



Book Slow Down, Sell Faster!

Understand Your Customer's Buying Process and Maximize Your Sales

Kevin Davis
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Recommendation

Most sales books focus on sales techniques. Not this step-by-step text by sales trainer Kevin Davis, who explains why you need to know your customer’s buying process so you can plan your sales activities – and your sales personalities – accordingly. This makes sense. The more you know about how prospects make their purchases, the easier it will be to sell to them. *BooksInShort* recommends Davis’s savvy sales advice – particularly his specific (if sometimes insufficiently linear) instructions on how to match the buyer’s needs right down the line – to business-to-business sales professionals who work with decision-making client teams, and to those who sell high-end products or services to consumers.

Take-Aways

- To sell more, “slow down” so you can ask more questions about customers’ needs.
- Your job is to obtain “go-forward commitments” by hitting four milestones.
- They are: make more appointments, build momentum, provide a persuasive proposal or presentation, and close the purchase to “make the transition from pre- to post-sale.”
- To gain a competitive edge, learn all about your customers’ “buying process.”
- Directly orient your “sales process” and persona to fit the clients’ approach.
- Determine where your customers are in the eight-step buying process of “change, discontent, research, comparison, fear, commitment, expectations” and “satisfaction.”
- At each stage of this process, adopt the appropriate parallel “sales role” as a “student, doctor, architect, coach, therapist, negotiator, teacher” or “farmer.”
- Complex sales usually involve a team of buyers that fulfill certain jobs. Match your proposal and presentation directly to their needs.
- Identify these key players: “return-on-investment authority, super user, user, power broker, gatekeeper, sponsor” and “anti-sponsor,” and decide whom to target.
- Follow up. Leverage customer satisfaction to earn more sales.

Summary

Don’t Hurry

Never rush a sale. To sell more, “slow down” so you can ask your prospects more questions and determine their needs. Customers buy from salespeople who take the time to meet all their requirements, on a systematic basis, by presenting information they want when they want it. This requires learning to think like the buyer and to understand the client’s “buying process.” Forget your usual sales approach and techniques. Focus on the buyers’ behavior. As you go through this process with your

buyer, your primary job is to obtain “go-forward commitments” by checking off four milestones: securing “more first appointments,” obtaining letters of understanding to build “momentum,” making a “winning proposal or presentation,” and closing the sale to “make the transition from pre- to post-sale” activities.

Understanding the Buyer’s Process

The buying process has eight steps – “change, discontent, research, comparison, fear, commitment, expectations” and “satisfaction” – that unfold in four basic stages, which include specific sales milestones. The four stages are:

1. **“Need”** – Something changes in the buyer’s firm, unveiling a new need. The buyer will be discontented until a solution emerges. Your initial sales milestone is securing more “first” appointments; the buying process steps at this stage are change and discontent.
2. **“Learn”** – To study product choices, buyers conduct research, make comparisons and weigh alternatives. The second sales milestone is “building momentum” by getting a “go-forward commitment”; the buying steps in this stage are research and compare.
3. **“Buy”** – Purchasing evokes fear and calls for commitment. Try to resolve the customers’ purchase-related worries. Making a strong proposal or presentation is milestone number three; the buyer process steps at this stage are fear and commitment.
4. **“Value”** – The customer evaluates your goods in terms of expectations and satisfaction. Is the client contented? Milestone number four is closing and moving from pre- to post-sale activities; the buying process steps at this stage are expectation and satisfaction.

“Slow down your sales process and get in sync with your customer.”

