

NICK KANE | JUSTIN ZAPPULLA

critical selling

How Top Performers **Accelerate** the
Sales Process and **Close** More Deals

WILEY

Additional Praise for *Critical Selling*

“As the sales landscape has evolved, so too have the needs of our customers. The methods, research, and strategies provided in this book have given our sales organization the tools they need in today’s market to create a positive customer experience, grow relationships, and improve conversion rates. If you are looking to increase sales, I would recommend this book to any salesperson, sales manager, or executive!”

—Brad Hice,
Manager Sales & Finance Programs/Training
Daimler Trucks Remarketing Corp.

“Justin Zappulla and Janek Performance Group have been Santander Bank partners for years. Our Corporate Banking senior sales team was trained on the Critical Selling program and it immediately drove real results. The contents in this book have been able to deliver that special ‘click’ to our team here at Santander Bank in a recurrent basis which is something unique in a time of ‘broad brush approach.’”

—Xavi Ruiz Sena,
Executive Vice President, Head of Finance
Santander Bank

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Introduction

Critical Selling: Focusing on What Matters Most

IN A DAY and age when meeting or exceeding quarterly expectations is more important than ever before, it's no secret that companies are constantly looking for ways to improve sales performance. That's because sales are the lifeblood of any company, and so the importance of focusing on sales performance remains a top priority with everyone throughout the organization, from the C-Suite to middle management to sales professionals working in the trenches every day.

In order to survive in today's fiercely competitive global marketplace, it's critical to operate a high-performing sales organization that can outsell the competition. To do this, there is quite a lot to get right, including:

- The right sales strategy
- A compelling value proposition
- A well-defined sales process
- The right sales talent
- Effective sales tools

All of these things are crucial if an organization intends to keep firing on all cylinders. But where the rubber really meets the road in sales is in the real-world interactions between the sales professional and the customer.

The fact is that people still buy from people. Sales strategies, process maps, and clear value propositions are all important. But in the end, how each sales professional performs during the critical moments he has with his customers determines whether the deal is closed and the sale is won. It all comes down to execution.

Top sales professionals are always thinking about how they can better execute each and every sales interaction. They take the time to think about the most effective approach they can use with each of their customers. They keep abreast of the skills, best practices, and processes that produce the greatest possible results. And they look for strategic, concrete ways to improve their sales performance.

The Critical Selling framework we'll share with you in these pages is a proven, real-world approach that helps salespeople from all walks of life—any industry, any size company—flawlessly execute sales calls with customers in order to accelerate the sales process and close more deals. We've spent more than a decade conducting ongoing research and identifying best practices in order to develop world-class sales professionals. Our research has focused on two key areas: sellers and buyers. On the selling side, we have worked side by side with hundreds of sales organizations and thousands of salespeople to understand what it is that top-performing sales professionals do (and do better) than other reps don't to win more sales. On the buying side, we've taken a deep look at customers, examining how they investigate and evaluate products and services and how they ultimately make their purchasing decisions. The results we've uncovered have informed the approach outlined in this book.

As such, we know that this is an approach that succeeds in the real world. Following the skills, strategies, and best practices shared in these pages will help ensure that you are fully prepared to accelerate the sales process and close more deals.

One of the most apparent findings from the research we've conducted is that buyers are changing. Today's buyers:

- Are more educated about products and services, and about the selling cycle
- Conduct thorough research into product and service options—before ever connecting with a sales professional
- Bring higher expectations to the selling cycle
- Are becoming increasingly intolerant toward sales reps who resort to aggressive sales tactics
- Do not want to hear a “pitch” in lieu of a tailored solution
- Want sales professionals to bring valuable insights, ideas, and advice to the sales conversation
- Place a greater premium on time
- Have easy access to more alternatives and options

These important changes in customer behavior mean that sales professionals, too, must change. Today's top-performing sales professionals must adapt to busier, smarter, savvier customers, who come to the table with more demands and higher expectations. Those salespeople who embrace this changing landscape by fine-tuning their sales approach using the Critical Selling framework will achieve bigger, better, and more impressive results that bring more value to their customers and to their own organizations.

