

# *The Top Two Greatest Sales Ideas of All Time and Five that Make Them Useable, Plus the Start to Selling Value*

---

## **Introduction**

My claim to have discovered the top two ideas comes from their popularity with the people who sent in contributions to this book. They are very interesting – the first is ‘Listening’, which may surprise some people who express the view that a born salesperson is one with the gift of the gab, the ability to talk Eskimos into buying fridges or rabbis into buying pork chops. But the strongly expressed view of many people is the opposite of this.

The second idea concerns being very focused on achieving quantifiable objectives at every stage of a sales campaign. You must know exactly where you want to be at the end of a sales call or at a particular date in a long tender exercise. It is that focus that distinguishes the competent businessperson from the competent businessperson with the added touch of sales awareness.

## *Idea 1 – Never interrupt a customer to make a point*

The top idea was top by a country mile. A huge percentage of the replies made reference to it either by example or by using the actual word. The skill they spoke about most was **listening**. Active listening some of them called it.

Here is the art of listening going wrong for an architect. He had the job of advising two new homeowners on how they should use the space and carry out the

refurbishment of an old run-down property they had just bought. Unfortunately there was a hiatus between the carrying out by the architect of the survey and the first meeting with the new owners. He used the time to speculate on what they might want to do with the house. What did it lack, in his view, and what would they have to do to put that lack right?

When the owners arrived for the first meeting they had prepared a list of their requirements for the property. Despite this the architect went ahead and presented the ideas that he had already sketched. After all, that is human nature. We all want to show our original ideas off since they feel so right to us. The architect was in fact interrupting the customer to make a point. When the customer eventually tabled the list, it was very different from the first thoughts of their adviser. They now had a situation of the customer not wanting to make the adviser feel bad, and the adviser feeling the need to defend his work. Despite all that went after, the relationship never got over this appalling start.

In any aspect of sales technique – including listening – I am not really comfortable with the art of selling being allied to the art of war. After all, it cannot be right to have the customer play the role of the enemy; clearly the enemy is the competition. On the other hand there is an element of struggle about it. The customer is trying to probe the salesperson's defences of integrity and truth to discover inaccuracies. The customer, with the best will in the world, recognizes that the salesperson has another agenda apart from helping the customer to solve problems or be happier. They are there to take orders of the right products (from their point of view) at the right time (also from their point of view).

Consider, too, the change in the relationship between a salesperson and a customer when the sales campaign is over and the salesperson has the order. Before the order the relationship is mutually interesting and the salesperson is working hard to engage the customer's liking and respect. After the order the important thing becomes the salesperson's company performing to specification. Now that can become a battle and the customers know it at the time of the order. As one of the contributors put

it, 'The relationship is never the same after the first successful sale by a salesperson to a new customer.'

Customers can be forgiven for feeling a little like landed fish. So maybe war analogies do have some merit. Here is a version of the listening idea from a man writing about war.

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

To get to know yourself and your enemy takes the art of listening, the top sales idea of all time.

## ***Idea 2 – Focus on milestones and progress targets***

The next thing that a lot of senior people came up with concerned the objectives of meetings. Fundamentally, most business people do too little in terms of preparing the exact objectives of a meeting with a client. I formed a team with an excellent salesman and we sold sales training into large companies. He was the account manager and, of course, if we got the business, I did the training. The way we planned calls was very detailed. We actually sketched out precisely the one or two sentences or phrases we wanted the client to say at the end of the call. This gave us terrific focus for the call. It also gave us a lot of merriment. If the people actually used the words it was quite hard to keep a straight face.

A lot of managing directors and Chairmen talked about focus in meetings. Partly, perhaps, because their diaries tend to be a series of relatively short meetings and

*The biggest single frustration with doing the job of the customer in a role-play is the feeling that someone has just popped in for a chat.*

they want people to get to the point, and partly – this is back to my theory of the specialist salesperson being uncluttered by expertise – because the people at the top of an organisation tend to have become general managers rather than experts.

Sales trainers spend a lot of their training time in role-play. They play the customer while the salespeople simply set about doing their job as salespeople. The biggest single frustration with doing the job of the customer in a role-play is the feeling that someone has just popped in for a chat. In the debrief at the end of the meeting the salesperson would say that they thought the call had gone pretty well; whilst the customer had no problem with the call, just an empty feeling that they had wasted their time. The cure for this is to have a single-minded focus on a sales objective and the use of good closing technique to find out if you have achieved the objective or at least whether you are on the way. So the next three great sales ideas are the essential techniques involved in doing this.

There are many ways of trying to remember this focus and to use closing questions, but I have found these three to be the best of them – ABC, STEP and SMART.

