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The Greatest Sales Deck I've Ever Seen

It's Zuora's, and it's brilliant. Here's why.

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A few months ago, my friend Tim took a new sales job at a Series C tech company that had raised over $50 million from A-list investors. He's one of the best salespeople I know, but soon after starting, he emailed me to say he was struggling.

"I've landed a few small accounts," Tim said. "But my pitch falls flat at big enterprises."

As I've written before, I love helping teams craft the high-level strategic story that powers sales, marketing, fundraising — everything. So Tim and I met for lunch at the Amber India restaurant off San Francisco's Market Street to review his deck.

After loading up on the all-you-can-eat buffet, I asked Tim, "So what point do prospects tune out?"

"Usually a few slides in," he said.

Intent on maximizing ROI, Tim went back to the buffet for seconds. When he returned, I pulled out my laptop and launched into a Powerpoint presentation.

"What's this?" Tim asked.

"This," I said, "is the greatest sales deck I have ever seen."

The 5 Elements of a Brilliant Sales Narrative

The sales deck I showed Tim came from Zuora, the IPO-bound Silicon Valley company that sells a SaaS platform for subscription billing. If you pay for anything on a recurring basis (e.g. enterprise software), there's a good chance that Zuora facilitates those transactions.

I had received the deck from an ex-Zuora salesperson, who said it helped him close the biggest deals of his career. (I have no connection to Zuora, and no relationship with anyone who currently works there. UPDATE: *Some current Zuora employees have contacted with me after reading this.*)

Abandoning his team to a puddle of curried goat, Tim grabbed pen and paper and took notes as we ran through what made the Zuora deck so effective.

Specifically, we noted how brilliantly the deck led prospects through the following five elements. (*to precisely this order*

(The ex-Zuora salesperson added that I too share the Zuora deck publicly, and I will honor that request. However, I found slides on Zuora's website and SlideShare channel that exhibit nearly the same narrative flow, all of the images below come from those public sources.)

#1. Name a Big, Relevant Change in the World

Don't kick off a sales presentation by talking about your product, your headquarters location, your investors, your clients, or anything about yourself.

Instead, name the undeniable shift in the world that creates both (a) big stakes and (b) huge urgency for your prospect.

The first slide of virtually every Zuora deck — sales or otherwise — is some version of this:

Zuora came up with the phrase "subscription economy" to name the new world that sellers must navigate, one in which buyers increasingly choose subscriptions over traditional purchases. Zuora's slides usually follow that with a slide laying out the history of the change:

Now the sales but important difference from what most pitch advice tells you, which is to start with "the problem." When you assert that your prospects have a problem, you put them on the defensive. They may be unaware of the problem, or uncomfortable admitting they suffer from it.

But when you highlight a shift in the world, you put prospects in open-up mode about the shift affects them, how it scares them, and where they see opportunities. More importantly, you grab their attention. As Hollywood screenwriting guru Robert McKee says:

> ...what attracts human attention is change....If the temperature around you changes, if the phone rings — that gets your attention. The way in which a story begins is a starting event that creates a moment of change.
>
> Tim McKee

#2. Show There'll Be Winners and Losers

All prospects suffer from what economists call "loss aversion." That is, they are more motivated to avoid pain than to seek the same amount of gain, rather than take a parallel gamble by opting for change.

To combat loss aversion, you must demonstrate how the change you cited above will create big winners and big losers. In other words, you have to show both of the following:

1. That adapting to the change you cited will likely result in a highly positive future for the prospect, and
2. That not doing so will likely result in an unacceptable future for the prospect.

Zuora nearly accomplishes this by documenting a "mass extinction" among Fortune 500 companies...

...and then showing how the "winners" have shifted from product ownership to subscription services. These include upstarts...

...as well as reinvented incumbents:

To bring the point home, Zuora asks the following:

Of course, by this point the common thread is already well established in prospects' minds. Winners adopt the subscription service models that Zuora supports.

#3. Tease the Promised Land

It's tempting at this point to jump into the details of your product or service. Resist that urge.

If you introduce product/service details too soon, prospects won't yet have enough context for why those details are important, and they'll zone out.

Instead, first present a "teaser" vision of the happily-ever-after that your product/service will help the prospect achieve—what I call the Promised Land.

Your Promised Land should be both desirable (obviously) and difficult for the prospect to achieve without outside help. Otherwise, why does your company exist?

After demonstrating that the subscription economy will result in winners and losers, Zuora presents the Promised Land slide, which offers concrete criteria for what it means to win in the subscription economy:

Note that the Promised Land is a new future state, not your product or service.

(Over lunch, I asked my friend Tim to articulate his Promised Land, and he said, "You'd have the most innovative platform for _____." Nope: the Promised Land is not having your technology, but what life is like *thanks to* having your technology.)

Your Promised Land is also crucial for helping prospects pitch your solution to colleagues after your sales meeting ends. In your absence, those colleagues will ask, "What do those guys do again?" Armed with a compelling Promised Land, your prospects are more likely to supply an answer that gets others on board.

#4. Introduce Features as "Magic Gifts" for Overcoming Obstacles to the Promised Land

If it's not clear by now, successful sales decks follow the same narrative structure as epic films and fairy tales. Your prospect is Luke, and you're Obi-Wan, furnishing a lightsaber to help him defeat the Empire. Your prospect is Frodo, and you're Gandalf, wielding wisdom(s) to help him destroy the ring. Your prospect is Cinderella, and you're the fairy godmother, casting spells to get her to the ball.

When you introduce your product or service, do so by positioning its capabilities like the lightsaber, wisdom(s) and spells—as "magic gifts" for helping your main character (prospect) reach that much-desired Promised Land.

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