
P R E F A C E

Unless you missed the headlines, you've probably heard that the role of the direct sales professional is dying. The experts tell us that the walls are coming down; since the advent of the new, frictionless economy, barriers between suppliers and customers have been falling, eliminating the need for salespeople and other middlemen who merely gum up the works of commerce.

Naturally, all the hype over selling's imminent demise has inspired a lot of fear. As buyer-seller transactions slowly abandon the customer's office and conference room in favor of streamlined avenues like the Internet and telechannels, sales traditionalists are left with fewer buyers to glad hand, shoulder-clap, and call by their first names.

Now let's be clear. Sales channels are changing, but in many cases the change is for the better. Unquestionably, inside sales and the Internet have driven efficiencies and improved communication. In fact, we spend a great deal of time helping our clients take advantage of these alternative sales channels.

But the existence of additional channel options is no more killing direct sales than VCRs killed the film industry. As Mark Twain might have put it, were he a business professional today, the reports of direct selling's death have been greatly exaggerated. But only partly. As a salesperson, if how you sell can be commoditized, consolidated into a simple questionnaire, and farmed out to the Internet or to telemarketers operating out of a minimum-security prison, then you should be afraid. You're a vendor, and your days are numbered.

During the vendors' heyday, salespeople could ask a few cursory questions, compare features and benefits, and then close like crazy. But today's customers are not so easily swayed. In response, many salespeople have tried to break out of the Vendor Trap in favor of an alternative path: selling value. Instead of talking their way through sales calls by hammering away on product features and then closing hard, the value sellers have begun to

ask penetrating questions, listen to their customers, talk about long-term benefits, and look to solve customer problems.

But along the way the value sellers have encountered a formidable obstacle: gatekeepers. Gatekeepers, going by misleading titles like “product evaluator” or “purchasing agent,” missed the memo about the shift to value selling. Used to dealing with vendors, they continue to focus on features, side-by-side product comparisons, and their favorite topic of all, price.

Gatekeepers view salespeople as vendors competing on a grid. They’re willing to hear about value, but only to the extent that your value-added services can be broken apart and placed on the grid somewhere. As a result, so-called value merely becomes another item on the gatekeepers’ commoditization checklist. At this point, many salespeople with the best intentions of selling value run into a brick wall and revert to old habits. As a result, selling value has become glorified product selling—selling products in the form of solutions to people who buy products to solve operational problems. In reality, it’s only vendor selling—all dressed up perhaps, but still with nowhere to go. This commoditization of value is bleeding the life out of direct sales.

Understandably, many value-minded salespeople have responded by grouching about gatekeepers. “How can we sell value to people who only want to beat us up on price and kill our margins?” they’ve been heard to wail. The simple answer: you can’t. And you shouldn’t even try. It’s not the gatekeepers’ fault that they aren’t interested in buying value. That’s not their job. The fact is, in today’s marketplace, selling value and selling to gatekeepers are not compatible.

So what’s a sales professional to do? To stop the bleeding and start winning today, you must rethink your selling efforts and go beyond—beyond vendor-based selling and beyond what you may think selling value means. Beyond selling value means breaking out of the Vendor Trap and undermining the gatekeepers’ influence; it means moving up in the customer organization and selling to the individuals who are empowered to buy value. These are the true decision makers—the executives who can say yes when everyone else says no and can say no when everyone else says yes.

And this is precisely where the future of professional selling lies. With *Beyond Selling Value*, we’re taking a stand. We’re saying that the direct sales channel can flourish, it needs to flourish, and it will flourish. Unlike the naysayers, we’re optimistic about the future. We believe that those of us in the direct sales profession should be hopeful, as long as we’re ready to take that step beyond the Vendor Trap and beyond commoditized value selling.

We have to say, “We’re not going to be vendors any more; we won’t be commoditized; we refuse to compete exclusively on price.” Instead of focusing on features and price, or selling to gatekeepers who insist on contorting value onto a grid, we must proactively understand how our customers do business, find ways to address pressing business issues, and recommend

strategic solutions that improve the way our customers do business. It means stepping away from a limited focus on departmental solutions in favor of big picture business value. It means presenting business fit, not product fit.

And it's not enough just to want to do things differently. We have to make change and take our customers along with us. Remember the saying, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got?" It's not enough to set your sights on the decision maker—but then settle for selling product to an evaluator. It's not enough to want to present your company's value to the executive who can buy value but then to let a gatekeeper block your path. It's not enough to dream about making a value-based business presentation to a high-level executive—while you're busy scribbling out an RFP response. You have to rethink the opportunities you pursue, how you create your plans, what you choose to learn about your customers, the level of people you are willing to sell to, and the way you present your value. As the German philosopher Goethe said, "Knowing is not enough. We must apply. Willing is not enough. We must do."

What business you're in doesn't matter, either. Whether you sell technology solutions, professional and corporate services, consumer products, telecommunications, transportation, software, coal, electricity, grease, portable toilets, or shoelace tips, some buyers are insidious—they prove every day that they can turn anyone's products and services into a commodity. But only if you let them.

If you allow customers to commoditize you and trap you with the strait-jacketing *vendor* label, then you better watch out. Watch out for buying consortiums and consultants coaching your customers on how to buy. Watch out for gatekeepers who put you on the grid and beat you up on price. Watch out for all the doors slamming in your face. And watch out for job listings, because soon enough no one's going to need you anymore.

Ultimately, the reason most sales professionals today don't sell value and wind up on the grid is because they lack the skills and strategies necessary to go beyond traditional selling tactics. A big part of the problem is that sales professionals have been misled by the existing literature. There's no shortage of books dedicated to being customer centered or customer intimate. So why isn't everyone doing it? Because despite all the talk, no one actually delivers the tools that sales professionals need. Sure, they'll talk about understanding the customer's business or selling higher in the client organization, but that's where the lesson ends.

Beyond the talk, rethinking the conventional wisdom on selling value requires tools—specific, step-by-step strategies for gathering the right kind of information about a customer account; for bypassing or working through gatekeepers; for gaining access to the senior-level decision makers who can appreciate your value; and for making presentations that simply blow away

those decision makers with your professionalism and understanding of their business.

This book delivers those tools.

So, if you're ready to rethink how you sell value and to begin viewing yourself as a business professional, not merely a sales rep, then you're ready for *Beyond Selling Value*. This book will help you understand the customer's business better than ever. You'll learn how your solutions can positively impact your customer's critical concerns. You'll stop worrying about how to differentiate your products from your competitor's and start focusing on helping your customers differentiate themselves from their competitors. If you do these things, you will always have a home and make a good living selling.

Direct selling is dying? Not on our watch, it's not.