



Listen Large: 9 Tips for Matching Your Selling Steps to the Buyer's Mindset
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Selling time is too short to waste butting your head against the wall – trying to present options when the buyer has no awareness of need. Instead, you'll both be happier if you can get in step. The following tips may help match your selling activities to the buying cycle.

Listen for Leapfrog Opportunities

During your discussion, listen for comments from your buyers signaling that they're looking for ways to grow their business or improve their operations. Some individual buyers and leading-edge organizations sit poised waiting for the next opportunity to leapfrog over their competition with the next big idea. They never think in small incremental steps. They're impatient with the typical 10 to 15 percent growth rates that many other organizations would be happy to report each year.

You'll hear comments such as:

- "We're different around here."
- "We find out what everybody else is doing – and we don't do it."
- "You've got an idea? I'll get you to the right people."
- "We need to talk. Let me get the right players in the room."
- "Let's brainstorm."
- "All of those ideas sound good. Let's explore a little before we narrow things down to a proposal."
- "Don't worry. If they like it around here, we can find the money."

Listen to such signals from your buyers so you understand when they're ready to make a huge investment in your offering and leapfrog to the next level.

Listen for Plug-the-Drain Opportunities

"Aren't all buyers interested in improving and growing themselves or their business?" you may wonder. Not on your life. Because sales professionals are a self-motivated group; it's hard to believe the rest of the world can remain stagnant. Nevertheless, that's often the case. Some businesses are in mature stages and do not intend to invest further to grow market share or expand. Their goal is to make their profit and loss statements look good and sell quickly. Other businesses and other consumers have any number of reasons to maintain the status quo.



Their focus is to plug the drain on current problems. Listen for phrases such as:

- “Let’s get real.”
- “One thing at a time. Let’s get this approved first.”
- “Look, this is our number one priority this year.”
- “Our customers want this corrected. What do you have to help us with this situation?”
- “First things first.”
- “How much does it cost?”
- “Where’s the breakeven on the investment?”
- “What’s the guarantee?”

Take your cue and follow their lead. They can think of only one leaking drain at a time. Focus on the first drain before you try to get them to re-plumb the whole building.

Listen for Keep-Me-Informed Opportunities

Listen for buyers who tell you they’re satisfied with the current situation, but not convincingly. Change takes effort, and buyers tend to take the path of least resistance. They may say they’re “happy with our current supplier,” but they may actually mean, “My boss likes them, but I don’t think they do a good job. And when I have enough time to fight the political battle, I’m going to do something about it.”

Listen for comments such as:

- “We always like to keep up to date with what’s out there.”
- “You never know when our situation may change. Please stay in touch.”
- “I’m not at liberty to tell you what’s going on. Just keep me on your mailing list.”
- “Things may change after October 10. Give me a call then.”
- “I wish I could make a change, but my hands are tied. I may be in a better position to do something later.”

Of course, these phrases sound like the typical “Don’t call me, I’ll call you” put-offs from a buyer who just doesn’t know how to be direct. It’ll be up to you to read between the lines with other information you’ve collected on the account, in the industry, and from competitor situations.

Refrain from Presenting Solutions Too Quickly

First, lead your buyers to clarify the cost of problems or the value of growth or improvements. Examples: “In what way does this affect how your drivers get the deliveries to your customers?” “How does this slow down your invoicing process?” “Are you concerned about the quality of the printed page?” “Is it important to you that. ...?” “What is your opinion about X?” “How satisfied are you with the way X is handled currently?” “How critical is it to you that Z happens consistently each time?” “How helpful would it be to you if you could find a way to do Y?” “How serious is this issue?” “This doesn’t seem like a critical issue to you – am I right or wrong?” “How much is this costing you currently?” “How would it benefit you if this decision were made?” “Would a product like this make your life easier?” “What gains would you have to have to make this worthwhile?”



Buyers need to feel the pain before they're motivated to invest the time, energy, and money necessary for improving the situation.

Ask What Your Buyers Know Rather than Tell What You Know

"What do you know about my organization?" allows your buyers to give their perceptions. You then can fill in the gaps, clarifying and correcting, if necessary. When you lead with, "Let me tell you a little about our organization," you're at a distinct disadvantage for several reasons: You're doing all the talking and setting yourself up in lecture mode as the person with all the answers. You may be providing already known information; you may be elaborating on what the buyer doesn't care about knowing; and you have no way of knowing if the customer really understands what you've said – and most important – what your organization offers.

Make Sure All Conversations Benefit the Buyer, Not Just You

Picture yourself in your workplace all day long, being approached by callers or visitors who have only one interest – "What can you do for me today?" That's the experience of many of your own buyers. No wonder they resist taking "just one more call" from someone they perceive to be selling them something.

So take a different tack from your competitors. Approach the buyer to give them something – an interesting new angle on handling an industry problem; an intriguing insight from an expert; new research; a new set of guidelines for judging a process; a job aid or reference tool; or personal concern and well wishes.

When you plan your calls and appointments, consider adding to your sales objective: What can I leave with them of value?

Never Make Buyers Feel Interrogated

Avoid run-on questions – multiples that buyers can't answer or that make them feel as though they're being cross-examined. With a sensitive question particularly, explain why you're asking it with a lead-in that lets them know the benefit of having an answer.

Not: "Do you know what percentages of your files in this department are never referred to again?"

But: "Most document managers report that 85 percent of their documents are never referenced again once filed. If we could identify those unnecessary files, that would represent a huge savings of floor space. What's your estimate on the percentage of such files in this department?"

Question and answers should be insightful, not threatening.

Don't Ask Self-Serving Questions

Leading and one-up questions make a sharp buyer resistant. Example: "Were you not aware that we guaranteed on-time delivery, and had you maintained your contract with us during the past three years the problems with the current vendor would never have led to the complaints from your own customer base?"



Although questions often lead to your point during a consultative dialogue, they should not be the point. The buyer will feel trapped and will resent – rather than appreciate – your insightful dialogue.

Ask “How Did You” Rather than “Why Did You” Questions

“Why” questions often sound challenging and put the buyer on the defensive: “Why did you decide to do X?” “Why do you think an upgrade isn’t warranted at the present time?” “Why was the décor done in navy?”

“How” questions, on the other hand, often get at the same information, but in a less challenging tone: “How did you make the decision to do X?” “How do you decide when to make an upgrade?” “How was the color navy selected for décor in this building?”

Phrasing makes a huge difference in reception.

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