

How to Defeat your Two Biggest Competitors: No Decision and the Relentless March of Time

By Steve Martin, Author, "Heavy Hitter Selling - How Successful Salespeople Use Language and Intuition to Persuade Customers to Buy"

Grab a pencil and take the following quiz. What are high technology salespeople paid to do?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Over the past year, I have asked this question of thousands people within the high tech industry. Perhaps the most popular answer given by people outside the sales field is SELL! SELL! SELL! SELL! Meanwhile, salespeople often respond with an answer that reflects their company's sales process: close deals, demonstrate products, qualify opportunities, and prospect for leads.

Here are the actual answers given in the order of priority. First and foremost, salespeople are charged with building customer relationships. Second, they are tasked with reading the customers' minds and knowing what they are honestly thinking. Third, they are responsible for predicting the future and foretelling which deals will actually close. Finally, they are paid to persuade customers to change their opinions and beliefs. So, how many answers did you get right?

At this point, you may be saying to yourself, "Wait a minute, there wasn't anything about selling or closing the deal?" That's correct. Closing business is actually a by-product of these four important responsibilities. Most appropriately, these four tasks are also exactly how you defeat your two biggest competitors -- no decision and the relentless march of time.

As you already know, the world of the high technology salesperson has changed dramatically in the past few years. Long gone are the days of "order taking" or deals closed without much effort in a superheated business market. Following a decade of unprecedented technology expenditures by corporations migrating to open systems, implementing client-server applications, building web sites, and ensuring the transition to the year 2000 went smoothly, capital spending is at a fraction of its previous level.

This situation has only been compounded by a downturn in the overall economy and the terrorist attacks. With so little money available, information technology projects must be continually justified and are constantly being reprioritized. These issues are reflected in the protracted length of today's selection process and the intense scrutiny vendors face daily. In these difficult economic times no decision has become a top competitor.

Heavy Hitters (extremely successful salespeople) understand that while no decision is a formidable challenger, their biggest competitor is time. Time is the ultimate enemy because time is finite. There are thirty days in a month and ninety days in a quarter. Heavy Hitters know that they can work only a finite number of deals during this time so they must invest time wisely in qualified accounts. Therefore, truly successful salespeople know when to pursue and when to drop deals.

Time takes on additional dimension of meaning during the sales cycle. While we usually think of it in terms of minutes and days, it is actually a measure of deal momentum. Therefore, forward momentum in a deal represents positive or good time and backward momentum can be considered as negative or bad time. Unfortunately, customers require all vendors to spend both good and bad time since though they already know who the winner will be early in the sales cycle.

In this article, we will review the critical concepts that help you determine whether or not there is actually a deal and if the account is a waste of time. We will examine the nature of relationships and how they impact the sales cycle. We will discuss why customers lie and why it's important to find the truth. We'll examine the role of accurate information in predicting the future. Finally, we'll identify the different customer receptive states that influence the customer's opinion.

BUILDING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Every deal requires an investment of time and resources. The resources are tangible things like people, equipment, and money. Intangible items are also being expended that including mental energy, credibility, and political capital. All of these items are finite. However, in order to gain momentum salespeople have to expend more effort and resources.

In reality, the only two positions to be in at the end of the deal are first place, as the winner or last place, as the first loser. Heavy Hitters would rather finish in last place than end in second place. Salespeople who are proud of a second place finish are a detriment to their company. The graph below illustrates this point.