Match your sales activities and your sales personality to the eight steps of the buying process. Adopt a specific role or persona at each step to engage with prospective customers:

1. **To handle change, become a “student”** – Learn how change affects your prospective buyer. “Use knowledge to gain an edge.” Discover all you can about the potential buyer’s firm. What is its situation? How do its buyers make decisions? How can you help solve its problems? For background, study industry magazines and the firm’s public reports. Check Google.com/finance, Google Alerts and Hoovers. Now secure an appointment with the decision maker who suffers the most from the problem you can solve. Telephone this person. Open your call by asking, “Are you in a meeting, or do you have just 60 seconds for me?” Mention problems the firm may be having and offer a solution.
2. **To address discontent, perform as a “doctor”** – You want to “diagnose small problems” and “define big needs.” When doctors want to identify medical problems, they ask their patients educated questions. Do the same with your prospects. Start your first meeting by briefly establishing your company’s credentials. Next, ask “big picture questions,” for example, “What is your number one goal?” Pose some diagnostic queries, like, “What kind of problems are you experiencing?” Provide a “minimum prescription” without specifics. Find out who is on the buying team. After your meeting, send the prospect a “memo of understanding” detailing the primary points of your discussion.
3. **To meet the need for research, function as an “architect”** – Help the prospect clarify a “customer-focused solution,” and provide a blueprint for achieving it. Once you understand what the prospect wants and needs, broaden the solution criteria to reflect well on your offering. Say, for instance, “Other clients have a problem in this area. Has this been an issue for you?” Collaborate on a unique solution that your offering satisfies better than the competition’s product. Tilt the playing field in your favor.
4. **To compare options, be a “coach”** – You have successfully navigated the change, discontent and research phases of the buying process. Now you must beat your competitors. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of your sales case, so you can “make a plan to defeat the competition.” Use strategies that emphasize your advantages, from superior price to high quality. No matter what your price is, be clear about the customer’s opportunities. Use the buyers’ terms and phrases; tie your capabilities to their needs.
5. **To overcome a client’s fear, act as a “therapist”** – To assuage the prospect’s worries, use emotional intelligence as a therapist would. Work to “understand and resolve a buyer’s fears.” Help prospects overcome their natural anxiety about making an incorrect buying decision. Explore the prospect’s concerns. After your presentation, ask if the client has any residual concerns so you can discuss them candidly and deal with them. Show empathy. Help the customer deal with any lingering issues.
6. **To secure commitment, become a “negotiator”** – Cement a “mutual” win-win agreement. Find out why your customer wants particular conditions and terms, including, of course, a specific price, and suggest a solution that meets everyone’s concerns and favors your case. Sometimes this involves meeting the customer halfway, perhaps by proposing a new solution that delivers increased value to the customer and to your firm. Don’t negotiate until the end of the sales process. To preserve your opportunity to leverage this sale for future business, your customer must be content.
7. **To address expectations, give lessons like a “teacher”** – Ensure that your buyer has realistic expectations and knows how to derive “maximum value” and satisfaction from this purchase. You’ve closed your sale, but your job is not done. Now you must ensure that your customers are pleased enough with their purchases to buy from you again and that they will advise others to do likewise. Customers face a learning curve with their new purchases. Your job is to teach them how to use your product or service professionally and efficiently. Refine your implementation plan to help the customer set reasonable expectations, use your product or service effectively, and measure the results.
8. **To harvest satisfaction, sow the ground like a “farmer”** – “Cultivate customer satisfaction and loyalty”; nurture good relationships. Stay in close contact with the buyer after the sale, and perform regular reviews to ascertain that you give the people in your client’s organization the support and service they need. Check in periodically to make sure that buying from you solved the targeted problem. Work hard to transform the customer’s satisfaction into gratitude and loyalty. Establish friendly relationships with the people inside your customer’s company. To cement your relationship, sell your customer something else. Become the firm’s strategic partner. Anticipate its needs and fill them.

