



MASTERING MAJOR ACCOUNT SELLING

Richard Ruff, Ph.D. and Janet Spirer, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

Over the years, we have had the opportunity to work with thousands of people engaged in major account selling. It is only from those experiences that we are able to write *Mastering Major Account Selling*. Although the number of people is too large to mention individually, we thank every one of our clients for the experience of working together and for the opportunity to discuss and observe major account selling. Working with the very best is a privilege and a great learning experience.

We also want to acknowledge colleagues we have worked with over the years. We have learned a great deal from every one. Again, the list is long but a few deserve a special note of appreciation.

We had the opportunity to learn about major account selling from some giants in the field. Richard worked with Neil Rackham, the founder of Huthwaite, Inc. and author of some of the foundational books in major account selling. Janet worked at Xerox and GE – two pioneers in major account selling and sales training.

Steve Gielda and Kevin Jones have been our business partners for over a dozen years and have participated with us in most of our client projects. We could not have learned as much about major account selling without their help. We also would like to extend our appreciation to Mike Smith at The Ohio State University who is not only a valuable business colleague but also someone who knows about major account selling from years of experience of getting it right.

Richard Ruff and Janet Spirer

PREFACE

We have had the privilege of working with a wide variety of market-leading companies engaged in major account sales. These opportunities have provided a peek in the window to observe and analyze what the very best are doing on a good day. From those experiences we've seen what it takes to get it right.

Top performing salespeople in major accounts are truly accomplished. They have mastered the fundamental selling skills and have integrated the best practices required to capture major account business.

Mastering Major Account Selling examines what it takes to be among those top performers. It is written to help develop the expertise for generating new business opportunities in major accounts with existing or new customers.

Three core sales performance skills are addressed in Chapter 1 – asking questions, active listening and positioning your capabilities. Then best practices for five business development competencies are explored in Chapter 2. They are:

- **Identifying Leads** – This section explores best practices for identifying business opportunities and discovering customer needs ... and how those needs affect the overall operation of the customer's organization.
- **Qualifying Leads** – Qualification focuses on how to determine the likelihood of a customer receiving funding and how to assess the degree of fit between the customer's needs and your capabilities.
- **Preparing for Calls** – In the major account environment, you usually have access and reason to be on the customer's site. The question is, How can you prepare for formal and informal sales calls to discover and develop opportunities?
- **Handling Objections** – In major account selling, you face objections – some are real and some are avoidance tactics. Resolving those objections requires asking questions for clarification and problem solving.
- **Obtaining Commitment** – Obtaining commitment is not a one-time challenge but instead an ongoing step in your business development process. The objective is to develop in every interaction a shared vision for moving forward.

We hope the ideas in *Mastering Major Account Selling* help you master the art and science of major account selling.

Keep an eye out for our other books on selling to major accounts. *Mastering Major Account Selling* is the first book in the *Sales Mastery* series. In the upcoming books, we will explore other topics that are pivotal for achieving success in major account selling.



1

SALES PERFORMANCE SKILLS

In customer interactions, the central principle for business development always comes down to **keeping the focus on the customer**. Translating that principle into action is achieved most effectively by following this best practice: ask, listen, and then talk. In too many customer interactions **sales people: talk too much – listen too little – and don't ask enough questions**.

So why does “ask, listen, and then talk” work?

- You learn what customers might have in mind, so you know more about the fit with your capabilities.
- You know what not to talk about so objections and awkward situations are less likely to occur.
- You create a small piece of value for the customer, so a solid foundation is established for future interactions.

Let's explore some best practices related to "ask, listen, and then talk". You'll find the best practices in these three sections:

- [Section 1 - Asking Questions](#)
- [Section 2 - Active Listening](#)
- [Section 3 - Positioning Your Capabilities](#)

ASKING QUESTIONS



A myriad of skills are important for success in business development. Some you need to master. Asking questions falls into that category.

Skillfully asking questions is a core competency of salespeople who are good at business development. The ability to ask questions effectively is a skill required in every customer interaction – regardless of whether the purpose is lead identification, need development, lead qualification, or positioning the value of your capabilities.

