

## **Consultative Selling – What’s next?**

**By**

**Charlie Lang, Executive Coach and Trainer, Progress-U Limited**

**and**

**John Bower, Director, Human Potential Ltd.**

**Many sales professionals and sales trainers consider the Consultative Selling method as a state-of-the-art approach towards more sales success. This article aims at helping you understand the key distinctions between Consultative Selling and the “Stop Selling!” approach. While we won’t be able to explain either method in full detail within the scope of this article, the underlying philosophies of these two approaches are presented here.**

### **Consultative Selling – What’s next?**

If you have been scanning the market for appropriate sales training to improve your sales team's performance, you may have noted that the Consultative Selling approach is often praised as the most effective method to achieve sales targets.

What are the key beliefs of this approach?

1. Sellers need to develop good rapport and a trusting relationship with customers.
2. Sellers must identify ready, willing and able prospects.
3. If sellers fully understand the customer's needs, they will be more successful.
4. If sellers recommend a good solution based on their need analysis in a persuasive and logical manner, customers will eventually buy from them.
5. Sellers need to recognize signs of objections and concerns and skillfully respond to them, based on what they know about customers and their needs.
6. After having handled all objections successfully, sellers can close the sale.

Everything sounds good and reasonable, right? It's not hard selling – instead, the seller has to know all available details of the issues to be resolved so that he can offer his best advice to the buyer.

When talking to people who have shifted from classic hard selling to this approach, we usually find that they achieve considerably better results in terms of closing rates and customer retention, in particular.

### **Consultative Selling – What's next?**

If you are one of those who shifted to consultative selling: have you noticed an improvement in the length of the sales cycle? What are your closing rates (leads needed for one order)? Are they 3%, 5%, 10% or even 30%? Take note: a 30% closing rate means that the sales person spends a lot of time, energy and resources with the remaining 70% who don't buy from him.

Why are closing rates so low? We often hear explanations like "Our product is not competitive", "The competition did not play a fair game", "The customers can't make up their mind", "The market is so difficult", etc. Do these explanations help in improving the closing rate or shortening the length of the sales cycle?

Let's have a look at the key beliefs again. In a nutshell, they say, "If the seller understands the customer and convinces him that the seller's solution is the best, the customer will buy."

We would like to explore with you three underlying assumptions that sellers must believe in for the Consultative Selling approach to work:

1. We can actually fully understand the customer's needs.
2. If we recommend the right solution, the customer will buy.
3. We need to be skillful in handling objections.

### **Consultative Selling – What's next?**

## **The customer's needs – how much can you know?**

If you have a life partner (if you don't, just imagine you do!), you've probably already spent a few years living together and most likely have a genuine interest in your partner. However, do you always know exactly what your partner needs or desires? If you've tried to ask, can your partner always immediately give you this information?

What does this translate to in terms of sales? Can a sales person possibly fully understand the situation of a potential buyer?

As we are aware that we can't possibly fully understand a customer's situation, we find it more useful to assist the customer in his discovery of needs and desires, and help him be clear on what is involved in meeting these needs (e.g., required resources, potential disruptions, anticipated benefits and added value).

## **The customer's buying decision – it's a puzzle**

Reaching a buying decision is often like seeing the image of a jigsaw puzzle. You don't need to have all pieces in place to recognize the image, maybe just a majority of the pieces or the most telling ones.

Often, the buyer doesn't have a clear idea what this image looks like; sometimes the seller has a better view. However, as long as the buyer can't see it, he won't make a buying decision even if he's clear about his needs.

### **Consultative Selling – What's next?**

So if the buyer needs to figure out how to reach a buying decision, how could a sales person best support him in the decision-making process?

### **What are objections?**

Where do objections come from? What does it mean when the buyer says, “Your product is too expensive” or “We are not sure about the quality of your product” or “We have to think about it”?

Quite obviously, objections are a sign of resistance in the buying process. Where does resistance come from? Resistance usually means that you don’t want to go the direction as the person that evoked the resistance.

What do you do if you come to a crossroads with your friend and you can’t agree on which direction to go? The approach you use with your friend in this scenario can also be used when being confronted with objections.

### **A new sales paradigm – the “Stop Selling!” approach**

We believe that creating good rapport and a deep level of trust is the basis of a successful relationship with the buyer – a belief no different from that of the Consultative Selling approach. Additionally, one of our core beliefs is that being attached to a certain outcome (a meeting, a demo or a sale) actually limits the level of trust we can create with a potential customer. As long as we have a concrete outcome in mind, we tend to create pressure on the buyer consciously or subconsciously, which leads to less trust between buyer and seller.

### **Consultative Selling – What’s next?**

Rethink the importance of seeing the needs of the buyer. If I discover that your shirt collar is torn, I automatically see the need for you to buy a new shirt. How important is my understanding of this need for the buying decision? What are the possible reasons why the buyer doesn't need to buy a new shirt? Who really makes the buying decision? So how can we best support the buyer in discovering his needs and how his situation would change after meeting these needs?

**The key benefits of the "Stop Selling!" approach:**

1. Both buyer and seller save time and resources

The "Stop Selling!" approach teaches the sales person how to best assist the buyer in making his buying decision. This cuts short the often-lengthy trial-and-error process of figuring out how and what to buy.

2. Considerably higher closing rates

According to our philosophy, one of the key skills a sales person must develop is to become sensitive when he creates pressure and respond appropriately when he feels resistance from the buyer. We found that the "Stop Selling!" mindset creates a better, deeper trust between the buyer and seller, which leads to closing whenever the seller can offer a suitable solution.

**Consultative Selling – What's next?**

### 3. Improved brand image

The people who sell the product or services of any company usually have the most frequent customer interaction. This means the behavior of sales people shapes what the buyer perceives as the brand image of the company. The 0-pressure approach of “Stop Selling!” sales people helps create the image of a very professional and likeable organization.

Are you ready to “Stop Selling!” and accelerate your business?

#### **Consultative Selling – What’s next?**