In the chapters to come, we'll look at specific strategies, skills, and best practices that, when fully embraced, will help today's sales professionals keep pace with tomorrow's customers. We'll also look at how to deal with common missteps. By embracing the approach found in these pages, you will learn how to:

- Accelerate the sales process by quickly discovering what is most important to the customer
- Create solid connections with customers and establish trust using effective relationship-building best practices

- Differentiate yourself from the competition by adding value, insight, and advice to the sales discussion
- Reduce the number of objections and effectively handle those you do receive, along with pushback from customers—at every stage of the process
- Close more deals by adopting a proven, research-based sales approach

Of course, you can't accelerate the sales process and close more deals if you're not building strong relationships with your customers. The fact remains that good sales is all about building good relationships. That happens if—and only if—you're able to establish credibility with your customers. Top performers are much more than order takers with a bright smile and a firm handshake. They're more than merely effective sales professionals. While they can recite product info, values, and benefits as well as—or even better than—anyone else, they know how to go much deeper in order to understand customer needs and to explain how their product or service is in alignment with those needs. They build credibility with their customers. They build relationships. In doing so, they become trusted advisers who know how to sell to today's customers.

Selling to customers will be more challenging than ever before. At a time when customers are better informed than in years past, they've more than likely done a lot of research before they've even thought about talking to a salesperson. As a result, sales professionals can't just assume that the selling conversation can start with a product demo or an introduction to the levels of service they offer—they need to understand where buyers are in their journey and meet them where they are. Today's savvy customers aren't looking for someone who will simply belch out a lot of specs and data about their product and then ask for a signature on the dotted line. They're looking for someone who can add value to the sales conversation by sharing insight and advice. They're looking for someone who can help them make an intelligent purchasing decision. They're looking for someone who has taken the time

to discover their needs. They're looking for someone who has evolved beyond order taker to trusted adviser.

So, in Chapter 1, we'll look at how to sell to today's customers. Doing so in a competitive, evolving marketplace requires creating an effective selling relationship that incorporates Critical Selling skills and best practices, all with an eye toward developing the kind of trust and credibility that allows sales professionals in any industry, whether B2B or B2C, to think, act, and communicate in a customer-focused way throughout the selling cycle. That's because, regardless of all the changes in the world of sales, the customer is still at the center of any successful sales approach. Top performers understand that they need to change if they want to keep up with the ways in which customers, too, are changing.

Of course, change doesn't just happen overnight. So, the first step in all of this is to embrace the change that is required. This means that sales professionals need to have the right mindset when looking to improve performance. They need to be all in when it comes to understanding, accepting, and practicing the Critical Selling framework. Being open-minded to change is critical when it comes to adopting the skills that allow you to continually improve your performance. We'll talk about this in Chapter 2.

In order to sell to today's buyers, top-performing sales professionals know that they have to deliver a differentiated experience and find unique ways to add tangible value throughout the buying process. But first, if you truly want to become a top performer, you have to believe in the process and make a commitment to it. You have to have the right mindset if you want to accelerate the sales process and close more deals.

That means you have to commit yourself to training and practicing. You need to be open to the possibility that there is always room for improvement in your approach to customers. That's not to say that the experience, insight, or wisdom you've gained during the course of your career is without value. Rather, it means that in today's highly competitive marketplace, it's important to recognize that customers are evolving and that, as a result, sales is

evolving. And so you, too, have to evolve if you want to keep up with your customers (and with your competitors). To do that, you need to believe that the process will yield tangible benefits—for you and for your customers.

In Chapter 2, we'll look at the importance of committing to and carefully following the Critical Selling framework. We'll discuss why top performers know that the key to securing more and better deals isn't about "always be closing" but rather about "always be improving." Why? Because best-in-class organizations—and top-performing sales professionals—know that practice is a key component to success.

Change can be difficult. Trial and error as you learn the process might feel clunky. But top performers know that believing in the promise of change, and in following the Critical Selling framework from start to finish, is crucial to making it work. Because the Critical Selling framework isn't a buffet. It's a proven, logical, and practical approach to accelerating the sales process and closing more deals while building credibility with customers and developing lasting, profitable relationships.

Incorporating strategies, skills, and best practices requires planning, which underlies the entire Critical Selling framework. Why? Because planning isn't one step you do at the beginning of the sales process and then check off your to-do list. Top performers know that effective planning matters at every stage during the selling cycle. They also understand that it is important not only to plan ahead for every call but also to reflect afterward. And they understand the benefits of planning and reflecting for each and every call.

