
PART I

Selling in Today's Transparent World

The Importance of You in Selling: Being a Real Part of the Solution

*“Always be a first-rate version of yourself,
instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.”*

—JUDY GARLAND

With today’s marketers focusing the bulk of their resources on data, hype, and having a powerful online presence, you might think that salespeople are no longer relevant. You might fall into the trap of thinking that buyers don’t need *people* in their buying process, taking up their time, when they can get “all the information they need” instantaneously over the Internet. Don’t believe it! In today’s world, where information is pervasive, *you*, the sales professional, are more important than ever.

What? The seller is more important than ever?

Yes, you heard me right. *You* are an essential component of what you sell. *You* are an essential component in many purchasing decisions.

YOUR ROLE IN THE SOLUTION YOU SELL

For more than a decade, “experts” have predicted the demise of the sales professional, arguing that online buying will significantly reduce or elimi-

nate the need for salespeople. Yet I haven't seen that happen and I don't expect it will. What I have noticed, to the contrary, is that many online retailers are adapting how *they* sell to include chat features that offer site visitors the opportunity to connect with someone "live" to answer questions, discuss options, and clarify information. They have found that personal attention and assistance leads to selling more product.

This confirms my belief that there will always be a need for people to sell to people. In fact, as of 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that there are over 13.4 million salespeople in the United States alone; and if you've checked the job listings lately, you'll find thousands of sales jobs waiting to be filled.

Why is that? Why do buyers still need salespeople when they have access to so much information? Let's take a closer look.

With the commoditization of many products and services, combined with the proliferation of information, *you* are often the differentiating factor in a prospect's decision to buy. While pricing, delivery, and the solution itself are important, what makes a buyer choose your solution over your competitor's is often you—your understanding of their situation, your concern for their need, your ideas about how they might best use your solution, and the confidence you give them in your company's solution. In short, they need what you personally bring to the sales process and solution during and after the sale—both in the business-to-business (B2B) sector, where solutions tend to be more complex, and in the business-to-consumer (B2C) marketplace, where personal experience and ability to relate to the consumer count—a lot. You add value to the solution and that value closes more sales.

Let me share an example from my own experience.

Early in my sales career, I took the advice of a mentor who suggested that I would win more business if I focused on my product, not my expertise, and modeled myself—style, dress, and demeanor—after a certain successful sales professional in my industry. Her message was that the product would sell itself if *I* didn't get in the way.

As a young upstart business owner, I thought I ought to listen. If that meant being invisible and just selling the product, well, that was okay by me. But that well-meaning, old-school coaching nearly cost me my first

big sales opportunity—a multi-year training engagement in the financial services industry.

I managed to land the project after some quick scrambling, but it ended up costing me dearly—tens of thousands of dollars over a four-year period. Why? Because I was so busy trying to stay out of the way, so focused on the product pitch and being invisible, that I lost sight of the value *I* added to the solution, and, consequently, so did the client. Bottom line, I did a great job selling the *product* because they wanted my solution, but they didn't want me.

I salvaged the deal by hiring a trainer who had the experience the client requested and fit their suggested profile—someone older, preferably male, with gray hair or, better yet, bald!—while I took on the role of account executive. The percentage I paid my colleague deeply eroded my profitability and cost me referrals that went to him as the front man.

Over time, though, I gained confidence and began demonstrating my competence as a resource for the client, finding answers even when it wasn't my direct responsibility, driving the ongoing implementation, offering my experience and advice, and using my talents to “get it done.”

After one particularly productive meeting where I was able to share some of my knowledge, insight, and suggestions, one of the leaders who had been part of the original selection team asked, “Where were *you* during the sales process?”

I wanted to stammer, “What? Where was *I*? I was the one working twelve-hour days to meet your deadlines and compile the information requested by your thirteen-person decision team, each and every step of the way.” But I wisely kept my mouth shut as she went on to say that if the decision team had seen how smart, knowledgeable, funny, and personable I was, I wouldn't have needed to bring in my training colleague!

Hearing that hard truth was tough, but it taught me a valuable lesson about the importance of being part of what I sell—of letting my personality and unique strengths come through. If only I hadn't hidden behind the product, thinking that was all that mattered. If only I hadn't blindly followed my mentor's direction to focus only on the product and not incorporate “me” into the process and solution. If only I had demonstrated that *I* was part of the solution and the value they would receive, I would have closed the sale with fewer complications and a much higher profit.

FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT: DOES THAT WORK?

What if you've been taught, or prefer, to focus your buyer solely on your product or service (solution)? What if you're not comfortable being a part of the solution—for whatever reason? Maybe you don't want to be seen as assertive or pushy, or you're feeling the pressure of not meeting quota; maybe you want to sell more and don't know how, or you've been "beaten up" by your buyers, by the market, by your manager, or by your competition. Maybe you are new to sales or in a new role, or have a new territory with different buyers, or have new solutions to sell. The reason doesn't matter much. The question is, can you "fake it 'til you make it" when it comes to confidence and competence, as many well-meaning managers, mentors, and colleagues advise when you're fighting through the fear, stress, and uncertainty that make up a day in the life of a salesperson?

I think not!

Perhaps it worked in the past, though I doubt it ever really did. It certainly doesn't work in today's world, where buyers have too many pressures on their time, resources, and attention to waste them on sellers who are disingenuous. And trust me, they can spot a fake a mile away—sellers who pretend to care, while they haven't taken the time to understand the buyer; sellers who lack knowledge, misrepresent the impact of their solution, or project uncertainty.

Buyers need sellers who really do care, who really do understand, who really can help them focus on the important information and discard all the rest. They need sellers who show up prepared to work with, and sometimes guide, them through the sales process effectively and efficiently.

But what if you genuinely lack confidence, or perhaps the necessary competence, to be the kind of seller buyers need today? You've come to the right place—the rest of this book will introduce you to the skills, tools, and techniques along with best practices and examples that will help you become a competent, valuable resource for your buyers, so you can approach any selling situation with genuine confidence.

THERE'S NOWHERE TO HIDE IN A TRANSPARENT WORLD

If you're not yet convinced of the need to approach your sales with genuine competence and confidence, in today's transparent world your reputation, and that of your product and company, are more exposed than ever before.

For you as a seller, this transparency is a double-edged sword, opening opportunities to reach more buyers, to build stronger relationships and trust, and to differentiate yourself from the competition. At the same time, it leaves you and all you have ever done uncovered for your buyers and competition to view and analyze as well.

When buyers access the Internet or their network for information about your product and company, they look for reviews to learn of others' experiences, and frequently check up on the sales rep's "rep," too. One bad experience or questionable action can be broadcast instantly across the Internet, through social networks and consumer forum sites. And buyers pay attention. There's simply nowhere to hide and no room for faking it these days.

ADOPT AND ADAPT BEST PRACTICES TO ESCALATE YOUR VALUE AND SALES

If it's important that you make yourself a part of your solution, and vital that you be "real," does that mean you should never model or borrow successful practices from top salespeople? No. This book is filled with best practices I hope you choose to adopt. The key, however, is to adopt *and adapt*—to make them your own.

Try them on for size, practice them, and make incremental adjustments to best fit your solution, your buyers, and the industry you work in. Make them genuinely yours by adapting them to fit your strengths, personality, skills, and expertise.

When you are "real" and a vital part of your solution, you give your buyers confidence, and you both experience new levels of satisfaction and success.