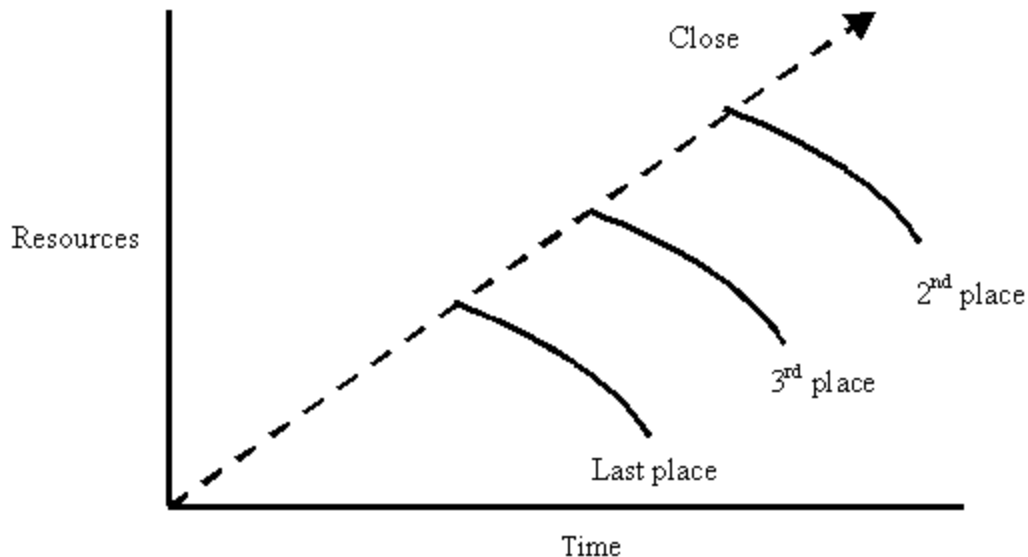


Fig.1 Investments by Winners and Losers

Also notice that vendors disappear from the sales cycle at various stages of investment of time and effort. Clearly, last place is better than every place except winning. However, in most sales cycles the investment does not stop suddenly. Rather, a customer is more likely to become unresponsive or make a vendor perform some tasks that it cannot possibly complete. By continuing to jump through a customer's hoops or wasting valuable mental energy and emotions thinking about the deal, the salesperson continues to pour good resources on top of bad. In this situation, the vendor has no hope of protecting its investment to date. It is a sunk cost, and the expenditure of additional time and effort compounds the mistake. The mistake can be magnified even more depending on the sales cycle phase. Learning you are the loser in the eleventh hour of a deal is a frustrating, humbling, and embarrassing event.

So, how do they get privileged intelligence about your position in the deal you're working on? By building a deep relationship with someone within the customer's organization. This is one of the fundamental premises of the high technology sales cycle. For many years, the term "coach" has been used by all types of salespeople, selling every conceivable product, to define the person who provides this data. The coach is also commonly known as the "champion," "internal advocate," or "counselor."

"If you don't have a coach, champion, internal advocate or counselor, you can't win the deal."

Literally, all high tech sales involve being "coached" through the evaluation process. Why would someone Coach one salesperson versus another? To establish a relationship with a Coach, Heavy Hitters build different types of rapport with their customer. At the foundation is a special relationship, a personal rapport between two individuals. Although powerful, this personal rapport is meaningless unless technical rapport is present. Technical rapport is achieved when a product's features satisfy the customer's requirements. Finally, there must be a business rapport between the two companies to consummate the deal.

FINDING THE TRUTH TO READ MINDS

For every salesperson there is one ultimate truth, "Will I win the deal?" The answer to this all consuming question requires the continual evaluation of both the obvious and subtle information the customer presents. Whether inadvertently or on purpose, salespeople know that customers do not always tell the truth.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to participate in thousands of sales calls with both typical salespeople and Heavy Hitters. A key difference between Heavy Hitters and most salespeople is their ability to determine if they are being told the truth. Truth is an interesting concept. Truth is defined as "genuine and authentic in accordance with a person's reality."

For a moment, let's put ourselves in the position of the customer. As the customer, you are going to meet with multiple vendors, watch their presentations, and read their marketing collateral. Each vendor, most likely, has equally talented, friendly, and professional salespeople who come to your office. However, you will select only one product. Given that, how will you behave with each vendor? Will you tell each one the truth? Probably not.

It is basic human nature to want to avoid confrontation. This is particularly true when you are meeting in person, face-to-face. In addition, our society has implicit guidelines of behavior. We are taught at an early age that if we have nothing nice to say, then we shouldn't say anything at all. If you (the prospect) are not interested in the product after the meeting, it is much more comfortable to tell the non-winning vendors about your decision over the phone or just do nothing. The problem is that all of the vendors may have to continue to spend an equal amount of time and effort to win the business when a decision for one vendor was most likely made early on in the sales cycle.

"Whether inadvertently or on purpose, the customer will always lie."

Our definition of truth also includes the phrase "in accordance with a person's reality." The problem here is that multiple realities are at work. The company reality may be that product sales are disappointing and the economy has slowed. Given this reality, the previously approved budget may have just been slashed, even though the lower-level personnel evaluating your product may not know of the cuts or believe they can work around the budget issues, so they continue with their product evaluation.

