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Beyond Selling Value

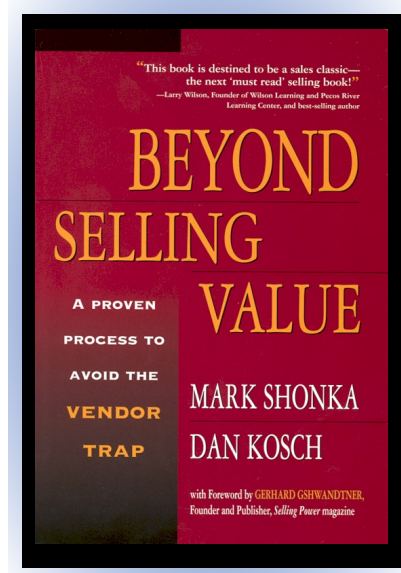
*A Proven Process to Avoid
the Vendor Trap*

Mark Shonka and Dan Kosch

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Reviewed by Lydia Morris Brown

Introduction

Although many experts believe that the advent of the frictionless, boundaryless economy has caused the demise of the direct sales professional, Shonka and Kosch think this view is an exaggeration. Yes, sales channels are changing to such an extent that the days of focusing on features and price, and closing with a big bang, are, indeed, numbered. But, according to the evidence gathered from their more than 40 years experience in direct sales, sales management, and sales consulting and training, this simply means that direct sellers must break out of the “Vendor Trap.” They must move beyond price-based selling—even beyond traditional value selling, which has essentially become commoditized—and sell *strategic* solutions to *key decision makers*, so as to differentiate themselves by helping these customers improve their businesses.

Thus, the authors offer **Beyond Selling Value**, which delineates the IMPAX® Process, a set of proven step-by-step strategies for successfully accomplishing this task. In it, sales professionals will find a comprehensive rethinking of what

it means to sell value, sell as a process, increase margins, make price irrelevant, win executive-level credibility, and create sustainable competitive advantage.

PART I: A CHALLENGE—A SOLUTION

Those who focus on closing the current sale, *today*, with no concern for building long-term relationships, are *vendors*. In the face of fierce competition, they constantly work hard to deal with price objections and to differentiate themselves and their offerings. Moreover, they are inevitably forced to run the gauntlet of product evaluators and/or purchasing agents (many of whom are “gatekeepers”), intent on limiting access to the real decision makers in upper management.

There are also those who proactively engage customers in order to identify additional needs that go beyond immediate concerns or beyond those issues listed on a request for proposal (RFP). These professionals are problem solvers, one step removed from the vendor, who in addition to selling products/services, also sell operational solutions.

Finally, there are those, who because they are involved in mission critical applications or functions, identify critical business issues and devise targeted solutions that help customers increase market share, cut costs, and enhance customer satisfaction. They may also form partnerships between their organization and the customer as a means of advancing both businesses, strategically and for the long

term. These sales professionals are perceived as business or strategic resources. And, they create demand because customers value them as an integral part of their businesses and processes.

Although few individuals fall into any one category, all of the time, more often than they would like, they usually find themselves in what Shonka and Kosch call the *Vendor Trap*, going head to head with gatekeepers, reacting to service demands, struggling to differentiate offerings, and sacrificing value to price. The authors have found, however, that sales professionals can overcome

“If your objectives are to identify opportunities, move beyond gatekeepers, and present strategic business solutions to senior-level decision makers, you must find a sales process that addresses each of these goals.”

this *Value Selling Challenge* by committing to *Beyond Selling Value*. It is a revolutionary way to sell that employs the IMPAX[®] Process, which they designed to help reps identify opportunities, move beyond gatekeepers, and present strategic business solutions to senior-level decision makers.

IMPAX is a system of research, communication, and presentation, based on six fundamental premises: (1) Senior-level decision makers are more likely to buy, based on what a salesperson knows about them and their business rather than on what they know about the salesperson and his or her products/services. (2) By far, the most important event in the selling process is a meeting with the decision maker. (3) The salesperson only has one chance to make a good impression. (4) *Early* and *ongoing* access to the decision maker is critical. (5) Effective positioning depends upon the presentation, whose power in this regard far exceeds the power of a product demonstration or a discussion. (6) The salesperson must prove the business fit before he or she proves the product fit. “Beyond Selling Value means not spending time comparing your product with the competitor’s, but helping your customers strengthen their own competitive advantage.”