### ***Idea 3 – ABC: Always Be Closing***

We do not know who first coined this phrase, but it's spot on. Everyone has to ginger up their communication skills by practising and using good closing and trial closing technique. This is true not only when you are actually trying to reach an objective such as getting the order, it is also useful when trying to measure the progress you are making in any form of communication – on the telephone, in a sales call or at any meeting.

***ABC – Always be closing***

- Salesman: ‘Which of the colours fits best with your kitchen decoration the grey or the light blue?’ (This is called an alternative close.)
- Manager: ‘If you had those resources would you take responsibility for achieving that objective?’ (Trial close)
- Mother: ‘If you had your own clothing allowance would you keep your room tidy’ (Associated project close)
- Teenager: ‘But everyone’s getting them, so if you don’t buy me them now there will be none left.’ (Impending event close)

This technique could equally be called ‘Don’t duck the issue’. Sometimes we fail to ask a closing question because we are scared of a negative response, or because we know that the customer is going to say no because they are simply not in a position yet to say yes. Maybe we are bored or the time is running short and we realise that we will have to come back for another go. Whatever it is, don’t make the mistake of failing to check where you have got to in the eyes of the customer. After all, if a customer says that they are not convinced that they need a particular feature of your product you can always ask why or use the stock ‘What would I have to do to convince you of this point’ to make further progress.

The other technique that makes for focused selling is allied to ABC; it is STEP.

***Idea 4 – STEP: Signal The End Point***

If you have to persuade someone to change their minds or move from a neutral position on a decision to a positive one, it is also easy to duck the issue at the beginning

of whatever persuasive activity you are engaged in. Using the medium of a presentation, let us look at this.

You are trying to get agreement from your board to put two new people into your team over six months to take charge of arranging trade shows. Prior to this, the trade shows had somehow happened, but with a lot of last minute panic and favours being asked of various people within and without the company. These last minute panics tend to cost a lot of money, as the alternative of not being ready for opening day is unacceptable. (How much does an electrician charge per hour when it is 6 o'clock in the evening before the show opens and your stand has at present only a temporary spotlight?) The general professionalism of your exhibits is also, you are convinced, inferior to the other companies at the show.

The board is likely to be sceptical since this is new expenditure with no exceptional new results.

From what has gone before in this section you have prepared your closing question. 'Do I have your agreement to go out to the usual recruitment agency and instruct them to hire two grade 4's straight away?' It's nice and specific with no room for ambiguity or subsequent backsliding.

Now think about your opening. A lot of people would fudge the opening, preferring to launch into horror stories of what has happened in the past, showing the board a list of extra shows which you could put on if you had the resources and so on. This tends to put the board on its guard. Remember, very few managers go to the board with any suggestion that does not require additional resources and it is frustrating when they do not have a clue about how much you are going to ask for.

Much better is to signal the closing question right at the beginning of the presentation. It goes something like this:

'You have given me ten minutes so I'll get to the point as quickly as possible. I am going to cover three topics in the ten minutes. First I am going to go over the current situation we face in arranging and setting up exhibition stands, then I am going to ask your permission to hire two extra grade 4 people to carry out that role

in the future, and with any time that is left I'll show you our current ideas for the next big show. Is that OK?'

The insertion of the closed question at the end of this statement can be very revealing. It can lead to a huge row. 'No you bloody well cannot have more people, these shows are more trouble than they are worth already' and so on. At least you are arguing about the point you are trying to make. More often you will get a neutral reply such as 'Yes, OK, but if we have any problems with the first bit, we will not be agreeing to the second bit.' Incidentally, if this remark comes from the most senior person in the room it will generally get a laugh, which is always good. Sometimes you will get a more positive response and you will wonder why you are making the presentation at all.

Whatever happens you will have made real progress towards getting a decision and your own way. The message is clear – be upfront about what you are going to ask for by grasping the nettle and taking the STEP at an early stage.

### ***Idea 5 – SMART: Stretching, Measurable, Achievable, Related to the customer and Time-targeted***

Let's move up just a bit from the focus of a meeting and closing for milestones, and think about the art of setting objectives. I am old enough to remember when setting Objectives and the Key Tasks necessary to achieve the objectives was a fairly new concept at the individual level. Nowadays no one in their right mind would take on a job where the objectives were not specific and agreed between the two parties: the manager and the person with the objective to achieve.

And yet it is surprising how poor the quality of these objectives frequently is. They simply do not live up to the essential attributes of a good objective. Let's take a team that is working together and work out how they can be sure that their objectives are consistent and that the sum of all the objectives will reach the overall objective the team is tackling. The trick is to make them SMART. Once again, I am not sure who

first coined this acronym. To be honest, I thought it was me for a long time, but the term appears so frequently in books and training manuals that I am now not sure.