The decision to buy your product may rest with a group of individuals that compose the evaluation team. Since everyone has a unique map of reality, what reality—and whose—will be pervasive in the selection process?

Heavy Hitters seek to understand what a customer is trying to accomplish from a business and technical perspective. The process of qualifying a deal from a technical and business perspective is what most people outside of the sales field associate with the term qualification. When someone from engineering, accounting, or marketing asks if a deal is "qualified," they are referring to these formal processes.

The intuitive process of deal qualification is far more complex. Frequently, non-salespeople within an organization have a hard time understanding that an entirely intuitive process surrounds the sales cycle. It's understandable, since they operate in a more controllable, predictable world, such as accounting or engineering. Accountants know that both sides of a balance sheet must be equal. Software programmers code a series of statements in a logical, procedural manner. They don't necessarily understand why their company's salesperson still may not win the deal, if the product technically fits the customer's environment and is priced competitively.

The Hitter's intuitive qualification process is far more important than the formal qualification process. The goal of the intuitive process is the successful search for the truth, and this is not a sequential process like marking items off a checklist. In fact, two competing salespeople could ask the same question and receive identical content level answers. However, the successful salesperson can identify and interpret contradictions in customer communication and discrepancies in deal information.

How a person speaks is also a good indicator of congruence (or truthfulness). When people aren't telling the truth, their tempo speeds up or slows down, their volume gets louder or softer, and their tone is higher or lower than normal. In addition, people's choice words will change when they are not telling the truth. People telling the truth will talk in a straightforward manner using ordinary terms. When creating misrepresentations, their word selection is more careful, and they tend to use more sophisticated words. They also speak with precision and are mindful not to repeat the same word twice as they are editing what they say.

ACCURATE INFORMATION AND PREDICTING THE FUTURE

Everyday, you receive an infinite amount of information. This information is constantly influencing the decisions you make. We are continuously processing information from our senses. The senses can't be turned off and the large amount of information they gather can overwhelm our conscious mind's ability to process and catalog it. Therefore, not all information is treated equally. Some information is ignored, some information is misinterpreted, and some information is generalized.

The world you experience is not the real world, but rather your perception of the world. The way in which you perceive your world is intricately connected to your senses and how you store information in your brain.

Because our past experiences are unique, our views of the same situation may be very different. For example, we may have grown up in the same town and even gone to the same schools. However, our recollection of our childhoods will be distinct since we both have a unique ability to interpret, classify, store, and retrieve information in our brains.

We are also filtering information all the time. While most salespeople operate in a world of incomplete or incorrect customer information, Heavy Hitters have a different strategy called "triangulation."

"Triangulation enables you to make the most accurate prediction about whether a deal is for real and your chances to win."

Triangulation is the process of identifying your position by using three or more data points. If you are sailing across the ocean, you can calculate your latitude and longitude by forming an imaginary triangle with the stars. In sales, we do the same, with the stars being the members of our project team assembled to win an account. In most cases, the team consists of the salesperson, a system engineer, and the sales manager.

Sailors continuously take readings from different stars to ensure their position is accurate. In the same way, Heavy Hitters may talk about a deal with someone who has never met the account or isn't even in sales, such as a spouse or friend. Heavy Hitters are constantly trying to triangulate their position by answering these questions: Is there a deal? Am I winning? Who do I have to watch out for, and what can ruin this deal?

Triangulation is the process of checking all information that has been gathered about a customer from other people. Through triangulation, Heavy Hitters are trying to identify the pieces of information that they may have ignored, generalized, or misinterpreted. It's a calibration technique for finding "reality."

Triangulation is a repetitive process done over the life of a sales cycle. The Heavy Hitter's most frequent triangulation is with members of the immediate sales team including the system engineer and manager. Mostly, it occurs directly after a sales call while memories are still fresh. The Heavy Hitter's team members compare notes on their performance and evaluate the probability of winning the deal.

They'll also discuss their "read" of the customer participants from the meeting. Who is for them? Who is against them? And who can be swayed? This is analogous to lawyers during the jury selection process, who try to determine which potential jurors would react most favorably to their client's case. Of equal importance, lawyers want to eliminate those jurors who may be biased against their client. The information gathered from triangulation is continually factored into the strategy.

Whether formally or informally, customers are also doing their own triangulation about the vendor. They'll compare notes with their evaluation team, talk to customer references, and solicit opinions from consultants or industry analysts. They'll create a set of criteria a product must satisfy and guidelines to determine if a vendor will be a good business partner. They will grant a vendor further access based on how it compares against these standards and ranks against other vendors. The better the fit, the longer the time they will naturally be spending on a vendor.