From these premises, the authors have developed a process strategy that contains three key elements: First, they advocate doing research from the bottom up (i.e., at supervisory and middle-management levels where a hands-on broad perspective exists) so as to gain support and access. Second, they advise selling from the top down and at all levels. Although it is necessary to sell effectively

About the Authors

Mark Shonka and **Dan Kosch** are co-presidents of IMPAX[®] Corporation, a sales consulting and training company, with a client list that includes such leading sales organizations as IBM, 3M, DuPont, Eli Lilly, D&B, AT&T, and Microsoft. With their more than 40 years of experience in direct sales, sales management, and sales consulting and training, their expertise is sought on a range of topics, including selling value, strategic account selling, strategic account management, account planning, and sales leadership.

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at any level, the people who can buy value tend to be higher up in the organization; thus, they need to be included in the process. Finally, they emphasize that the focus must be on the business fit, not just product fit—“Beyond Selling Value is all about the business fit.”

PART II: A PROCESS SOLUTION

Research, which the authors characterize as understanding the customer’s business from the customer’s perspective, and as a means of gaining the tools to develop

“The key is to keep your file current with recent, regularly updated data. So make it a habit in every account situation [to] commit to keeping a steady supply of fresh materials coming in.”

credibility with senior-level decision makers, begins the IMPAX Process and forms its entire foundation. In this context, it is about gaining a business perspective of where the customer’s organization is headed, as well as understanding where one’s product/service fits. Thus, in the Process, research offers the sales rep the benefits of credibility, professionalism, and differentiation from the competition. This level of credibility will prove critical when one is proposing a strong ongoing business relationship with a prospect. Effective research elevates the professional’s understanding of the customer’s entire business to such an extent that he or she is able to make recommendations that go beyond the limits of a *product* solution. And, research sets the professional apart from the competition, not in terms of product comparisons, but in terms of resourcefulness. Again, it is about business fit.

The first step is the gathering of data, which Shonka and Kosch define as “the publicly available facts and figures about a company.” In this context, annual, quarterly, and 10K reports are primary sources. Other starting points, whether one is pursuing a publicly or privately held company, include the D&B Business Information Report; articles on recent events, product introductions, marketplace positioning, etc.; company brochures, media kits, product literature, and internal newsletters; brokerage reports; management bios; news releases; and speeches by company executives.

Although necessary, gathering data is merely the administrative part of the process. In order to be strategic, however, data must be used effectively (i.e., as a means of understanding the customer’s business and, thus, building

credibility). This understanding must be of the company’s vision, mission, market objectives, strategies, business issues, and organization (the “big-picture” concerns). Thus, Shonka and Kosch suggest using the acronym POSTI (Profile, Objectives, Strategy, Trends, and Issues), as a means of keeping focused on the precise data to cull when accessing the aforementioned sources. This data can be used in account planning, in preparation for a research meeting, during a research meeting, when identifying research-meeting contacts, and in developing the business presentation. It also allows the formulation of intelligent questions that communicate to the contact that the sales rep has invested significant time, even before the first meeting, in discovering the possible business fit between the two companies.

The other critical element of research is the gathering of information learned from working with, and talking to, people who have an insider’s perspective. The authors note that there is a clear distinction between data and information—the unique perspective gained from conducting research meetings with people who have insight into a target account. However, if this information is to be helpful in developing a high-impact business presentation to a key decision maker, it must be distinctly categorized into what the authors call the *Research Elements*: corporate profile/direction, organizational structure, key players/profiles, departmental profile/direction, and business fit.

The corporate profile/direction is the big picture—the facts and figures that make a company unique: its products/services; market share; the top five or ten customers (“In order to be a consultant to your customers, you have to understand their customers.”); whether the firm is trending up, down, or holding its own; its major divisions and locations; the number of employees; and its history. The profile should also consider the activities within the company, and outside, that influence corporate direction; the company’s financial condition—the pressures senior-level executives are under; its culture—how the company views itself and its place in the market; the competitive environment; and its future direction (i.e., vision, mission, objectives, strategy, and tactics).

Selling value requires mapping company structure in three ways so that all contacts, evaluators, gatekeepers, true decision makers, and potential coaches can be found.