Part of planning requires outlining the critical objectives for each call, and in Chapter 3, we'll look at the importance of setting objectives, how doing so helps salespeople better connect with customers, and how it helps accelerate the sales process. We'll also look at a variety of helpful tools and resources that can make planning work for you—and for your customer.

From planning, we move to opening. Solid openings don't happen by chance. They don't begin with a canned line or a

memorized script. Through our research, we have found that too many sales reps lean all too often on timeworn pitches when opening the sales conversation with their customers. On the other hand, we've also found that top performers understand the importance of crafting openings that are personalized for each individual customer.

Top-performing sales professionals understand that a solid opening requires specific, intentional steps, things to do in the first few minutes of the call that will set the stage—and the tone—for connecting with the buyer and building the kind of rapport that will put you on the right track to building stronger, longer-lasting relationships with customers.

Top performers understand the benefits of a good opening. They know that it's not about foisting their personalities upon the customer but rather about understanding the customer's style and adapting the conversation accordingly. Sales professionals who perfect the art of opening find that the rest of the selling cycle naturally falls in place.

In Chapter 4, we'll look at the elements of a solid opening. We'll look at how so many salespeople struggle with determining the right thing to say to the customer and with getting the conversation started on the right track, and we'll look at how top performers overcome those struggles in order to successfully open interactions with customers and quickly begin the rapport-building process. We'll also examine how delivering a Legitimate Purpose Statement helps you connect with customers, manage expectations, and successfully direct the sales conversation. We'll discuss the importance of confirming to ensure that you and the customer are on the same page. And finally, we'll look at best practices as well as common missteps in this stage of the sales process.

With a solid opening secured, the next stage in the Critical Selling framework is all about understanding. Our research has revealed that, unfortunately, too many sales reps gloss over this critical step in the selling cycle, sometimes out of haste, sometimes out of laziness, sometimes out of fear. But the discovering phase of the process is critical to understanding your customer and

building trust—and getting it right actually helps speed up the entire sales process.

Discovering what the customer needs and what drives his purchasing decision requires salespeople to do two things: ask questions and listen to the answers. Seems simple, but many sales professionals struggle with these two critical skills, for a variety of reasons. Getting this right is crucial, and doing so puts you in a position to connect with the customer, become a trusted adviser, and offer solutions that are tailored to the needs of the customer.

In Chapter 5, we'll look at what it takes to ask the right questions and to become a good active listener. We'll examine critical areas of focus that top performers key in on in order to build a solid understanding of customer needs. And we'll explain how getting the discovering phase right can be a key way to differentiate yourself from the competition. Finally, we'll look at what top performers do in order to get this step right—and where average performers get it wrong.

As we've seen (and will discuss further in the pages to come), today's customers aren't interested in being pitched. Although a lot of sales professionals want to move straight from opening to closing (that old "always be closing" mantra can be difficult to silence), that's almost always a grave mistake. And although a lot of salespeople spend much of their time on perfecting their pitch, presenting a memorized, generic solution almost never works the way you might like to believe it will. The key to presenting successfully is to share a solution that is uniquely tailored to each individual customer.

Top performers know that getting the opening right and getting the discovering phase right pave the way to making presentations that are well-aligned to customers and their needs. So, in Chapter 6, we'll look at how top performers tackle this stage, from planning their approach to tailoring the solution to asking for feedback. Top performers also understand the power of linking, so we'll discuss why linking your solutions to your customer's needs helps provide the confidence each buyer needs to make the purchasing decision—and to be comfortable with that decision. Part of that requires you to understand customer needs, and we'll look at how the critical areas

of focus discussed in Chapter 5 come to bear on this phase of the process. We'll also look at some best practices (such as presenting persuasively) and common pitfalls (such as presenting by rote).

It should be clear by now that the Critical Selling framework does not espouse the old saying that you should “always be closing,” an obsolete phrase that for far too long has served as the mantra for sales professionals. Closing should be neither pushy nor passive. Nor should it come as a surprise. In fact, top performers who practice the skills in Critical Selling understand that by planning each sales call, delivering a solid opening, discovering the customer's needs, and presenting persuasively, closing the deal comes naturally because they have simply built on the momentum that has already marked the selling cycle.