And it's crucial in post-sale situations, such as when implementing solutions.

Some best practices for asking questions are:

Use questions as a consultative tool. Questions can serve multiple purposes. Clearly, one purpose for asking a question is to gain information. But, there are others such as helping customers gain new insight about the challenges they face.

For example, the well-planned question can help customers gain insight about a particularly difficult issue. Every conversation should bring value to both you and to your customer. Bringing value can be achieved just as well by a thoughtful question as by a dialogue driven by fact telling. For example, if the customer seems to be thinking about something that may involve risks, asking questions about how they plan to manage the risks shows you understand their situation and enables you to offer a solution later in the discussion.

An added payoff of asking questions is they often lead to more memorable interactions. Plus, well-planned questions can go a long way in establishing your credibility, particularly when they are framed around issues and challenges important to customers.

Avoid the temptation to talk too soon. A common scenario is for the salesperson to start the conversation by asking some thoughtful questions ... the customer says something about an issue or concern ... and then the salesperson starts to provide information related to the answer. Equally often that is probably a trap since the definition of the problem is incomplete and/or all the correlated issues are yet to be surfaced.

An alternative approach is to ask second and third order follow-up questions to better understand the scope of the problem as the customer sees it and to explore what the possible strategic,

operational, and financial ripple effects might be. This approach not only helps you to better understand the problem but also often helps the customer discover new insight. This approach is a foundation for **selling value** rather than simply pitching products.

Although the percentages are somewhat notional, customer interactions usually work better if the customer is talking about 70% of the time and you are talking 30%. If the percentage split looks something like that, you have probably avoided the mistakes of talking too soon and/or talking too much.

Assess the potential value of a solution. Questions are not only valuable for exploring the scope of the problem; they are also useful for assessing the potential value of a solution. By asking questions, you can obtain insight about the customer's view of how the overall situation would be better off if the problem is resolved and the possible downsides of maintaining the status quo. This approach to questioning also provides an opportunity to add a benefit that the customer may not have envisioned as an achievable outcome.

Consider the value of shaping. Shaping is a technique to help customers redefine a problem or decision criteria in a way that brings value to them and creates a better fit with your capabilities. There are two major stages in the business development process where shaping comes into play – first, in the early part of the buying process when the customer is defining the needs, and second, when the customer is defining the specifications they will use to decide between competitors. Working with customers to think differently about the specifications and your capabilities to meet them can be insightful to customers and can help position you as the best qualified candidate to deliver the solution.

Treat as a myth the idea that open-ended questions are better than closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions are designed to engage the customer to talk and provide an extended answer – “Could you tell me a little bit more about why you have fewer inventory turns ...?” or “Where are you experiencing the greatest downtimes ...?” Closed-ended questions are designed to solicit an explicit answer – “How many would you need in the first quarter ...?” or “My experience is the first problem you discussed is really important. Does that map with your situation ...?”

The old story was open-ended questions are more powerful than closed-ended questions; hence, closed-ended questions should be avoided or used only rarely. This old story is actually a myth. One of these types of questions is *not* universally better than the other – it's about under what condition is one of these types of questions more helpful than the other.

For example, open-ended questions tend to be helpful when initiating a discussion – “So what changes have occurred since we last met ...?” – or when trying to get a reading on the attitudes or feelings about an issue – “How do you think the rest of your team would feel about changing

suppliers ...?” Open-ended questions are also effective when trying to develop a shared vision of success – for example, “If you make a change, what would your three top priorities be ...?”

Closed-ended questions tend to be helpful when testing alternatives – “You have talked about a couple of ways to go, which do you think would be supported by ...?” – or when seeking closure to a topic – “So, how many days of technical support would you need ...?” Closed-ended questions can also be used to redirect conversations, such as, “I think that sums up our first topic, can we move on to ...?”

The best idea is to plan a mix of questions based on the customer and the issues you intend to discuss and avoid worrying minute to minute about whether you are using too many of this type or that type of question.

Avoid creating the perception of an interrogation. One of the downsides of questioning is the potential for a conversation to turn into an interrogation or to be perceived as manipulative by the overuse or misuse of questions. A few simple best practices can avoid this dilemma.