Incidentally, I took the phrase into common parlance in Hewlett Packard when I ran a series of training courses for their salespeople. Years later the word SMART was still in use, but I was amazed that only one word was the same as I had used in the original training courses. Talk about Chinese whispers and ‘Send re-enforcements we are about to advance’ becoming ‘Send three and fourpence we are going to a dance’.

Anyway, here is my version of this immensely useful acronym.

To be an acceptable statement of a team’s aim, a goal in any plan must be SMART:

- **S**tretching
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**elated to the customer
- **T**ime-targeted

## Stretching

There is no point in wasting precious time on planning an objective that is going to occur even if the team went off on a cycling tour of the Scottish Highlands. The job has to be difficult enough to merit the time required to make and implement the plan.

Further, it is the role of the salesperson to change the world. He or she needs to set goals which test the ability of the team to be persuasive, i.e. to change people’s behaviour. A good planning session will often change or add to the original goal as the team examines what the opportunities are.

If this happens it is indeed right to change the goal. With all elements of any plan, you need to remain flexible to an ever-changing environment and to new ideas.

## Measurable

The normal measure of a sales goal is a sum of money that the team is going to achieve in revenues or in profits.

In theory the team should be interested in both, and set a target that predicts the revenue value and the resultant profit. In practice many companies, for good reasons, do not give the profit responsibility to salespeople at all and they may even not be able to predict profitability.

Other measures in a sales campaign can be more qualitative than quantitative. You may set an objective to impress someone with a demonstration, for example, but in most cases you can get even these measures down to a number. 'On a scale of one to ten, how did you find the demonstrated performance of this equipment?'

*It is unfortunate when team leaders see an opportunity, prove a good business case and then fail to agree the goal because people are not willing to propose the risk to senior management.*

## Achievable

Having made certain that the goal is stretching, the team must also believe that it can be achieved. The team should be sufficiently close to the problem or opportunity to recognize where there is a feasible chance of success.

The achievability test is particularly important where new technology is being considered that managers will recognize as carrying extra risk. It is unfortunate when team leaders see an opportunity, prove a good business case and then fail to agree the goal because people are not willing to propose the risk to senior management.

The key to checking achievability is to ask this question of as many people as possible and at as high a level as possible: 'Do you think this team can achieve this objective in the current circumstances?'

### **Related to the customer**

Just as we must be able to see what the benefit of the objective is for the team in terms of revenues and profits, so we must also get a flavour of what is in it for their customer. Be the customer internal or external, this rule still applies. If they are setting objectives that do not have a benefit to their customer, they have to ask themselves why.

The action of checking the objective with the customer can be useful in terms of getting the customer's agreement on the main benefit statement that the team will aim at while implementing the plan. Incidentally, this book uses the word 'customer' to include external and internal customers; so if your selling or persuasiveness is all aimed at people inside your organisation, they are your customers.

### **Time-targeted**

The date of the completion of the goal completes the rules of setting appropriate objectives.

It is uncanny how many objectives are targeted to end by the date of the completion of the company's financial year. Once again, the concentration must be on the customer's view. Is the timescale suitable for him as well for the team?

### ***Idea 6 – Listen to and learn from other people's jargon***

As a salesperson working to understand your customer as well as you know yourself, you are *ipso facto* going to be skating on thin ice from time to time, when discussing the other person's job and expertise. Have confidence. Most people are happy to explain what they do and the words they use. Besides which, a little bit of bluffing can, at fairly low risk, pay handsomely in terms of pleasing people by sounding as though

you understand what they do. It is a question of taking careful notes, reworking their words and repeating the ideas back.

Here is an example from the publishing business. A commissioning editor was in full selling mode as he tried to get a Nobel Prize winner to write a book for his publishing company. The scientist says, 'I could be interested in doing something on my work on the electromagnetic properties of wood, given the new work published recently by Professor X.' 'So,' says the salesman, repeating the jargon with slight changes, 'You are studying in the same area of research as Professor X, who I guess has made a major contribution to the field of electromagnetism.' 'You know my work?' says astonished and impressed Nobel Prize winner.

Take care not to affect too much knowledge that you do not have in this area, but risk and return go hand in hand and no salesperson made target without taking some risks.

### *Idea 7 – Understanding the real need*

OK, so getting people to talk about themselves their jobs and their problems is generally not too difficult.

(Just as an aside to that, and to balance this, I must report on a meeting, one of the most uncomfortable I have ever attended, with a senior person who came to the meeting because her boss had told her that my software product had potential for applications within their organisation. Have you ever seen anyone absolutely determined to be unimpressed by a product? My open questions about her major issues were met with a blank refusal to discuss them with me. I finished the demo and came out resolving yet again never to go into a meeting to demonstrate a product unless I knew something of the real needs and issues of the other person. I still make this mistake after all these years.)