In Chapter 7, we'll discuss how and when top performers take the opportunity to secure what already has been done. We'll look at the four critical steps to closing well. And we'll look at the benefits of acting as a trusted adviser at this stage, about speaking directly and frankly with your customer, and about being straightforward.

When it comes down to it, closing should come naturally. It shouldn't feel rushed or pressured. Instead, it should capitalize on the momentum you and your customer have created during the entire sales process. In fact, getting everything right up to this point actually makes closing that much better—and that much easier.

Of course, getting everything right doesn't mean you'll never hear another customer tell you “no.” Few people like to hear “no”—especially when it comes from a customer. But dealing with objections is part of the game. Top performers understand that objections can come at any point during the selling cycle, and those who follow the Critical Selling framework know that the very process itself can reduce the number of objections. Why? Because asking the right questions, listening to the answers, and tailoring solutions to customer needs goes a long way in addressing the issues that most concern customers, often before they have even voiced those concerns.

Everyone wants to minimize objections, and the Critical Selling framework will help you do just that. In Chapter 8, we'll look at four key skills salespeople can (and should) use to address objections. We'll look at how to handle even those objections that customers have a difficult time articulating. And we'll take a close look at handling price objections, which is one of the trickiest landmines in the selling landscape and one that weighs heavily on the minds of most sales professionals. In addition, we'll discuss why top performers view objections as opportunities rather than obstacles (and why you should, too).

Accepting that it might be time for a new sales approach can be difficult. Change is hard. But top performers who follow the Critical Selling framework understand that it isn't a one-and-done experience. Top performers continually practice planning, opening, discovering, and closing. They reflect and assess. They learn from what works and what doesn't. And, importantly, they keep an open mind to change, to new processes and tools, and to the various evolutions in the world of buying and selling.

Look: we understand that there are a lot of ways to improve sales performance. There are a lot of tools and resources and gadgets and programs that purport to help sales reps win more sales. We know—because research has proven—that the process we'll share with you in these pages is one of the most effective ways to improve sales performance so that you can close more deals, closing them faster and with fewer objections. That's because sales isn't about tools or gadgets or programs. As we said before, sales comes down to the sales professional and the customer—and the interactions between them. Sales is all about executing on the critical moments in the sales process in order to achieve desired outcomes.

Critical Selling provides a proven process that shows sales professionals how to handle those critical moments. This process helps sales professionals improve their customer approach, build trust, shorten the sales cycle, and close more deals. Having trained thousands of sales professionals in the Critical Selling program, and having gained research-driven insight from hundreds of

companies and thousands of sales professionals, we've learned a thing or two about what makes the most effective sales approach for today's customers.

Top performers who embrace this process—and practice it regularly—understand that doing so will help their companies, their customers, and their careers. One of the first steps is to understand that having the right mindset is key to improving performance, and we'll look closely at that in the pages that follow. But before we do that, we first need to understand how customers have changed and what that change means for the sales process in general and for sales professionals in particular. We'll look at that next, in Chapter 1.

1

Selling to Today's Buyers: Remain Customer-Focused

MAYBE IT'S CHANGING technology. Maybe it's the still-recovering economy, which in some sectors has yet to bounce back from the Great Recession. Maybe it's increased competition. Whatever the reason, it's useless to deny that sales is changing—and in dramatic ways. Researchers note, for example, that “[c]ompanies are reporting longer sales cycle times, lower conversion rates, less reliable forecasts, and compressed margins.”¹

If the selling landscape is changing, so too is the buying landscape. Buying behavior is changing in numerous ways. Of course, today's buyers have always been and will always be different from the customers of yesterday. From the production era to the sales era to the marketing era to the information era, selling and buying have progressed, evolving with changing times, changing needs, and changing technology. It's no different today—except, perhaps, for the pace of change.

Back in the day, sales professionals held all the cards. If a customer needed something, the sales rep provided all the information,

educated the customer, and drove the selling conversation. Oh, how the tables have turned.

Today, customers are in large part driving the selling conversation. In fact, many studies have shown, and thought leaders agree, that customers are much further along in the buying process before engaging the sales professional; some reports indicate that customers are as much as 60 percent of the way through their decision-making process by the time they connect with a sales rep.