- Think about the meeting’s purpose and formulate two or three questions to help guide the dialogue.
- Ask permission up front to ask questions – “Let me just stop here and ask a few questions to get a better idea about ...”
- Use questions periodically to check that you are pursuing a topic of mutual interest and are going down the right track.
- Avoid asking questions for the sake of asking questions and then talking about what you were going to talk about in the first place.
- Recognize it is okay to pause and consider what you have heard so far ... remember, no one feels comfortable being faced with a rapid-fire session of twenty questions.
- Bring along a colleague – a colleague can give you time to process what you have heard and to think of quality follow-on questions. Colleagues can also serve as a monitor of the interrogation trap.
- Don’t feel you need to know the answer to all the questions you are asking. Failure to ask a question because you don’t know the answer can often mean you might miss obtaining a critical piece of information or a crucial insight.

ACTIVE LISTENING



Social scientists report that after listening to someone talk – immediately after you only remember one-half of what was said and after eight hours you only remember about one-half of that. So in a business conversation, a good idea is to follow the “**100 Percent Rule**” – take 100 percent of the responsibility for making sure the other person understands you and take 100 percent of the responsibility for understanding what the other person says.

To achieve this goal, Active Listening can be particularly helpful. Active Listening focuses not only on listening to what the other person says but, equally importantly, making sure the person knows you are listening. Some specific best practices are:

Test understanding. “That’s a need I haven’t heard you talk about. Before we move on, could you just tell me more about ...” Testing Understanding invites customers to continue to discuss or explain, so you can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of their needs and opportunities.

Summarize. “From what you have said, it sounds like your major concern with the existing support could be summarized this way ...” Summarizing restates what the customer said in a way that demonstrates understanding. Here, it is important to distinguish Summarizing from “parroting” – the latter being a bad idea. Summarizing paraphrases only the essentials stated in your words.

Summarizing can have a couple of significant payoffs. First, you give customers the opportunity to reflect on what was just shared. As they listen, they may realize they have forgotten something or misspoke. Second, it demonstrates you care about what they said. Furthermore, you may be able to provide an example that builds on a point the customer surfaced that is helpful to the customer and to you.

Build support. “That’s an interesting point – might there be other reasons for building that into the equation? For example, we have found in a similar case that ...” Building Support reinforces or extends the customer’s support or agreement by applying what you have learned from a previous experience or by suggesting its application to a new situation. In a business

development it can provide a proactive approach against competitive action and additional answers to the question – Why us?

Clarify value. “Since you said your major concern is having state-of-the-art technology, let me just give you the highlights of our new ...” When Clarifying Value, you are taking the responsibility for helping customers see the fit between their need and your capability to address that need. Otherwise, the customer must make the connection, and unfortunately, sometimes they don’t.

Two other points about Active Listening are helpful to keep in mind. First, it is important to not only listen to what is being said, but also to listen to *how* it is being said and to what is *not* being said. The use of qualifiers or evasive language is informative, and the absence of information about a particular issue can be an important signal for future action.

Second, take notes so you can recall key points. You can listen four to five times faster than someone can talk so use the time to evaluate what is being said and take notes. Do it in a transparent way because it indicates you are interested in what the customer is saying. One of the additional positive outcomes from taking notes is often the more notes you take, the more the customer will share.

POSITIONING YOUR CAPABILITIES



Like most companies in your market space, you have a substantial range of capabilities. Unfortunately, your customer contacts probably are not aware of the breadth of your offering. Rather, they often think your capabilities are limited to the products or services they're currently using.

In the end, the potential value you can bring and how you are **different from the competition** can only be seen when customers make the link between your capabilities and their mission, priorities, and challenges. But links will be limited if customers only know part of your story.

The first step in positioning your capabilities is developing a comprehensive understanding of the customer's needs, which is why Asking Questions and Active Listening are such important face-to-face selling skills. The second step involves talking about your capabilities in a way that helps the customer make the connecting links. One way of examining these ideas is to explore the concept of Features and Benefits.

