesperson's offering, plus the complexity of the selling/buying environment.

Understanding how each archetype functions within each type of selling/buying environment can help sales leaders plan wisely for skills training and development initiatives.

### **ARCHETYPE #1: EXPLAINERS**

The "explainer" salesperson is ideal for interactions with customers who are purchasing a complex offering within a relatively simple selling/buying environment. Such buyers want to talk with salespeople so they can gain a deeper understanding of the offering, and they may also want input or guidance as they weigh their buying options and alternatives.

In terms of selling skills, depth and breadth of product knowledge is more valuable for the explainer salesperson than advanced selling skills (for example, negotiation or handling objections). Forrester predicts that a quarter of "explainer" sales roles will no longer be needed within the next decade or so.

### **ARCHETYPE #2: ORDER TAKERS**

Buyers purchasing simple offerings and operating in a relatively simple buying environment (with few decision makers and a clear path to purchase) are best served by the "order taker" salesperson. Order takers facilitate straightforward interactions.

Currently, automated systems and other technologies (machine learning and artificial intelligence, for example) are either heavily enhancing or entirely replacing order takers. (Forrester estimates 33 percent of such sales roles will be eliminated by 2020.)

### **ARCHETYPE #3: NAVIGATORS**

Buyers purchasing a simple offering in a more complex buying environment need salespeople to guide them through a purchase. These buyers are ideal for "navigator" salespeople; they can help customers forge a path through internal hierarchies and secure buy-in from multiple stakeholders.

Advanced selling skills are in high demand for navigator salespeople. Not only can they establish multiple stakeholder contacts, but they can also create complex ROI models to secure funding for deals. The prediction from Forrester is that 15 percent of such roles will be eliminated over the next 10 years.

### **ARCHETYPE #4: CONSULTANTS**

The "consultant" salesperson will be highly prized to interact at a sophisticated level with buyers who are purchasing a complex offering in a complex selling/buying environment. Such salespeople can provide insight for multiple stakeholders who are actively looking to be "enlightened" by sellers. They will have the skills and business acumen to help buyers think about their business in new ways.

This is the singular role Forrester expects to increase in demand over the next 10 years; consultant roles are projected to grow by 10 percent.

### **ABOUT JANEK**

Janek Performance Group is an award-winning sales performance company that provides research-based sales training and consulting services with a focus on driving revenue, top sales performance, and ROI for our clients. Our staff is committed to delivering tailored training solutions combined with effective sustainment and reinforcement solutions that lead to long-lasting behavior change and measurable results.

We define ourselves as a forward-thinking research company dedicated to the continual improvement of sales effectiveness and performance across a variety of industries and selling environments. As sales consultants and thought leaders, we strive to stay at the forefront of what truly works for top sales performers in today's competitive marketplace. It is this combination of ongoing research and identification of best practices that drives the development of world-class sales training programs and consulting processes.

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### **ABOUT SELLING POWER**

In addition to Selling Power, the leading digital magazine for sales managers and sales VPs since 1981, Personal Selling Power Inc. produces the Sales Management Digest and Daily Boost of Positivity online newsletters, as well as a five-minute video series featuring interviews with top executives. Selling Power is a regular media sponsor of the Sales 3.0 Conference.

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