The implications of these findings are no less than earthshaking. In addition to changing technology, a challenging economic climate, and increased global competition, sales professionals today now must deal with customers who are much further along in the decision-making process, who are much more educated, who are technologically savvy, and who are busier than ever. Customers often know what they want and have an idea of what it should cost as well as how long it should take to get it. They know what you and your competitors can offer, and they might even understand how the products and services you can provide vary from your competitors' products and services.

As a result, it's becoming harder and harder to differentiate yourself and your organization by what you sell. Products and features, options and benefits, prices and specials—despite all the various nuances that might make what you sell at least a little bit different from what your competitors are selling, the truth is it is much more difficult to differentiate on these points. Therefore, today's sales professionals face an important challenge: how to differentiate themselves from all the other sales professionals out there who are selling similar products and services for similar prices.

This is a critical point: in order to succeed, today's top-performing sales professionals must find ways to differentiate themselves. They do this by providing value in how they sell, not just by what they sell. They differentiate themselves by how they build credibility with their customers, by how they nurture customer relationships, and by how they become trusted advisors. In doing so, they can better sell to today's demanding buyers.

Throughout these pages, we'll discuss how these changes have affected the selling conversation, and we'll look at how applying the steps in the Critical Selling framework will help you accelerate the sales process and close more deals, all while remaining focused on the customer. We'll look at planning, opening, discovering, presenting, and closing. And we'll look at overcoming objections. But for now, let's focus on what it takes to sell to today's customer. Because the bottom line is that, despite all the changes, selling is still all about the customer.

That means that today's sales professionals have to focus on the customer. Our research has shown that top performers do several key things to remain customer-focused: they use the right sales approach in dealing with customers at whatever stage they are in their decision-making process. They understand how customers perceive them. And, finally, they work to become trusted advisors. But before they can do any of that successfully, they first have to recognize (and accept) the fact that buyers have changed.

Recognize That Buyers Have Changed

Yesterday's paradigms and yesterday's customers and yesterday's selling approaches no longer apply. Sales and selling are evolving, largely because buyers and buying are evolving. In many cases, buyers are bringing sales reps in much later in the process (the extent to which this happens depends in large part on the complexity of the sale). By some measures, most of the traditional sales process is already done by the time a customer even contacts a sales rep. *Forbes* recently noted, for instance, that about "57 percent of the sales process [has] just disappeared."²

Faced with such data, it is useless to deny the facts that sales is changing and that customers have changed. Today's customers have little desire to have their hands held by sales reps who usher them through a lengthy decision-making process. Rather, buyers already have access to a lot of information, and chances are they've figured out their needs (or at least they think they've figured out their needs)

before they've even reached out to you. Many likely have even already begun considering specific products or services that could meet their needs, solely based on what they've learned about your company.

Customers can do this because there's so much information out there. Your website; your competitors' websites; industry websites; online social media; traditional media; online, personal, and professional references; and so much more: all of these sources provide customers with avenues to conduct their own research in order to determine what products and services are available to meet their needs. As such, customers are doing much of the legwork that sales reps used to do. And, as a result, the customer may well be further along in the process than sales professionals are used to.

Not only have customers done much of the research but they're also often crafting their own solutions. The research they've conducted and the information they've gleaned from various sources allow them to identify their needs and determine what products and solutions will meet those needs. Today's customers know what they need, they know what they want, and they know how to get it. Furthermore, today's buyers not only know that there are various options available to them but also may even understand how they vary from one another. They have the ability to do the research and at times can determine what the points of differentiation are on price, features, and benefits.

In addition to all of this, buyers are busier than ever—just like everyone else. We're all doing more with less, working on tight deadlines, solving problems in a 24/7 world from which we can rarely, if ever, disconnect. Like the rest of us, buyers are busy and demanding. They have less time to spend (and less inclination to spend time) with salespeople.

Faced with all of these changes, top-performing sales professionals recognize that their world has changed. Top performers don't waste time pining away for the good old days when they could share select, scripted information with less knowledgeable buyers. They don't bother to "always be closing" or go in for the hard sell. Instead,

they accept the fact that buyers have changed and that, as a result, they have to change, too. Sales and selling must evolve along with buyers and buying.

With that, top performers understand that today's buyers want salespeople who are ready, willing, and able to meet them where they are in the sales process. They don't want a sales rep who will waste their time going over ground they've already covered on their own. Instead, today's top-performing sales professionals understand that in order to sell to today's demanding customers, they have to adopt a new approach.