The formal organizational chart depicts how things are supposed to work. The informal chart describes how things really work (i.e., the insider perspective, or the “politics”). Because politics is a major factor in any organization, sales professionals cannot succeed unless they know how to recognize, work with, and leverage the company’s political structure, and understand how company politics influence the decision maker. Shonka and Kosch also note the necessity of not being misled by job titles, for power and job title do not always coincide (this also holds true for accessibility and influence). And, because interpersonal relationships are another critical organizational factor, the social chart (“how things work when people are not working”) is the third structure to consider.

Mapping structure will allow sales reps to identify where contacts, decision makers, coaches, potential coaches, evaluators, and gatekeepers can be found in the organization. Contacts can be almost anyone who is knowledgeable about the company, has credibility within the organization, is willing to meet with the rep, and is able to provide useful information. It is, however, important to keep in mind that because contacts can easily share the same information with a competitor, they are not all necessarily allies.

Coaches are special kinds of contacts who share information *completely*, eagerly providing insight and direction. Coaches also offer reliable, subjective analyses of the buying firm and help the rep develop strategy. Most importantly, however, they want the sales rep to win—if the rep wins, they win. Moreover, if they are truly excellent, they take the initiative to go to the rep with perceived problems and/or opportunities.

Shonka and Kosch believe that sales professionals, who want to avoid the Vendor Trap, must absolutely develop strong coach relationships, because coaches frequently have specific areas of expertise that can be of particular value in strengthening the professional’s understanding of the target account. Coaches can also recommend strategies that may focus on different elements of the selling process. They can help identify such subtleties as whether to talk to the decision maker about ROI or ROE. They can help generate excitement and interest, throughout the organization, in the rep’s efforts. They can suggest other coaches in

other departments who can strengthen and broaden the professional’s perspective. They can review the presentation the rep plans to deliver to the decision maker, checking that the right terms are used, that subtleties are grasped, and that the right issues are prioritized correctly. And, they can help the rep gain access to the decision maker.

Evaluators, most commonly known as purchasing agents, can be closely tied to the rep’s products and also very concerned about product specs and financials. They can be gatekeepers, able to say no, but needing to get approval from a higher-level before saying yes. Evaluators can be key influencers, able to make recommendations to decision makers. Focused on the present, they are usually inclined to ask “What?” but not “Why?” And, although these people are often disguised as decision makers, they are not empowered to make decisions independently.

Gatekeepers are familiar obstacles to most sales professionals. Either subtle or overt, antagonistic or friendly, they block sales people from gaining access to key players, block their strategy, limit their effectiveness and, as noted previously, they are quite good at saying no, but they cannot say yes. Shonka and Kosch believe that because it is the gatekeeper’s nature to focus on price, it is counterproductive to try to convince them to buy value.

Finally, there are those who actually *use* the offering and whose daily work will be affected by it. These users

“A great coach is someone who’s smart enough to answer questions you’re not smart enough to ask. The relationship can be like playing chess with a master who’s always three or four moves ahead of you.”

take a tactical-implementation view versus a strategic one and focus on the past and present, rather than on the future, except to ask, “How will this affect me?” This concern is unlikely to extend to the company as a whole.

The department, where the product/service or solution is going to make an impact, should also be profiled around several key issues: how the department functions, and what makes it unique; its relationship to corporate objectives (the professional needs to ascertain whether the department has the leverage to obtain resources for a large new project); its future objectives/strategies; its major projects (their priority, who is driving them, and the factors that will influence their success); the obstacles that may prevent the department from achieving its objectives; how the

department traditionally makes buying decisions; and whether the department uses any unique buzzwords, acronyms, or mottos.

The corporate profile, organizational structure, key players, and departmental profile all contribute to the business fit, which is defined as: “how two companies, working together, can help the customer achieve critical objectives, implement important strategies, and address important issues.” While the business fit will be different for every account, it always identifies the basis for a long-term, strategic relationship, and states the value of the relationship in the customer’s terms. Thus, it typically focuses on the business priorities of senior management.

Preparing for and conducting the research meeting is the final area of concern in this phase of the IMPAX Process. This is not a product-focused sales call, but an opportunity to: move beyond amassing data toward gaining an insider’s perspective and broadening one’s

“Unlike traditional vendor-based sales methods that allow ... gatekeepers to control your destiny, research meetings help you maintain control to avoid ... the Vendor Trap as you progress through the selling cycle.”

understanding of what really goes on within an account; make an impact and perfect the business fit; turn contacts into coaches and strengthen existing coach relationships; and build excitement and momentum about the selling cycle and process. The overall objective is to help the salesperson discover who the decision maker is, gain access to this person, and understand his or her primary concern.