Finding the real need is a question of further thought and probing. Your product or service is there to solve a problem for the customer or to allow them to exploit an

opportunity. Sometimes the solution may be part of something bigger that is more difficult to describe. Here is an example of a team of managers misunderstanding the fundamental strategy of their own business, let alone someone else's.

*Sometimes the solution may be part of something bigger that is more difficult to describe.*

The CEO of Parker pens who was in post while the company was having a bad time, asked his senior team who their competition were. They replied, as you would expect, with Waterman, Bic, Biro and so forth. 'No,' says the CEO, 'Here is our competition,' and produced a Dunhill lighter. 'We are not in the pens business any more,' he said, 'We are in the executive gifts business.'

The next complication to understanding real needs in business-to-business selling is, as we have said, that you have to divide the needs into two types – institutional and personal. In fact, it is a very good sales technique to draw this up as a matrix, with the organisation's needs across the top and the personal needs of the key people down the side. Then look for places where they might coincide. Where there is a tick you find your most straightforward opportunities, where there is a cross or mismatch you know the areas where you have, in one way or another, got to work hard and change something. Doing this also helps with demonstrating how a service you are selling not only solves a client problem and gives a good return on investment, but also supports the overall strategy of the organisation as explained to you by the high level board room contacts which you should have.

One other example of this – I was selling a training programme to help a company to get its sales force to emphasize in their sales proposals the customer's business problems rather than the merits of their products and services. They plainly needed it. Senior customer managers were ignoring the salespeople and their proposals and the hit rate of proposals tendered to orders received was going down. The person who was responsible for sales development programmes was an ambitious man who had not been in the job long. It was plain that he wanted my solution but equally clear that he had some reluctance to go ahead with my proposal as it stood. I suddenly realised the real personal need. He wanted to kick-start his reputation in the new job by appearing in front of a lot of salespeople and sales managers early on

and impressing them with a new idea for a process that would obviously increase sales. My programme offered this, but he felt it was rather lame for him to appear as the owner of the idea but not its implementer. That is, he felt it unsatisfactory that I would be the obvious front man in the training.

I changed my proposal, selling him the system and a ‘train the trainer’ event for him so that he could go round the sales force doing the actual training. Organisational need and personal need were now in sync and he went ahead.

### ***Idea 8 – Remember that nobody said life was easy***

Let us finish this first section of the top two sales ideas and the five techniques that make them implementable by reminding ourselves that although we may as salespeople have the occasional ‘bluebird’, the order that comes in without our putting any or much effort into getting it, mostly it takes hard graft.

A sales manager contributor said this:

*Sometimes selling takes not only focus but also hard work. I remember a salesman in London selling accounting systems. Every Friday we used to go to the pub at lunchtime to celebrate deals won or drown our sorrows. This man didn't turn up one Friday and everybody assumed he had had a bad week. Later that afternoon he arrived back at the office with a handful of orders he had closed that morning. He had decided to do a few hours' cold calling as he was in an area he hadn't done much prospecting in before and that was why he had missed the gathering.*

### ***Idea 9 – Start thinking about selling value***

Apart from making contacts – that is, getting people to whom you can sell – the most difficult thing that salespeople have to handle is differentiation: why should customers

buy from you rather than anyone else and how do you prove that the price being asked is fair? Both of these questions boil down to a common theme uniting a number of great ideas, all united round the subject of selling value.

Here is a simple definition of value – the market value of a product is what the market is willing to pay for it the next time a sale is made. How much, for example, is your house worth? You can hazard a fairly reliable guess by looking at what a similar house went for recently; but you will never really know unless you accept an offer from someone to buy it. At that point you know exactly the market value of your house. The following day its market value could be more or less, and so it goes on.

Here is the value concept being coached into a new assistant by an old and wily optician. He explains that when the customer asks how much the new glasses will be, you tell them the price: ‘Fifty pounds.’ If they don’t wince, you say, ‘Per lens.’ If they still don’t wince, you add, ‘Plus the frames.’

## *Conclusion*

This is the only section of the book that is, in my view, in numerical order. It has the top two ideas as stated by the many contributors of material and ideas, and it has the basic selling or persuading techniques you need to implement them. Now we move on to other great ideas, but not necessarily in order. Rather, they form a reference book of ideas you may dip into from time to time. For the sake of some structure I have put them into sections that roughly correspond to the steps you go through in a professional sales campaign:

### *ABC – Always be closing*

Incidentally, you are not still browsing are you? If so, isn’t it time you made a decision to go ahead, take this book to the checkout and pay for it?