Use the Right Sales Approach

Today's customers have no desire to waste their limited time with salespeople who cannot provide tangible value. They have less need to be educated. And they are not at all inclined to deal with sales reps who are more intent on selling a truckload of widgets than they are on solving the customer's needs. So today's salespeople have to use the right approach when dealing with today's buyers.

As much as things have changed, as much as buying and selling have evolved, the right approach remains a customer-focused approach. Today's sales professionals still need to ask questions, listen to the answers, and confirm understanding in each and every dealing with their customers. They also have to be conscious of where the customer already is in the sales process. They have to understand—and appreciate—how much legwork the customer has already done. But, perhaps most important, they have to remember that the customer is still at the center of the right sales approach.

Top-performing sales professionals make it known to their customers that the buyer's needs come first. They put the customer's needs before their own, and they are determined to help solve the customer's problems. They understand their primary role is to help their customers achieve their desired outcomes.

This focus has to be at the center of any sales approach—and it has to be genuine. Top performers aren't putting on an act when they

tell their customers that they want to help them find the right solution. They sincerely want to help. Good thing, too, because today's savvy customers can tell when sales reps are insincere. They can sniff out when a sales rep is more focused on making a sale than on providing a solution and helping the customer.

So, instead of launching full-bore into a scripted sales approach, top performers use a customer-focused approach. They seek to have a full understanding of the customer's needs because they know that it is those very needs that drive buying—and selling—opportunities. In order to address the customer's needs, you need to get to know your customer, digging deep so you can discover what it is that's driving the purchase decision; what the customer values most; and what his needs, priorities, and goals are. Despite all the changes in buying behavior, that hasn't changed.

In fact, it's more important than ever. Asking questions in order to discover more about your customer's known and unknown needs, actively listening to the answers, and understanding where the customer is in the buying process are critical components of successful selling to today's buyer. Only in uncovering this crucial customer information will you be able to devise the right solutions that meet his needs. Only then can you bring your expertise, insights, and ideas to the table, helping your customer in ways your competitors simply cannot.

Buyers might well have access to more information than ever before. They might well do more research and, as a result, have a better sense of the solutions that can help them meet their needs. But that doesn't mean they're always right or that they're not open to other ideas, further insight, or useful advice. That's where you come in.

Our research shows that buyers value those sales professionals who can bring these attributes to the sales process. No longer can you just ask the customer what he wants and fill out the order form. It's critical to show the customer that you can be of value as a knowledgeable, helpful sales professional who will carefully evaluate

the customer's needs, offer credible insight, and provide valuable advice.

It's in this that you demonstrate what makes you different from—and better than—the competition. Top-performing sales professionals are well-educated about their own products and services. They know their organizations inside out. They also are well-informed about their competitors and their industry in general. In asking thoughtful questions and actively listening to the answers, they develop a deep understanding of their customers. As such, they become the point of differentiation. You can do the same. As a top performer, you can offer added value in your expertise, uncovering of unknown needs, offering of insight and advice that you—and only you—can provide the customer.

You might like to believe that your company offers a truly special product or service, one that is so unique that no other organization comes close. But the truth is that as quickly as your company offers a new feature, your competition is trying to one-up you. However unique you think your product or service is, your competitors are working on replicating that same product or service—and trying to go you one better. The one thing that you can offer that no one else can is yourself. Customer-focused sales professionals who succeed in today's changing marketplace understand that they can provide unparalleled value in the form of their approach.

Of course, they also understand that knowing their customers at a deep level and offering sage advice can't take forever. Today's customers are busier than ever, and there's nothing that turns off a customer more than a sales professional who wastes their time. Top-performing sales professionals respect their customers' limited time. They take the time to plan for each and every selling conversation. They engage in the right activities before, during, and after every sales interaction in order to maximize the limited time they have with their customers.

We'll talk more in the chapters to come about how following the Critical Selling framework will help you save time (for yourself and

for your customers), but it's important to note for now that sales professionals should use their time wisely by, for example, researching their customers so that they don't waste precious moments asking for information that easily could have been found out ahead of time. They also should take the time to prepare presentations that are carefully tailored to each customer's needs, avoiding superfluous information that has little or no bearing on the precise solution that will meet the customer's objectives.

