



Book Conversations That Win the Complex Sale

Using Power Messaging to Create More Opportunities, Differentiate your Solutions, and Close More Deals

Erik Peterson and Timothy Riesterer
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Recommendation

With widespread competition and the commoditization of products and services, salespeople have difficulty differentiating their offerings from their competitors' goods or services. Many sales reps resort to severe price cuts, the ultimate self-defeating differentiator. Sales message consultants Erik Peterson and Tim Riesterer propose a different tactic. Their book presents the core concepts from their popular "Power Messaging workshops," which teach salespeople how to engage prospects in compelling, profitable sales conversations. This eye-opening program has helped salespeople improve their results for 20 years. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to salespeople who want to stand out from the competition and win their prospects' attention and agreement.

Take-Aways

- Competition and commoditization make it tough to sway prospects to favor your product.
- Often, prospects simply do not hear a presentation the way you think they will.
- For many salespeople, the biggest roadblock is the status quo, not the competition.
- Use conversation to differentiate yourself from your competitors.
- These friendly, compelling conversations should deliver powerful sales messages.
- Be bold: Startle your prospects, and shake them up.
- Your prospect – not your company – is the hero and the focus of your story.
- Assume the role of the helpful mentor, providing the solution that enables your hero-prospect to win the day.
- Challenging your prospects and their assumptions on a regular basis is an effective sales technique.
- Make your prospects feel pain, and present your product or service as pain relief.

Summary

Do You Have Gas in Your Tank?

In 1986, Alain Prost, a French Formula 1 champion, held the lead for most of the German Grand Prix, but he ran out of gas in the last lap. Prost jumped out of his car and tried to push it across the finish line. He received a thunderous ovation from the crowd as other cars zoomed past him.

"Your sales conversations are becoming the last battleground in competitive differentiation."

Many sales professionals are in the same situation – stuck with sales systems like Prost's car: powerful but not able to get them across the finish line. But salespeople who offer the correct messages during their sales conversations can beat their competition. Sales systems give salespeople the opportunity to win, but they only work when the right sales messages provide the fuel that powers them. You can have a great system, but without the right message, you will never cross the finish line.

"Humans live in story."

When sales start to dry up, most sales professionals try to replace their systems. Often, in fact, their messages are at fault instead. Research shows that companies believe the three main problems that deter sales are bad economic times, commoditization and an inability to differentiate their products from their competitors'. Sales conversations are the best way to distinguish your goods and services. Most customers believe that salespeople call on them only to make a pitch and then deliver worthless information. Few executives think that the material salespeople deliver justifies the time spent listening to them. Successful sales do not depend on your step-by-step process. What matters most is what you say.

The Status Quo: The Biggest Sales Roadblock

Your primary battle is not against your competitors; it's against customer indecision. In a market that is flooded with undifferentiated competitors, often the most logical move is to stand still. Many confused customers get stuck making the non-choice choice to be stuck doing nothing.

"If your prospects see you and your competition as the same, you end up having to compete on the only thing that's left to differentiate you – price."

Most salespeople fail to perceive this problem. Instead, they focus on contests against their competitors. In this battle, rivals often stress the same benefits and features, and converse with customers the same way. Prospects freeze, either unable or unwilling to make choices when they discern no advantages among their alternatives. Your primary sales effort should focus on moving the prospect away from the status quo. The most useful tactic in that case is to engage prospects in conversations that provide new insights about ways they can operate more efficiently.

"Messaging fuels methodology."

The first step is to offer a "distinct point of view" that gets prospects to sit up, take notice and hear what you want to communicate. Once they accept your point of view, they'll begin to question their previous basic assumptions. This method enables your potential client to visualize upcoming challenges in light of the solutions you provide. Your distinct point of view should cover five components:

1. **"Grabber"** – To initiate a dialogue, discuss an industry fact that the prospect does not know.
2. **"Pain"** – Bring up a potential problem that could move prospects out of their comfort zone. Explain how this problem may prevent their companies from attaining their business goals. Make sure the problem you introduce will ultimately enable you to become part of the decision-making process that leads to a solution.
3. **"Impact"** – Detail the negative consequences that will ensue because of the problem. Quantify everything. Explain that the problem is imminent.
4. **"Contrast"** – Introduce a solution that involves your product or service. Focus on your firm's special ability to solve the problem. Contrast this solution with the way the prospect currently handles things. The core message: The prospect should quickly make a change that involves buying something from your company.
5. **"Proof"** – Provide a brief case history that illustrates how your company helped another company deal successfully with a similar problem.

"The Old Brain...loves contrast. And the closer together the things being contrasted in your messaging are, the more powerful the impact will be."

With this approach, you step entirely outside frustrating fisticuffs with your competitors, you differentiate yourself and your products, and you guide the prospect into the buying cycle. If you deploy this technique correctly, you can redirect the sales conversation to favor your firm and its offerings. Does this methodology work? It did for ADP, a payroll service and human resources management company with a previously stagnant customer relationship management (CRM) system. By establishing a distinct point of view and focusing on clients' needs instead of its products' features, ADP changed the sales conversation within 90 days. In the process, it closed 145 deals, some 115 of which previously were in limbo.

"Your prospects assume that you are the same as your competitors – until you prove otherwise."

Making prospects feel pain goes against every sales instinct. But your job is to move potential clients away from the status quo. Shaking prospects up, moving them away from their rigid suppositions – including their automatic assumptions about you as a salesperson – is the most effective technique. Pique your prospects' curiosity. Challenge their ideas with thought-provoking conversations. Mention a problem that your prospects will soon encounter. Spur conversation as much as possible by attacking the status quo and redefining the battle to your advantage. Suggest an alternative involving your product or service.