Making the Complex Sale

Most sales that involve multiple decision makers on a complex buying team also involve office politics. To make a sale, you must master the politics and coax as many buyers to your side as possible. Dig to learn who will take part in the buying decision, what influence each person responds to, what each one wants, and what each participant’s attitudes are about your firm and your product. Address each person’s needs. Understand where each member is in the buying process. Plan your contact points and other sales work accordingly. View your clients in terms of the following roles, being aware that they can overlap:

1. **“ROI authority”** – This person is responsible for earning a “return on investments” and focusing on the bottom line.
2. **“User” or “super user”** – Ordinary users put your product or service to work. Super users are more intensely involved and can become greater advocates. “Integrators” become experts in your product’s specific applications.
3. **“Power broker”** – These are your most influential clients. Your sale is a near certainty if internal power brokers support you. Work well with their “gatekeepers.”
4. **“Sponsor”** – This executive is firmly in your corner. Try to secure a sponsor, or two or three. The “anti-sponsor” will work against you for any of several reasons. Perhaps he or she favors another supplier or just doesn’t like you. Be on guard.

“One key to selling faster is to target senior decision makers.”

When working with potential clients, watch for the following indicators at each stage of the buying process to determine which company insider to visit and what steps to take next:

- **Change indicators** – Look for industry or firm changes. They’ll affect super users first. Speak with the ROI authority early; connect quickly with the client’s decision makers.
- **Discontent indicators** – Beware when prospects start saying things like, “I wish we could...” and “We can’t...” By this stage, super users and users already are dissatisfied with the current provider. Join them in conferring with the ROI authority. If you cannot visit the ROI authority, talk to his or her deputy, who is a potential power broker.
- **Research indicators** – Ask about the buyers’ capabilities and solutions. By this stage, the ROI authority leaves the process. Work with the power broker and integrator.
- **Comparison indicators** – Prepare to answer such questions as, “What’s unique about your capabilities?” and “Why should I choose you?” The gatekeeper and the competition now enter the process along with the power broker. Anti-sponsors also will surface.
- **Fear indicators** – Watch for nonverbal language that indicates possible trouble. Get your sponsor to tell you how the buying team’s assessment of your offering is developing.
- **Commitment indicators** – Be encouraged by price complaints or attention to contract specifics. Expect the power broker or the purchasing manager to run the negotiation.
- **Expectations indicators** – Learn from any requests for implementation assistance or statements that your solution doesn’t work. The integrator takes charge during this stage; users also become active. Of course, the power broker now has a strong investment in your product’s successful deployment.
- **Satisfaction indicators** – Things are going well if the customer demonstrates technical proficiency with your solution, or if you receive compliments about your product or service. The ROI authority re-enters the picture to see how everything is going; while you have this opportunity, cultivate a lasting relationship with this influential executive.

Dodging Sales Mistakes

Avoid these four mistakes that salespeople commonly make during complex sales processes:

1. **“Dancing only with the one who brung ya!”** – Do not tie yourself only to your first contact. Seek broad support.
2. **“Assuming the complex buying team has clearly defined its needs”** – Team members may not completely understand their needs, or they may interpret demand differently. Define the client’s true problem so that everyone understands it.
3. **“Getting to the C-level with nothing to say”** – After a strong first contact, many salespeople want to see a senior executive. Instead, ask to speak to people with lesser rank so you can learn more about internal problems your product or service can address.
4. **“Antagonizing gatekeepers”** – Yes, these assistants and secretaries stand in your way; that is their role. Treat them with the same deference you extend to top executives.

How to Coach Others

Once you fully master these sales skills and roles, coach the salespeople on your team so they become expert with these techniques as well. Stick to important issues. Don’t rush your training or your salespeople. Try to work with them in the early stages of a client’s buying process. But, just as in sales you should slow down to sell more, “coach slower so salespeople will learn faster.” Use the four milestones – securing appointments, sending a memo of understanding, making a proposal or presentation, and moving from pre- to post-sale – as logical points in your coaching efforts. Your salespeople always should know who the players are, where each of them is at any point in the buying process and how to adjust their sales approach accordingly.

About the Author

Kevin Davis, president of TopLine Leadership, Inc., a sales management firm, is the author of *Getting into Your Customer’s Head: 8 Secret Roles of Selling Your Competitors Don’t Know*.