Respecting the customer's time, offering keen insight, providing helpful advice, understanding that the customer might have already done a substantial amount of legwork—all of that plays into using a customer-focused approach to sell to today's buyer. It also helps customers perceive you as someone they can rely on and someone they can trust. And in a day and age when customers might not need you as much as or in the same way that they once did, that perception is crucial.

Know How Your Customers Perceive You

How a customer perceives you and the relationship you have together has a significant impact on whether you win a deal and book the sale. Few customers want to deal with an automaton who fills out purchase orders, completes invoices, and arranges to ship orders. Today's customers are looking for someone they can rely on to provide them with crucial information, keen insight, and expert advice that will help them make important purchasing decisions.

Most of us would like to believe that we offer superior service to our customers. But what really matters is what our customers think of us and how they would describe the relationship they have with us. Through our research, we have identified four different and distinct relationship levels that sales professionals can earn with their customers. At each level, the actions, behaviors, and values displayed by sales professionals vary—as do the ways in which customers perceive, value, and trust sales professionals. As shown in



Figure 1.1 The Relationship Continuum

Figure 1.1, the Relationship Continuum identifies those four levels as order taker, friendly salesperson, effective salesperson, and trusted advisor.

It's critical that you understand these levels, and so we define them in detail here:

Order Taker

- Has zero understanding of customer needs
- Does not focus on connecting with or developing relationships with customers
- Is focused on closing the sale without consideration of customer needs
- Does not challenge the customer's thinking or offer options and alternatives
- Does not offer any insights or ideas on the application of products or services

Friendly Salesperson

- Has limited understanding of customer needs
- Is slightly focused on connecting with or developing relationships with customers
- Stays focused on closing the sale with limited consideration of customer needs
- Has slight willingness to challenge the customer's thinking and rarely offers options and alternatives
- Offers very few insights or ideas on the application of products or services

Effective Salesperson

- Has a strong understanding of known customer needs (needs the customer is aware of)
- Remains focused on connecting with and developing relationships with customers
- Strongly considers customer needs when making recommendations in the sales process
- Is willing to challenge the customer's thinking and offer options and alternatives when customers seem open to other ideas
- Offers some insights or ideas on the application of products or services

Trusted Advisor

- Has complete understanding of customer needs (known and unknown needs)
- Deems connecting with and developing relationships with customers of the utmost importance
- Makes customers' needs the number-one priority in the sales process (willing to walk away from a sale)
- Is always willing to challenge the customer's thinking and offer options and alternatives, no matter how strong the customer's opinions
- Always seeks to offer insights or ideas on the application of products or services

Sales professionals who aim to sell to today's demanding, busy customers must strive to become trusted advisors if they want to succeed. In fact, in order to become a top performer, it's critical to work on the skills and best practices that will position you as a trusted advisor. You can't be one without the other: top performers are trusted advisors, and trusted advisors are top performers. It's critical to achieve the highest level of credibility and trust with your customers so that you can accelerate the sales process and close more deals—and become a top-performing sales professional.

Critical Moment: Put Your Customers First

Sales professionals who wish to succeed with today's buyers know they have to focus on customer needs. They put the customer first. Customer-focused selling acknowledges that the customer is at the core of each and every sales interaction. Focusing on the customer and how you can meet her needs (rather than simply on closing deals) helps you earn trust, accelerate the sales process, and close more deals.

Customer-focused selling is an intentional approach and a crucial component of the Critical Selling framework. We've identified a few tactics that can help you put your customer and her needs first:

- **Address Your Customer's Priorities.** Remember that no sales interaction is about you or your goals or your quotas or your schedule. It's about the customer, her priorities, her goals, her values, and her time. Don't assume that you know what she needs or when she needs it. Discuss her priorities with her. And the only way to find out what your customer needs is to ask questions and listen to the answers.
- **Make Sure You Understand What Your Customer Is Telling You.** Customer-focused selling requires sales professionals to continually confirm understanding with their customers. We'll talk a lot about the importance of confirming in the chapters to follow, and that's because it goes a long way in building trust between you and your customer. For now, note that when it comes to meeting your customer's needs, you can do that only when both of you are on the same page as to what those needs are.
- **Share Your Expertise and Your Insight.** If all a customer wanted to do was place an order, she could order her truckload of widgets online, saving herself and you a lot

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of time and energy. Remember that your customers are looking to you to add value to the sales process. That means you have to dig deep and listen carefully to what your customers are telling you so that you can analyze the customer's situation, assess her needs, and provide valuable insight and helpful advice. Doing so goes well beyond mentioning features and benefits your customer might not be aware of to offering the expertise and opinions that only you can share.