Tell a Story

Storytelling is the best way to convey your distinct point of view. Don't make the common mistake of creating stories about your company and its products or services. Always craft your story to be about your prospect. He or she must be the central character – the hero – of the story. To find the best story, determine what your prospect and you have in common, while avoiding anything that your prospect or you have in common with your competitors. The commonality between you and your prospect is your "value wedge," which must meet three requirements:

1. It should be something special that only your firm provides.
2. The customer must consider it important.
3. You must be able to defend your unique proposition.

"You'd better be able to tell me something I don't already know, about a problem I didn't even know I had." (Senior executive at a large technology company)

The combination of these traits represents the parameters of your "power positions," which define your distinct point of view. To put these concepts to work, develop a "prospect profile" that focuses on three of your prospect's main business objectives. Target the objectives that carry the most emotional weight for your prospect. For each objective, find a problem, challenge or threat that keeps your prospect's company from reaching its objectives.

"A safe, familiar message is a forgotten message."

Consider how your commercial offerings differ from your competitors'. Brainstorm as many ideas as possible. List your main competitor's strengths and weaknesses. Use this information to help develop your value wedge. Note the competition's strengths because you may be able to persuade your prospects that they are, in fact, weaknesses. Consider the 2004 US presidential election, when opponents turned Senator John Kerry's Vietnam War heroism into a weakness, even though he won the Silver Star and several other medals.

"If you separate emotion from decision making then decision making breaks down."

Once you assemble the components of your message, develop three primary areas of focus, or "edge pieces" for your message. Present your case using four steps: 1) Uncover the prospect's primary challenge; 2) Align that issue with one of your competitor's primary weaknesses; 3) Compare your competitor's weakness unfavorably to your firm or product's special or distinctive features; and 4) Develop a phrase that encapsulates how your solution will enable the prospect to handle its challenge differently and better.

"Your message needs to be more than just compelling facts."

To find the right wording for step four, visualize a "message pyramid" to represent the information you want to provide. The base of the pyramid describes your solution. The center explains what it accomplishes, and the peak displays the meaning of your solution. For example: Tylenol contains acetaminophen, a pain reliever. Tylenol is special because it eliminates pain but does not upset your stomach. This is both Tylenol's defining aspect and its brand identity. This quality – the peak of the pyramid – can be stated in a slogan: pain relief without stomach upset. Your solution phrase should explain how your prospect could handle something better or differently thanks to your product or service.

"Presenting a catalog of facts or playing 20 questions with prospective customers is the surest way to lose the sale."

Always employ "you phrasing." Include "you" repeatedly in your product's story. This keeps your prospect as the focus of the pitch. Insert a few "'What if you...' questions" into your story. For a building cleaning services company, you might say, "What if you could leave work knowing that your after-hours cleaning service is using the right processes and tools to...eliminate cross-contamination?"

Talk to Your Prospect Like a Friend

Speak as if you were talking to a friend. For example, if a friend wants to know how you like your new car, you would not say, "It's great. It completely optimizes my ability to get my family resources from point A to destination B." You would speak naturally, using conventional words and phrases without resorting to buzzwords. Tell your story to your prospect in a few conversational words. For instance, the cleaning company could tell prospects, "Get a healthier clean at no extra cost."

"Stories...have more flexibility and applications than any other messaging technique."

For effective storytelling, use the "hero model" that worked so well for George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*. The hero model narrative contains five steps: First, everything is normal. Second, things change. Third, a hero tries to fix things. Fourth, a mentor enters the picture to help and, fifth, the hero triumphs. Your prospect is always the hero. You want to inhabit the story in the role of the trusted mentor who advises the hero-prospect to use your product or service to win the day. The hero story will capture your prospect's attention, and attention is a valuable and rare commodity. Research indicates that people lose interest in what others say after about 10 minutes. To grab attention, make your prospect's problem the villain of your story and offer the heroic product to fix it.

Defeating the Old Brain

People pay attention in response to signals from their brain stem and other elementary neurological structures, known as the reptile brain or Old Brain. Therefore, use grabbers to ask questions that draw on basic emotions, such as "what if you" questions. Other grabbers include:

- **"Customer stories with contrast"** – Stories with contrast help you persuade resistant prospects. Such a story might present a before-and-after situation about another customer – someone who earns your prospect's empathy. These tales circumvent the Old Brain's filtering feature by citing someone's pain, what they gain from the product and proof that it works.
- **"3D props"** – Props show prospects how your solution will work for them. For instance, draw simple, large pictures while talking to the prospect. Such graphics make complicated messages and abstract ideas easy to understand due to the "pictorial superiority effect." A sketch on a napkin is all you need. Use your pictures to show the prospect's problem and to depict the benefits of your solution.

"What's truer than the truth? The story."

Use personal stories to connect with prospects. Metaphors and analogies promote "liking," a concept developed by noted influence researcher Robert Cialdini. Prospects purchase from salespeople whom they believe, like and appreciate. Speak to prospects as if they were your friends. Build emotion into your stories. The Old Brain, the primary decision filter, remembers emotion. Your emotion secures your prospect's attention, which also responds to contrast, visual aids and simplicity. PowerPoint puts the Old Brain right to sleep.

"People buy on emotion and justify it with facts."

Concrete proof, such as statistics from third parties, works well, as do demonstrations and return-on-investment stories about other customers. Depicting your prospect's life before and after your solution, or the "mini-drama" technique, is also effective. Here, your body language and tone of voice are as important as your words. Don't be shy or fearful. Just have a conversation.

About the Authors

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