Features are the characteristics of your company and what you do and how you do it. Benefits focus on the value you can bring to a need expressed by the customer. To talk about your capabilities in a more compelling manner, it is helpful to remember these key points about Features and Benefits:

Features have no inherent value. Any given capability, regardless of how unique, brings value to a customer only when that capability addresses a need that matters to that customer. This is one of the reasons why it is risky to have an extended discussion about any given capability or Feature without an understanding of the customer's needs. Without the understanding, it is easy to do a really good job of talking about the wrong things.

Value is positional and situational. For a new business development opportunity, the perceived value of any particular capability varies by the position held by the person on the other side of the table. A scientist may consider a specific Feature of a solution of tremendous value; whereas, a senior executive may hold a different point of view.

Value is also situational – what constitutes value tends to shift over time. Whether you analyze it from the perspective of an individual, a department, a division, or an entire customer organization, expectations about value are dynamic. There are no generic customers; hence, the discussion of your capabilities must be fine-tuned to every customer and to every situation.

Benefits are both tangible and intangible. Because of the diversity of your capabilities, the variety of potential Benefits is substantial. The payoffs to the customer could be financial, strategic, operational, or even societal.

As is usually the case, many of the Benefits in these categories are intangible. Although Intangible Benefits can bring as much or greater value than Tangible ones, customers often undervalue Intangible Benefits because their impact is difficult to quantify. In some cases, customers will give a value to an Intangible Benefit but then discount it because the true value of the Intangible Benefit isn't measurable. So, salespeople need to assume responsibility for helping customers develop a clearer picture of the true payoffs, or value, of Intangible Benefits.

There are two best practices to position Intangible Benefits. First, since the definition of success differs for different stakeholders, you must get customers involved in creating the metrics for quantification. Second, perhaps the most effective technique for crystallizing the payoffs of Intangible Benefits is the **power of the case example**. **A well crafted story of a case example** told in a manner the customer can relate to is one of the most powerful techniques for bring the conceptual or intangible to life.

Positioning at the C-level. In major sales, sometime during the buying process, **senior level** executives will get engaged. How those conversations go will be critical for success. Today, the expectations of C-level executives are higher than yesterday – they expect you to know about the challenges and issues the company is facing and have a point of view about how to move forward with a solution.

Positioning a winning solution but losing the sale. Two sales are really going on in major accounts. The first involves persuading the customer that they need to address the issue, and the second is they ought to go with you. It is good to remember as the buying process unfolds “both sales” need to be kept on the front burner. You could **win the competition but lose the sale** because the customer ultimately decides to postpone the scope of work.



2

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES

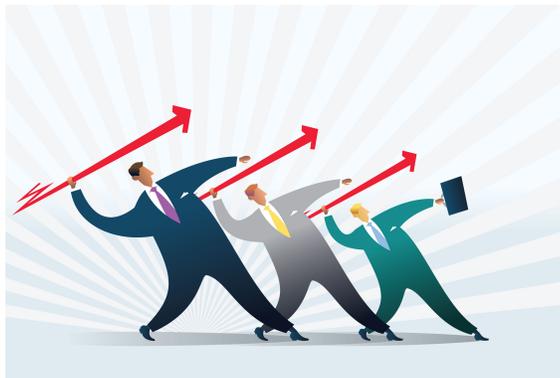
Major accounts are not just big little accounts; they are qualitatively different from transactional accounts. They exist in a dynamic environment where market demands, competition, and government regulations are constantly changing. Because the status quo is short-lived, how customers buy, what they buy, and what they are willing to pay for it are all shifting constantly.

On the selling side of this equation, the sales process is long, involves multiple players on their side and yours, and almost always includes a competitive threat. In Chapter 2, we explore five business development competencies required to win major account business.

The five business development competencies are explored in these sections:

- Section 1 - Identifying Leads
- Section 2 - Qualifying Leads
- Section 3 - Preparing for Calls
- Section 4 - Handling Objections
- Section 5 - Obtaining Commitment

IDENTIFYING LEADS



Beyond your Marketing Department's lead generation efforts, there are three potential sources for identifying new business opportunities.