The goal of triangulation is to find out the truth about winning an account as early as possible. The sales cycle is a process that occurs over time, and Heavy Hitters are constantly reconfirming information they received earlier to ensure it is still correct. At the beginning of the sales cycle, they'll spend much effort evaluating the product's fit with the customer's need and qualifying the business opportunity. As the sales cycle progresses, Heavy Hitters will keep triangulating to ensure their information is still accurate by validating information they receive from one person with other people. They will also triangulate to determine the personal biases of each individual involved in the selection process. Finding the truth is a time-consuming process, and triangulation is a discipline that requires effort and time.

CREATING THE RECEPTIVE STATE TO CHANGE CUSTOMERS' OPINIONS

The sales cycle has a natural evolution. The first step for customers is to gather information from each vendor. As they gather more information, one vendor begins to look better than the others, its product sounds like it will work better, and they feel this vendor will be a better partner. Naturally, that vendor will enjoy an advantage throughout the remainder of the sales cycle and their relationship will flourish.

However, customers have a dilemma. They still want to collect information from the other vendors to be 100 percent certain they are selecting the right vendor. Or they may want to complete the evaluation process to show others within or outside their organization (management, colleagues, consultants, or government agencies) that their evaluation was thorough and fair. As a result, they offer the other vendors the "customer placebo."

The customer placebo is present in literally every sales cycle. One vendor is in a unique position of receiving information from the customer that the others don't receive. As this favored vendor and the customer spend more time together, a higher level of rapport is developed and a personal relationship is formed. While this is happening, the customer is presenting misleading information to the other vendors about their position in the deal. The customer may give salespeople false buying signs that they are more interested in the product than they actually are. Conversely, they may not share critical information or access to other people in the company as they do with the leading vendor.

"Unfortunately, the other vendors continue to spend additional resources and time on the account when a decision for one vendor has, for all intents and purposes, been made already."

The only way to avoid becoming a victim of the customer placebo is to create four different receptive states with the customer: personal, technical, business, and political. The first priority is to build a personal receptive state with each individual. To accomplish this, Hitters will try to determine people's unique language, search for interests or hobbies they might have in common, and determine the traits of their personalities.

Once personal rapport is established, Heavy Hitters will qualify the customer's technical fit. Usually, the criteria to determine technical fit is supplied by product management or marketing and consists of a series of questions to be asked of the customer. However, they do not want to jeopardize the Personal rapport they have established. Therefore, they take great care to build a technical receptive state through understanding the customer's problem. They want to ensure they understand the technical problem the customer is trying to solve and compare it against their company's solution. Their line of questioning is not like a police officer interrogating the prime suspect of a crime. Rather, it is interwoven as a natural part of the conversation without much fanfare. It is designed not only to qualify the technical fit but also to insert logical arguments that their solution can solve the customer's technical problem.

As Heavy Hitters demonstrate their primary interest is in the customer's success, they begin to build a business receptive state. At this point, the customer starts to consider them more than a vendor. They become a business consultant who has the expertise to solve the customer's problem.

Finally, the political receptive state is established when customers use the Hitter's solution to achieve their own personal needs or political agenda. The graph below depicts the ideal progression of rapport and momentum during the sales cycle.