- **Use Your Customer's Time Wisely.** When it comes to earning trust and building credibility with your customers, nothing can derail that faster than wasting your customers' time. Don't waste time telling your customer what she likely already knows. Remember that she's likely done research into you, your organization, and your product and service. Don't regurgitate features and benefits that she's already aware of. Instead, focus on discussing what she doesn't know, which might well include things she doesn't even know she doesn't know (those "unknown unknowns"). Ask thoughtful questions, listen attentively to the answers, and confirm details with your customer during every selling conversation.

No one can build trust and earn credibility with their customers unless they put their customers first. It's simply not possible otherwise. If you want to become a top-performing trusted advisor, it's critical that you address your customer's needs and make sure you understand those needs, all while respecting her time. Do that and you'll be on your way to building the kind of trust that moves you in the right direction along The Relationship Continuum.

Become a Trusted Advisor

Trusted advisors go well beyond simply providing specs and product data to offering valuable information. Trusted advisors identify needs and seek to tailor solutions that fit those needs—both known and unknown (i.e., those needs that customers need help in identifying and articulating). Trusted advisors are more than salespeople. They're something different. Trusted advisors are those professionals whom customers trust and rely on for opinions, insight, ideas, and advice. They help educate their customers so that they can make the best possible purchasing decisions.

This is all great for the customer, and it's great for you, too. There are a number of benefits associated with being a trusted advisor. When your customer perceives you as a trusted advisor, you:

- Get more access to important customer information, which will better help you tailor a unique solution to fit his needs;
- Get more time to spend with the customer, who values your insight and advice and wants to take the time to discuss your ideas;
- Get access to more people who are involved in the decision-making process;
- Get the first call when the customer is looking to buy again, which goes far in helping to accelerate the sales process and close more deals.

Of course, we know we're not coining a phrase here; the notion of "trusted advisor" has been around for a while. For example, nearly two decades ago, in their 2000 book *The Trusted Advisor*, authors David Maister and Charles Green explained that, without trust, no salesperson can achieve his goals—but that when trust is established between customer and salesperson, just about anything is possible.³

We couldn't agree more, and our own research shows that trust remains of the utmost importance to the sales process. In fact, at a time when customers are smarter, savvier, and busier than ever,

trusted advisors are more important than ever before. Regardless of all the changes facing the industry, the importance of achieving the status of trusted advisor has not changed. What has changed is how you go about earning that status.

Following the Critical Selling framework discussed in these pages will help you earn the status of trusted advisor. Adopting the skills discussed in these pages will help you create the kind of effective selling relationships that benefit your customers and your organization. And accepting that today's buyers have changed will make that process a lot easier for you.

Of course, it won't happen overnight. But if you commit to the process, follow the Critical Selling framework, and remain customer-focused, you'll find that, over time, you'll very likely earn the distinction of trusted advisor. And, once you have obtained that distinction, you'll see higher levels of performance. You'll close more deals, and you'll do so more quickly and with fewer objections.

Top performers understand that none of this happens just because they wish it to. It takes an open mind. It takes an "always be improving" mentality. We'll talk about the importance of having an open mind and adopting an always-be-improving attitude next, in Chapter 2.

Critical Selling: Lessons Learned

- Changing times have led buyers to change their behavior, which means that sales professionals also need to change if they wish to keep up with their customers—and their competitors.
- Top performers also know that the right sales approach remains one that is customer-focused. The customer remains at the center of each and every sale.
- Top-performing sales professionals understand that products and services vary little from one company to the next. Because of that, they make themselves the point of differentiation, sharing

their unique expertise, insight, and advice with customers in order to craft tailored solutions that meet their needs.

- How your customer perceives you can make or break a deal. Sales professionals who earn the title of trusted advisor are best able to meet their customers' needs, all while accelerating the sales process and closing more deals.

JUSTIN ZAPPULLA | NICK KANE

critical selling

How Top Performers **Accelerate** the
Sales Process and **Close** More Deals

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