

This book is dedicated to everyone who
has ever had to wake up

knowing they must sell an idea,
a product, a story, or a dream.

Your passion and courage
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C H A P T E R 1

Consultative Salespeople Often Struggle with Closing

As a sales trainer, coach and consultant for nearly twenty years, I've worked with hundreds of sales organizations and thousands of sales managers and salespeople, and one thing has become very apparent—many consultative salespeople, and people using consultative selling strategies, really struggle with having to push hard to “close the deal.”

Consultative Selling, in a nutshell, is the art of effective questioning, listening and probing of the client to effectively ascertain their problems, challenges, goals and objectives; then presenting solution options that are customized to meet specific needs and are designed to form long-term working partnerships with the client to maximize their investment. Consultative Selling is focused almost exclusively on the client versus on the “bells and whistles” of the salesperson's product or service. The objective is to understand the client's situation to such a degree that the sale and implementation of the product or service becomes a seamless, integral part of the client's ongoing business operation. People have labeled the process of consultative selling with

wonderfully creative titles like “Customer-Centered Selling” and “Value-Added Implementation.” The salespeople are called “Consultative Marketing Professionals,” “Implementation Specialists,” and of course the old standard, “Account Executives.”

No matter what name we give it, the methodology is right for the times and is the only way to professionally sell any product or service. However, there is something about this style of selling that seems to be leading to problems with getting the client to take action and closing the deal.

“My biggest challenge is getting clients to take action without coming across as pushy . . . or too salesy,” said Mark DeMasse (not a real name), a top producer for a Canadian computer storage company I was consulting with a few years back. “I am definitely someone who likes to be seen as more of a consultant than a salesperson . . . but I think sometimes that hurts me because, when it is time to sell another project, or another level of service. . . . I have to get decisions, and I tend to let people off the hook because I don’t want to push things too far and maybe ruin the relationship . . . and I need good relationships in order to do the work I do. If I come across as just another self-serving salesperson, we won’t have the right type of relationship to work together down the road.”

Mark is like many of the salespeople I’ve worked with, especially since the more consultative sales model came into vogue in the 1980s and 1990s: He likes the consultative selling model versus the more “traditional” pushy sales strategies, but he struggles in getting enough closed business through the pipeline. Not all salespeople are as honest and forthright as Mark, admitting his struggles with closing, many aren’t even aware they have a problem, they just think this is the way sales has to be. If you want to be a consultant

and not a pushy salesperson, then you have to live with clients deciding on their own, and a longer sales cycle.

Managers and business owners however can't afford to have that "just live with it" mindset; they have aggressive goals to meet and ever more demanding owners and stockholders to answer to. Managers are the ones usually contacting me, reporting that while their salespeople are competent, professional, friendly, and do a good job of knowing their clients, they aren't closing enough, fast enough to deliver the needed results.

Let's look at some of the reasons why consultative salespeople and others using consultative selling model may struggle with closing:

- ***Consultative Salespeople are like the vast majority of people: They don't like conflict.*** Closing typically involves some sort of conflict, where one party is asking the other party to take action of some kind. What ensues can include any or all of the following—arguments, disagreements, stalls, objections, lying, pressure, or silence. All of these are loaded with potential conflict, and conflict can lead to hurt feelings and all the negative thoughts that go with being a pushy salesperson.

Most people don't like conflict (not ALL, but most—and some people LOVE to create it). Salespeople don't like it. Clients don't like it. And we soon learn how to avoid conflict situations if at all possible. This includes the use of several degrees of lying—from subtle deception to flat-out BS in order to spare someone's feelings, or avoid a fight. It's faster, easier, and less stressful to just lie. We'll cover this in greater detail coming up when we profile the role of client in the sales situation, but for now suffice it to say we all lie to avoid conflict.

We all do it at one time or another. When you're at

your friend's house and she brings out her brand new baby for everyone to see her for the first time—and of course the poor little thing looks like the alien that attacked Sigourney Weaver—we don't let out a scream and say, "Send it back. It's not done!" No, we use some deception and say, "Ahh-hhh . . . she's so . . . so . . . cute." Or, when you're holding a dinner party at your house and a neighbor arrives with his new girlfriend who's obviously "had some work done," you don't ask, "Wow, are you for real?" We in fact are masters of deception in these types of settings: We either pretend not to notice, or use vague terms, or just flat out lie to whatever degree necessary to avoid hurting someone's feelings, being seen as rude, or perhaps getting a punch in the nose. If we always told the truth 100 percent of the time, we probably wouldn't be very well liked.