The first source is customer contacts. When obtaining a reference from a customer contact, the objective is to leverage the potential of the opportunity and build on the relationship with the customer providing the reference. The second source is others in your company who are working with or have worked with the

customer. A third source is industry partners.

Let's take a closer look at each source and then examine some best practices for identifying new opportunities.

Customer contacts. When obtaining a reference from a customer contact, there are several points to keep in mind.

- **Mutual benefits are the most frequent outcome.** Obtaining a reference is sometimes viewed as self-serving; however, that is seldom true. In most cases, references turn into a meeting that is positive or a sale that is highly successful. This means the person providing the reference benefits as much as the person receiving it.
- **Timing matters.** For example, if a solution has just been implemented or a project recently completed, and you are getting positive feedback, asking your customer contact if someone else in the organization could benefit from this type of effort is likely to be well received. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine scenarios where the timing makes asking for a reference more difficult. So, a best practice for optimizing customer referencng is planning ahead. Ask for a reference or for the right to ask for a future reference when the situation and timing is right.
- **Departmental moves.** A typical customer scenario that is an excellent source for lead identification is where a customer with whom you have worked successfully moves to another department inside the same company. The move can provide either a lead you can develop or a lead you can pass on to a colleague in another division. In either case, you are identifying a potential lead and maintaining the customer relationship.

- **New job – new company.** Top performers are particularly good at keeping track of customers that move to a new company. If you have worked successfully with a customer and they take a position at another company, this is an ideal source for identifying new leads. The “frosting on the cake” is when the person assumes a more senior position. Top performers go out of their way to keep track of customers as they move from one organization to another.

Company colleagues. This is one of those best practices that everyone knows but often fails to do. Depending on the customer history, the potential for lead identification from colleagues can be substantial.

For example, when a colleague’s customer contact moves to one of your accounts, your colleague can facilitate an introduction. Or, perhaps someone in another division of your company is well positioned with a customer contact you want to work with – here again, your colleague can facilitate an introduction. And, of course, there may be others inside your company, such as technical or support people who are on the customer’s site and might be able to make an introduction. Finally, because of a previous sale, a colleague may know a customer who has a need related to your product portfolio.

Industry partners. In many industries, like management consulting and information technology, there are often large, complex projects involving multiple providers. Sometimes the companies are working on different phases of the project and sometimes one is serving as a subcontractor to the other on the same scope of work. In either case, there is a work history that can be leveraged for obtaining future leads.

But industry partners don’t always have to be formal relationships between companies. Very often multiple salespeople call on the same customer contact – such as in the medical device market space. In situations like these, individual salespeople can forge personal relationships with salespeople representing complementary products – sharing contacts, introductions, and even some customer intelligence.

Best practices. For identifying opportunities, some best practices are:

- **Look at the current situation through the lens of the existing sale.** From time to time, when you are engaged with a customer, look back and think about the situation as it was preceding the existing sale. What things did you observe? What situations were present? Who did what just preceding the opportunity? New opportunities are a response to something. Was the opportunity consistent with what you understand to be the customer’s plan, or did it appear to be a reaction? What things were in motion before the opportunity occurred?
- **Assess organizational changes for clues.** Another set of signals that an opportunity may be in the offing is changes in the organization. Whether a company is preparing to implement a planned strategy, merging with another group, or responding to a problem, very often personnel are tasked before the opportunity is visible to the outside world. Teams of required skills are

assembled and units are disbanded or reduced. Look at new and expanded organizations and what kinds of skills, and in what quantity, are being added. If you have been working with the organization, it is important to leverage the sales team's knowledge of the customer. They can provide meaning to what specific changes may mean and not mean. This can help you determine what kinds of opportunities may be coming down the road.