Thus, the meeting is likely to conclude in one of two ways: If the contact has shared helpful insights and demonstrated a genuine interest in helping the sales rep develop his or her research, this contact has coach potential, and follow-up issues, such as seeking referrals to other contacts and requesting permission to meet again in the future, can be pursued. As the rep continues to do research, it is a good idea for him or her to review what has been learned with the contact and determine relevance to business fit. In addition, this is the time (if appropriate) to begin elevating the relationship to the next level by asking for input and assistance in scheduling a business presentation with the decision maker and asking for the names of other key players. If, however, the rep concludes that the contact has no credibility with the decision maker,

no coach potential exists, and going into these follow-up issues is unnecessary.

Shonka and Kosch observe that, “Information is not power; applying information is.” Thus, the communication phase of the IMPAX Process is all about leveraging one’s research (i.e., applying information) to gain access to the decision maker so as to schedule the presentation as soon as possible, while dealing effectively with all blocking, controlling, or ensnaring gatekeepers. “Beyond Selling Value is all about not trying to sell value to people who can’t buy value and not being blocked by people who can say ‘no’ but can’t say ‘yes.’ ”

Given this perspective, it is important to be aware of some of the more effective strategies for accomplishing the difficult task of gaining access to key players at senior levels. Occasionally, decision makers will call out of the blue. And, though this usually occurs because they have a specific problem, it is a great opportunity for the rep to use

this opening to present around the issues.

If the coach network is credible, it can be the salesperson’s most valuable asset in gaining access. However, the authors warn that coaches must be “coached” in how

to position the presentation so that it focuses on business issues/priorities rather than on product, and the research meeting is the opportune time to begin educating coaches to the necessity of this approach. Someone outside the client’s organization can also make the request—reps, who have a close enough relationship with the decision maker; managers and/or executives from the rep’s company; or a coach from another firm entirely can all be candidates for the task. However, if the prospective customer has an established buying process in place, and opts to use it, the rep should adhere to this procedure, but ensure that the decision maker is involved.

Another viable means of winning the business presentation is the Access Letter. The point, here, is not to sell solutions, but for professionals to sell themselves as business resources, who understand the decision maker’s organization, strategies, issues, and objectives, and who effectively demonstrate why a *relationship* between the buyer and seller would be desirable. Thus, the focus is not on the rep, or the rep’s firm, but on the customer’s business.

The best way to accomplish this is to structure the letter so that it contains the following elements: an opening

paragraph that refers to the decision maker's past successes; a mention of the decision maker's critical objectives and concerns identified during the research phase; a reference to the future possibility of addressing those issues/concerns or helping the company achieve its critical objectives; a request for a *business* presentation (again the authors emphasize business presentation as opposed to *product demo* or *product* presentation); and a conclusion that states specifically what will be done to schedule the presentation.

In the meantime, it is essential to plan for possible challenges from the gatekeeper. Gatekeepers are only interested in finding cost savings, not in making strategic investments; thus, they naturally try to reduce all sales professionals to vendors and prevent them from solving problems or selling value. But, Beyond Selling Value means selling value to the decision maker, who is interested in big-picture solutions. It also means "acting differently than the gatekeeper wants you to"; thus, specific strategies are needed to break through this block. Sales reps can walk away from the challenge (but, only after having systematically examined and weighed the pros and cons). Or, they can transform gatekeepers into coaches (which requires first finding their win); involve them in the process; neutralize them; sidestep the block by building a coach network in outside areas of influence; persistently wear them down; utilize someone else in the client company; leverage mandates or directives from their own company to sell value; ask a coach to intercede; create an event where it will be possible to talk to the decision maker directly; or go over or around the block—professionally and ethically.

Even if the sales professional is not being actively blocked, he or she needs to anticipate the possibility and get to the decision maker as early as possible; assume a competent confident air that says, "I won't take no for an answer"; identify gatekeepers ahead of time so as to avoid them until the presentation is scheduled; and leverage coach relationships as a means of leaning about any potential threat.

