

Stop Selling Drill Bits

Some simple advice to influence customers through value-selling

If you're like me (and I will speculate that if you're reading this, you might be) you don't enjoy "selling." While there are undoubtedly those who revel in the competitive nature of the 'sell' (think Alec Baldwin's character in Glengarry Glen Ross), others just see it as a four-letter word. For this latter group, selling feels awkward and unnatural, a mysterious art of high-pressure pushy sales tactics designed to get the buyer to commit. As one can imagine, this natural aversion to selling presents quite the conundrum for an entrepreneur, whose primary mission is to sell. So much in fact, that I might suggest with near certainty that an entrepreneur afraid of selling will meet the same fate as a fish afraid of water.

Fortunately, if you know what you're *really* selling, you can part ways with many of the old doctrines of sales. In addition to getting comfortable selling, I might go so far as to suggest that your customers may thank you - after all, no one enjoys being sold to. While there are enough books on the subject of sales to fill a small library, this article provides a suggested approach to influencing buyer behavior through value-selling.

First Things First.

To get started with value-selling, as one might expect, it is necessary to uncover the *real* value of your product or service. While this can sometimes be a chicken-and-egg discussion, for most entrepreneurs, you'll want to start by answering a few simple questions.

What?

What are you selling?

Begin by identifying the products and services that you're able and willing to deliver effectively and efficiently. While you may be tempted to create an exhaustive list, I recommend starting with 3 to 5 products or services (don't try to boil the ocean - focus on what you do exceptionally well.)

Who?

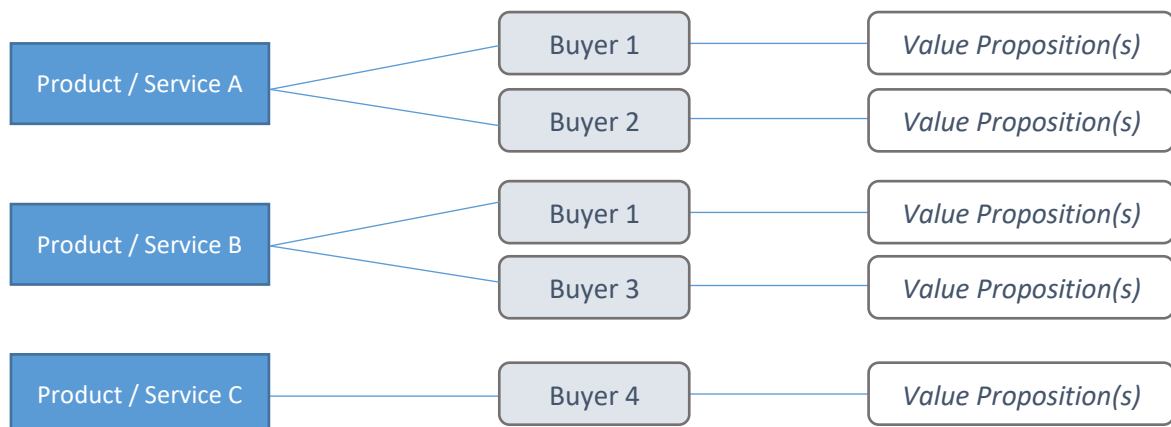
Who are you selling to?

Next, identify the potential buyer(s) for each product, service, or group. While it is important to note that each product will have its own buyers, it is also possible for buyers to be duplicated (i.e. a single buyer may be interested in more than one product or service offering.)

Why?

Why should they buy from you?

Finally, spend time to identify the WIIFM ("What's In It For Me") for each buyer. This is the most important step in the strategy as this helps to uncover the true value of your product or service - this will serve as the foundation of your value proposition in all your marketing materials.



Know Who You're Talking To.

With a strategy in hand, you're almost ready to start talking with prospective clients. But before you go spouting off about your amazing *solutions*, you must first figure out who it is that you're talking to! Remember, Buyer 4 is only interested in Product / Service C and Buyer 3 isn't likely to respond positively to the value proposition you've crafted specifically to resonate with Buyer 2.

With those points in mind, you might be tempted to simply serenade your listener with a high-level overview of everything you do. With all the great products and services you have to offer, surely there's something that will pique your listener's interest, right? Unfortunately, the answer is likely no. The problem with this approach is (as you may have guessed) that the listener's attention span is typically very limited and if you're not specifically addressing a relevant WIIFM, it's unlikely that you'll be able to hold their interest long enough to get to talk about the product / service which might interest them. To contend with this dilemma and maximize the number of productive conversations, you must first determine which buyer you're speaking with and (assuming you know your client) what problems you can help them with.

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Understand What's Important.

The key to influencing buyers is to first understand what's really important to them (i.e. the buyer's WIIFM) - that is to say, what are they *really* buying from you. In keeping the buyer's needs at the forefront, you can easily shift from selling products and services to selling solutions. To illustrate this point, I've often relied on the comparison of a drill bit - it's important to understand that a customer who walks into a hardware store to purchase a drill bit does not want or need a drill bit. What the customer actually needs is a hole - the drill bit is what the customer perceives to be the best solution to their need.

I've told many clients over the years to stop selling what they do (drill bits) - few may understand and fewer may care. However, by selling the solution (the hole), clients are able to quickly connect with your product or service and understand the value in a way that resonates with them. For example, I've introduced myself to many people as "a consultant" 20% of the time the listener may follow up with a question such as, "what's that?", "what does that mean?", and "so, what do you actually do?" while the conversation dies there for the other 80%. Instead, I introduce myself by saying "I help business owners develop practical strategies to grow their business." By focusing on the problem I solve, instead of what I am or what I do, the conversations quickly develop into productive discussions. Some additional examples are shown below:

Drill Bit	Hole
"I'm in marketing."	"I work with businesses to get their products and services in front of their target audience in a compelling way that spurs sales growth."
"I'm a photographer."	"I help my clients capture life's most important moments."

Practice, Practice, Practice.

Finally, armed with a strategy and a true understanding of your prospective client and their likely needs, you can begin selling your solutions with confidence. BUT (there's always a but) it's important that you not get overly discouraged if you're not selling or setting appointments after your first pitch, your fifth pitch, or even your hundredth pitch. Learning to uncover which prospective client is in front of you, selecting the correct value proposition on the spot, and seamlessly sliding into the perfect pitch can take time. There is, unfortunately, no way to become great at anything without messing up first. As with all things, the key is practice, practice, practice.

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