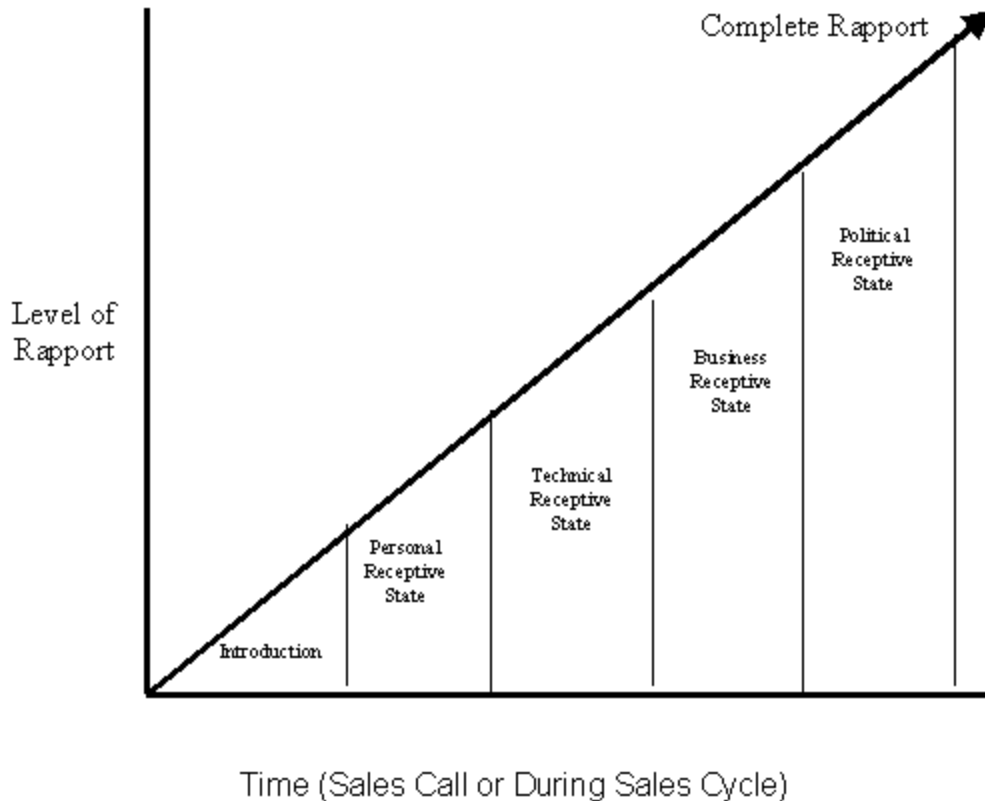


Fig. 2 Receptive States During the Sales Cycle

At the bottom of graph is the concept of time. The amount of time required to create rapport depends on the product you are selling. For example, it may take weeks or months to achieve "complete rapport" for a salesperson selling a million-dollar software application or just minutes for an inexpensive product.

CONCLUSION

I admire persistent salespeople and respect the underdog who will fight with passion and battle against the odds. However, sometimes it's flat out impossible to win. Such is the case when your competitor holds such a tight grip on the customer that there is no way to pry them loose. In other accounts, although customers may not come right out and say it, they simply don't want you around.

Even facing these circumstances, some salespeople believe the customer is just playing hard to get or treating every vendor in this way (which they aren't). Salespeople mistakenly believe they can turn the situation around by sheer willpower and determination. Recognizing when to abandon an account is equally important to knowing what accounts to pursue. Ultimately, you will only win deals where you are given the opportunity to build personal relationships.

Every deal has a critical moment or turning point that defines the winner and determines the losers. In some cases the turning point is easy to spot. For example, when a salesperson is presenting his solution and encounters a deal-breaking objection that he is unable to overcome. Even though the customer remains cordial for the rest of the meeting, a turning point has occurred and the deal is lost. In most cases, the turning point occurs when the salesperson isn't present. It's in casual hallway conversations or internal e-mails that selection team members share opinions that influence vendor's futures. The only outward sign that a turning point has occurred is the perceptible change in deal momentum.

Even for the vendor that has passed the turning point and has been told they have won the business, there's always one last impediment to closing the deal. There might be unknown bureaucratic obstacles in the contractual and procurement processes. The formal approval process may include members outside the decision process who want to influence the decision outcome at the last moment. Sometimes, people flat out change their minds in the eleventh hour of decision-making. Therefore, the leader needs to continue with caution, remain on guard, expect the unexpected, and never stop triangulating.

Truly great salespeople intimately understand that selling is a process as well as a specific result. The sales process starts with the creation of a relationship between people who understand each other's needs. Heavy Hitters are always trying to determine what a customer wants and to create the environment that is most receptive to their message. They are continually evaluating where they should spend their time and where they shouldn't waste resources.

Steve Martin has been personally responsible for over a quarter of billion dollars of high technology sales while working for leading edge Silicon Valley companies over the past twenty years. During this time, he has participated in thousands of sales calls and worked with hundreds of salespeople in roles ranging from salesperson to Vice President. His new book titled "Heavy Hitter Selling-- How Successful High Technology Salespeople Use Language and Intuition to Persuade Customers to Buy," is the first book to truly explain the human nature of high-tech selling. Visit www.HeavyHitterSelling.com or email Steve directly at stevemartin@heavyhitterselling.com to provide article feedback.