At this point in the IMPAX Process, it is time to make a strong impression on the decision maker by delivering the kind of presentation that (1) focuses on what has been learned about this customer's business and (2) places

specific recommendations in context with those business issues/objectives. It is an approach that differentiates sales reps, not just based on *what* they sell, but on *how* they sell it. "Beyond Selling Value means delivering more than a 'show up and throw up' presentation to the decision maker." It means demonstrating that one is not just another vendor, but an insightful and potentially powerful business resource.

Shonka and Kosch note that this strategy has several advantages. It establishes the basis for a business *relationship*. It is flexible in that it can be employed to close a deal on the spot, move an opportunity forward, or manage and expand a current customer relationship. It helps the sales professional establish an objective-driven atmosphere, designed to close on agreed-upon action steps. It differentiates the sales professional from other reps who present facts and figures about *their* business as opposed

"We don't have a choice. We have to sell value. A going-out-of-business-strategy for us is to ignore the fact that gatekeepers don't buy value. We have to take it personally every time."

--Dave Fraser, IBM Canada

to focusing on the customer's objectives. This type of presentation is also more "professional." By setting the tone and controlling the direction of the meeting, the rep gains a functional advantage over competitors who "fumble" through product demos, and this control establishes the rep's company and solution as a priority in the customer's mind. The business presentation acts as a form of qualification, for at its end, the rep knows if the account is worth any more time and effort. Finally, this approach nearly guarantees *continued* access to senior-level management, which is a primary goal of Beyond Selling Value.

The business presentation process involves developing the presentation draft, preselling the presentation, reviewing the draft with the coach, rehearsing the presentation, managing presentation logistics, delivering the presentation effectively and successfully, and following up. Three critical points need to be kept in mind before beginning: (1) What does the presentation need to accomplish? Begin with the end in mind—the action steps you will want the decision maker to take once the presentation has concluded. (2) What has been learned about the account? Identify what makes the account unique, what critical business factors drive the customer's future success, what insider perspective has been gained, and what keeps the decision

maker awake at night. (3) What is the business fit between the two companies?

Depending on the specific situation and the account, the business presentation may close with a deal in hand. But, in other situations, the rep will close by gaining agreement from the decision maker to advance the process and meet again. This later meeting becomes the close, and it should be taken as seriously as the business presentation. Thus, the authors emphasize the importance of not undermining all the work that has been done by falling back on vendor-based selling and closing on price or features.

One way to understand the objectives of the closing presentation is to note the differences between it and the first meeting. The purpose of the business presentation is to confirm the rep's understanding of the customer's business direction and objectives, to present the rep's company as a strategic resource, and to determine the appropriate path forward. The purpose of the closing presentation is to review the customer's background, review action steps and activities, confirm the business fit between the customer and the seller, review the seller's solution, and solidify the business relationship. Thus, the business presentation is conceptual and strategic, emphasizes the business fit, and closes on advancing the process, while the closing presentation is targeted and specific; emphasizes the action plan, accomplishments, and solution fit; and closes on the sale. "The whole reason you've put in all this effort is to close sales and build value-based relationships. To accomplish this goal, you still need to ask for the business."

Before applying the IMPAX Process, it is always necessary to determine which accounts or opportunities (Shonka and Kosch define opportunities as "individual accounts, multiple opportunities within a given account, and multiple accounts across territories.") make the best candidates. "Beyond Selling Value means consistently asking these two questions: Which opportunities should I prioritize? How well positioned am I to win?" Product fit, the short-term and long-term value of the relationship, whether the target company has earmarked funds for the project, logistics (i.e., the accessibility of the location at reasonable cost), and whether or not the customer has a sense of urgency constitute traditional qualifying guidelines. However, the strategic criteria are the ones that matter most, simply because they are more aligned with a value-based approach to selling. They are: the

quality of information one has about the prospective account; the likelihood of finding good coach candidates; the strength and influence of gatekeepers who can block one's Beyond-Selling-Value strategy; the strength of one's existing relationship with the decision maker and others who can influence the decision-making process; and the philosophical fit, in terms of buying value and willingness to build open partner relationships.

After the right account/opportunity has been selected, a plan is needed to begin implementation. "Beyond Selling Value means beginning the planning process by identifying what you know and, therefore, what you need to know versus how much you want to sell." Thus, the sales professional needs to ask: What do I know today about the account? What do I need to know? What is my objective for the account? What is my action plan to accomplish this?

* * *

A subject index is provided.