And we don't *like* to be liked—we *love* to be liked. And in a sales situation, when we're already nervous about being too pushy, we're deathly afraid that if we cause conflict, the client won't like us (and we won't like ourselves.)

- ***Consultative Salespeople are usually adamant about their dislike for traditional selling styles and the undue pressure those styles put on clients, so they over-compensate in the other direction and end up not asking for action steps.***

Consultative salespeople are so anxious about being seen as "old-school" sellers that they go to great lengths to avoid putting ANY pressure on the client. They back away, won't ask for commitment. While they'll avoid the uneasiness of selling in the old-school style, they also won't get to issues that lie beneath the surface; and without issues it's very tough to solve problems, answer questions, and close deals.

- We're so paranoid about being painted with the negative brush of a sleazy salesperson, we'll sub-

consciously go out of our way NOT to be seen that way—meaning we won't do some of the things one MUST do to get the client to take action.

- We're thinking about this stuff all the time, and if a client should so much as mention that we're acting in that fashion, it will freak us out and make us run the other way. As in:

“Man, Tom, I've got to tell you, you're a nice guy, and we like working with you, but you're really kind of acting like a pushy salesman here.” (No, no . . . not that . . . anything but . . . anything but a salesman. . . . ahhhh!!!!)

Negative Characteristics of Old School Salespeople

- Arrogant
- Insincere
- Liars
- Pushy
- Self-Centered
- Will say anything to close the deal

- *Consultative Salespeople know a good deal about the client's condition or situation, and that can lead to a greater fear on the part of the client because he knows he can't easily escape with nonaction.* This would be like going to see the doctor for a physical, and before she gets started she says: “You look like you could lose some weight, which could eventually elevate your cholesterol levels. Better watch that diet.” And you say: “Sure doc. Yeah, fine. What-

ever. (Now hurry, I've got a box of donuts with my name on 'em.)”

Compare that with the doctor who has already done the blood work and has the tests. And now her comment is: “Okay, your cholesterol is well over 200. You've GOT to lose some weight, and that means changing your diet.” If you're the patient/client in this scenario, it's much harder to say no and avoid making changes. Which means no more donuts . . . which means pain.

While knowing a lot about the client's condition is great—and at the very heart of consultative selling—it may lead to more extreme avoidance issues on the part of the client: “Maybe I just won't get a physical at all!”

- ***Consultative Salespeople forget that the “sales clock” has started and they're in a sales call playing a role, and so is the client.*** Years ago I developed something I called “the sales clock,” to signify the point in time during a conversation when the sales call begins and both sides slip into their roles in this human drama: one as seller, and one as buyer. And they come together in this age-old play, with one side trying to convince the other to do something, and get paid for it. And with these roles come costumes and characteristics that are inherent in that role. When the clock starts, the characters must get in their roles (whether they want to or not). The clients will act a certain way and do certain things that come with their character, and so will the sellers. Each side will also know that they are to do battle with the other character, and will instinctively do and say certain things to deal with the actions of the other.

The clock can turn on and off in an instant, with the roles suddenly being dropped and both sides returning to their former selves. Remember the old cartoon about the sheepdog and the wolf? They would ride to work together

in the morning, and as soon as they clocked in all hell would break loose for they would start to play their roles—with the wolf coming up with a million different ways to get at the sheep, and the sheepdog foiling the wolf every time. Usually the sheepdog would drop the wolf off a cliff, or launch him miles away with a large catapult (they always seem to have a catapult around in the cartoons, don't they?). Then, at the end of the workday the whistle would blow, and they'd clock-out and ride home together. They'd wake up in the morning and do it all over again. The sheepdog and the wolf would wait till the clock started before they got into character and did what they were programmed to do.

I think of a sales call in the same way, with the characters of salesperson and client waiting for the “sales clock” to start before slipping into the age-old roles that have been defined over years of our collective social experience. The problem, however, is that only one of the characters is in their role: the client. The salesperson either isn't aware the clock has started, or has decided not to participate “in character.” Now when I say “in character,” I'm not suggesting salespeople should become something they're not. I *am* saying they need to realize the play has started, and they're going to be seen in the role of salesperson (whether they want to act like a stereotypical one or not). Also, they must look at the person across from them as being “in character as the client.”

When salespeople forget they are in a sales call, they have a tendency to see the client as a “normal human,” displaying regular, socially acceptable behaviors. But they don't understand who they're messing with! We'll introduce you to this role, known as *client*, and its tendencies later on in the book.

As for the role of salesperson, some try to play it, but

without all the “messy” inconveniences, such as asking the client to take action. If you don’t ask for a commitment on SOMETHING, you’ll avoid all conflict in sales, but you certainly won’t be successful.

- *Consultative Salespeople have trouble suddenly “getting into character” and becoming high-pressure closers right in the middle of the sales cycle—and they aren’t familiar with other nonconfrontational closing strategies they could use instead.* Probably what I hear most from consultative salespeople is that they feel they have to change their personality in order to close a client. They only really know about the standard closing styles, and they realize they suddenly have to become more focused on “pitching” the product or on becoming creative, funny, or unbelievably motivated.

For most people, the high-pressure strategies and techniques taught with traditional selling are pretty foreign and uncomfortable. This is particularly true when salespeople are in denial about even *being* in the role to begin with: They just don’t want to have to do all that ugly stuff to close a deal. (“I am NOT a salesperson . . . I am NOT a salesperson.”)

There also aren’t many “soft-closing” strategies available for people who don’t like conflict. And those strategies that are available tend to be too complicated and aren’t readily accessible in the heat of battle.

High Pressure Strategies of Old-School Sellers

- Pulling out the contract and pushing it at the client, asking them to “Push hard, third copy is yours.”

- Telling a “closing story” about Ben Franklin, or a farmer with two-pigs, or any number of other analogies designed to make a point.
- Asking loaded questions that make the client feel bad: “So, do you care at all about your family?”

• *An extra reason: Consultative Salespeople, because they don't like to be in conflict situations, also tend to not have enough irons in the fire because they don't do enough prospecting (which is an activity loaded with potential conflict).* Prospecting is nearly always tied directly to closing. If you have twenty prospects who all want the one item you're selling, you don't have to be a great closer, or apply a ton of pressure. The market conditions apply the pressure. Conversely, if you can only work up the courage to prospect long enough to get five prospects into your sales pipeline, you'll have to work harder at closing the few opportunities you have: Market conditions closing *ain't gonna work*.

HARD-SELL, HIGH-PRESSURE SELLERS COULD CLOSE—BUT AT WHAT COST?

Make no mistake about it, as much as we despise the hard-sell techniques of “old school” sellers, they do work to get people to take action. They have techniques for applying pressure, and for brow-beating clients into a decision cause action to happen, and they do close sales.

The Hard Sell

Allow me to share a story (and we all have a story or two about hard-sell sales geeks) about a guy I knew who was selling home fire alarms, and he told me all about his closing style and how he was trained. We'll call him Wes. (No, there's no surprise ending where it's really me and I suddenly change my ways.)

“The bottom line is, if I don't put an alarm up in that house before I leave, there will be no sale,” Wes said. “And I was trained to do whatever I had to do to get that alarm up on the wall, even if it meant risking a physical altercation.”

To me this sounded a bit extreme, but Wes continued.

“Our pitch went like this. We would find out all we could about their family, especially the kids' names, the dog's name, the cat, everyone in the house. Then we'd do our spiel, talk about the chances for a major fire, the stats on people getting out alive, all that stuff. And the close would be asking whether they felt protecting Johnny, Jenny, and little Spot was worth the \$300 set-up and \$60 monthly fee.”

These types of sales, and frankly this type of sales guy, have always freaked me out, mainly because he's just the epitome of everything I hate about being called a salesperson: pushy, insincere, focused on self, deceptive, fake, etc., etc. Here's how he closed:

“About midway through the call I'd pull out a contract and just start filling it out, asking how many alarms they felt they needed, and where they'd want them. A few people would stop me. If they did, I

brought up the kids, how much is peace of mind worth—but most people were too afraid to say anything and would just let me go. My final move though was to just pull out one of the alarms and start screwing it in the wall. At that point, I either got a deal, or they'd be pretty upset and tell me to stop.”

Wes's closing ratio was around 60 percent, but he had to deal with a good deal of conflict. I can't imagine many clients enjoying that experience and wanting to give him referrals. But in Wes's world, it's not about client's enjoying the experience, or forming long-term relationships. Wes's objective is clear: Get the client to buy on the spot.

CAN WE CREATE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

My purpose in writing this book, and the driving force behind my getting into this business to begin with, was to try and develop an approach that represented the best of both worlds: the relationship-building aspects of consultative selling, coupled with the action-oriented focus of hard-sell closing. I wanted to develop an approach to selling that at the end of the day satisfied the needs of clients, led to sales, *and* created long-term relationships.