Remarks

Today, even the best sales professionals find selling value extremely difficult. Despite the fact that they know they must ask the right questions, so that they can get at the customer's critical needs and develop value solutions that are appropriate for the customer's long-term business challenges, their efforts are constantly blocked. More often than not, buyers are focused on price rather than on long-term value relationships; thus, the professional's only choice is to lose the deal or abandon value and resort to price. But, the future of selling lies in gaining "regular access to the decision makers who are not only able to but also eager to buy into truly value-based solutions."

Thus, **Beyond Selling Value** offers a perspective and a process that are truly effective in building important value-based relationships. It goes beyond a *conceptualized* rethinking of the conventional wisdom on selling value and offers detailed, uncomplicated, step-by-step strategies. And, implementation is built into every step of the process so that anyone can begin, almost as they read. This feature alone more than makes the book worthwhile, for there is no danger that it will end up collecting dust on a shelf, simply because there's no time to wade through a ton of theory, there aren't enough clear, actionable details to guide the

initiative, or one must comprehend the complete picture (which often doesn't come together until the final chapter) before getting started.

So, what makes Shonka and Kosch's perspective and process so effective (i.e., different)? Unlike most sales books, **Beyond Selling Value** does not avoid addressing that two-ton "elephant" in the parlor that everyone pretends not to notice—the gatekeeper. Most allude, in passing, to the fact that sales reps need to be adroit in sidestepping any obstacle in their path to the decision maker, and they usually view the challenge as merely a matter of will power and/or determination. But, few, if any, actually give this obstacle a name and a face and provide a detailed process and a series of strategies for successfully dealing with it.

Few sales books make a clear distinction, if it is made at all, between selling product fit and selling business fit. This distinction forms the cornerstone of the Process. The authors' premise is that failing to make the distinction, and understanding its importance, not only keeps individuals ensnared in the Vendor Trap, but also defines it. Thus, every principal, guideline, strategy, tactic, example, and study is developed to reinforce this critical point.

Last, but not least, Shonka and Kosch elevate research to a lifetime pursuit. Like brushing one's teeth, research is something that must be done regularly, automatically, and with care. And, throughout the work, they emphasize that "Research is not a one-shot deal that ends as soon as you get in front of the decision maker—it's an ongoing process that will continue as long as you have a relationship with this customer." Once again, this perspective is built into the process with every principle, guideline, strategy, tactic, example, and study.

Thus, **Beyond Selling Value** demonstrates that what top-performing "rainmakers" do innately and eloquently (rise above the vendor pack, present to prospects who are empowered to buy value and hunger to do so, and close on mutually beneficial business relationships "like a cheetah chasing down a limping gazelle on the Serengeti" [the work is colorful as well as educational]) can be systemized into a process that anyone can follow successfully. It is a process that, by its very nature, helps the professional to shorten the sales cycle, assess the probability of a sale early in the process, become a true and valuable resource, manage customer expectations and improve customer relationships, elevate the priority of his or her project, and close efficiently.

Moreover, these benefits are available in a wide range of situations: with established customers and with prospects, in competitive and/or complex situations, with small and large companies, with public-sector accounts, and at any time in the sales process.

Reading Suggestions

Reading time: 12-14 hours, 294 Pages in Book

You don't have to be a Willy Loman, on the verge of abject failure, to gain immensely from reading this work in its entirety. In fact, even if you are known far and wide for having the ability to sell sand at the beach and coal in Newcastle, we recommend that you take the time to examine this book carefully. The value is in the details, and Shonka and Kosch provide plenty of them. Nothing is left to chance, and no knowledge is assumed. Every aspect of the process is defined, explained, illustrated, and broken down into distinct, actionable steps. (A brief glance at the samples provided in the appendices will give you a broad idea of the minute detail that appears throughout the book.) And, just in case you misunderstand or overlook a point, the FAQs in the last chapter will bring you up to speed. Thus, no matter what you know (or think you know) about the selling process, in each chapter you are likely to discover a wealth of new and valuable lessons that you can apply immediately.

With that said, we can offer no particular advice on whether you should read the book entirely before attempting to implement the Process or implement as you go along. That would depend upon your individual needs. We do, however, suggest that you visit the impax.com website either before you start the book, or before you get too far into it. This resource provides supportive articles, tips, and help in implementing the Process and, thus, reinforces the concepts found in the work.

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