Though combining these strategies will help both types of salespeople, I believe it will help consultative salespeople more, because I'm not sure you can teach hard-sell, me-first sellers to have a desire to form lasting relationships and focus on helping other people. Perhaps I'll be pleasantly surprised and there will be many old-school sellers who'll see the light and decide to make major changes.

Combining the Best of Both Selling Styles

Consultative Selling Positives Hard-Close Selling Positives

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on the client's needs • Fosters partnership • Stresses long-term relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on getting action • Advancing the sale as much as possible • More forceful, defined "asks" |
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Combined Qualities of Consultative Closing

- Focused on meeting clients needs, and getting them to take action
- Stressing long-term partnerships—more purposeful and direct in creating the relationship
- Always advancing the sale and closing, but positioned always as a good for the client first and foremost

LET'S START BY REDEFINING THE WORD "CLOSING"

As we explore some simple steps for improving our closing capabilities, we should start by redefining the word "closing" itself. This is a simple step, but like other steps in this book, you may find that it causes a major paradigm shift for you and how you view sales.

I've asked several groups over the years to define the word closing, and they've come back with these types of phrases:

- Getting the deal done
- Getting a YES
- Signing on the bottom line
- Getting a check
- Pushing people to decide

While these are all good descriptions, they only cover half of closing. There is another side, the NO side, or what happens if there is no deal. I teach that closing means the following:

Closing does not mean a YES decision exclusively. Closing just means “a decision.” Closing can also mean a NO decision.

Old School Definition

- Closing means “YES”

Bennett’s Consultative Closing Definition

- Closing means “YES” or “NO”

This distinction is critical because it elevates the other side of the equation, the NO side, to near equal status as possible answers to a question. We’ll cover this in greater detail later in this book, but if we can start to gravitate to NO rather than accept MAYBE, we’ll be much better off.

For when we get NO, we get reality, and when we get reality, we hear issues, and in some cases we can solve the issues and move the client back to yes.

INSTEAD OF FEARING CLOSING WE MUST LEARN TO VALUE IT AS GOOD FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED

Now that we know closing means YES or NO, we should feel better “closing the client”, instead of *having* to push them into a YES or all is lost. Beyond that is the bigger issue, and one that doesn’t get talked about much, which is that closing is good for the client, while *not closing* hurts the client, as well as the salespeople.

How Not Closing Hurts Clients

- ***They are stuck in their muck.*** Their pains and problems still exist, and will probably get worse, because they haven’t purchased the right solution (yours).
- ***The stalking process will continue.*** Because clients desire to avoid conflict, they are often deceptive with their answers, especially if there is bad news to deliver. And so they hedge their words and often give salespeople false hope.

How Not Closing Hurts Salespeople

- ***We can’t make money and be successful.*** Enough said.
- ***We end up with clogged pipelines.*** One of the biggest challenges salespeople face is clogged pipelines full of what salespeople think are potential clients, when in reality most of it is garbage that sits in there and rots.

- *We can't help people.* We need to either get a YES and get clients the help they need to solve problems and achieve goals, or get a NO and we can both move on to bigger and better things.

GREAT NEWS: CONSULTATIVE CLOSING SALESPEOPLE WILL RULE THE WORLD!

The great news for those who read this book and decide to follow my strategies to become true “Consultative Closers” is that because we will possess the deadly combo: the heart and soul of a consultative seller, with the ability to close and get people to take action. We will dominate whatever marketplace we operate in! We will create more business, develop stronger relationships, have more fun, save more clients, make more money, and generally enjoy a life in sales we can be proud of!

Closing is a good thing. Consultative Closing is an even better thing. Let's dig into the simple steps that will make you a more effective closer immediately.

REVIEW

- Consultative selling is the only way to sell, but the process can lead to problems with closing.
- Consultative salespeople typically don't acknowledge that there is a sales call taking place and that the person they're talking to is playing the role of client. This leads to an increased use of deception to avoid conflict.

- Closing needs to be redefined as not just a YES, but a YES or NO.
- Consultative salespeople typically aren't comfortable with hard-sell closing strategies, though there are some positives to the harder style, like getting people to take action.
- The secret to success in sales in the future is combining the best of consultative selling with the action mindset of harder-edge sellers (all while building and sustaining strong client relationships).