- **Observe what is happening in overall ongoing expense management and related capital budgeting.** Implementing new ideas and acquiring new capabilities cost money. Even when they are budgeted, they have to be funded. Is the customer experiencing any changes in spending patterns you can identify? Are expenses being restricted, or expanded? Large opportunities are rarely standalone and companion parts may have very different schedules and critical paths. Look for opportunities that may signal other opportunities.
- **Remember it's a network.** In major accounts, many players are involved in the decision. A few are key decision makers. Others are influencers. Still others are gatekeepers who can't say yes, but can say no. You have to know who is playing which role, the relationship between the players, and what they think about you and your competition. An average performer has a general understanding. **A top performer has a comprehensive understanding.**
- **Don't forget to tell your story.** Be able to subtly, but clearly, reinforce just what it is you do that is of value to the customers. They don't spend much or any time pondering what you do. They worry about what they need, and when they do, only the organizations that are top of mind, come to mind. More often than you wish, they will even forget all of what you do. If that happens, you simply won't be considered. Too often, if you do not share the range of things you do well, the customer might say, "Oh, I wish I had known you can do X because you did such a great job on Y, and had we known, we would have used you." Always have an up-to-date value proposition about your core capabilities and a **new story** about how those capabilities have been used by others.
- **Bring in fresh thinking.** Think about leveraging literature, speeches, research, and stories you've heard that relate to the customer's agenda or you know are of particular interest to the individual. Even if they don't produce a lead today, it builds relationships and often creates leads in the future.

QUALIFYING LEADS



Lead qualification discussions have two purposes. First, it is important to determine if there is funding for the opportunity. The second consideration is “fit” – to what degree are the customer’s specifications and preferences for the opportunity aligned with your capabilities? Let’s explore some of the best practices related to lead qualification.

First, finding out information about funding can be difficult. But you can’t find out if you don’t ask and it is okay to ask. However, it is important to make sure you are talking with someone who knows the answer to the funding questions, so you don’t get poor information or end up asking the same questions again and again to different people who don’t have the funding answer. So, keep in mind:

- If funding has not been identified, there is an opportunity to help customers seek the right amount needed by carefully determining an estimated cost and pre-selling them on that amount. If done correctly, this can be helpful to both you and the customer.
- If funding has been identified, asking questions about their estimated budget or what they have in mind to support the effort is fair and can yield beneficial results. It not only helps you competitively but it can also enable you to continue to shape thinking about a **realistic price**.

Second when it comes to fit, it is good to remember that **fit is a two-way street**. You must objectively determine the degree of fit between the customer’s specifications and preferences, and your capabilities. And, you must obtain the customer’s perception of that fit. In analyzing the alignment of those two points of view, some best practices are:

Get a sense of clarity and priority of the various specifications. Customer specifications and preferences can vary from very concrete criteria (e.g., the extent of your experience with the customer) to criteria that are more difficult to define (e.g., your capability for innovation). It is important to develop a shared view of the meaning of the criteria and to get a sense about the relative priority on the importance scale. For example, a customer might view the capability to provide “innovative alternatives” as a key specification. Only after you get clarity around that specification can you assess the degree to which you are able and willing to support their requirement.

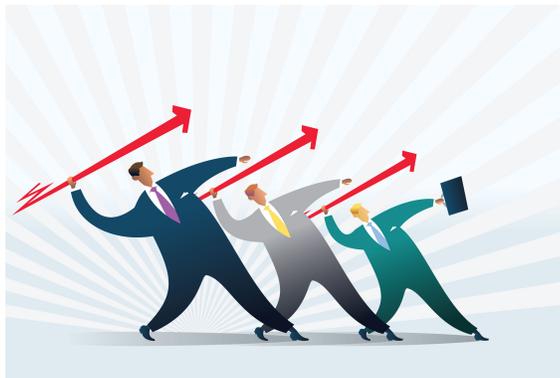
Remember, you may also see a specification that you believe is important, but its importance is not recognized by the customer, so gaining clarity can also be about helping the customer develop an awareness of the importance of that specification.

Check the customer's perception of your capabilities. This best practice seems straightforward. Unfortunately, it frequently is not followed. The customer often has a history with you and therefore knows a lot about your capabilities. But anyone making a judgment about a particular capability may have less than a complete assessment. It is important to find out the customer's view. If that view is not objectively accurate, then finding a way to correct the misperception is both important for the customer and for you.

Recognize when shaping is appropriate. There are times where it is appropriate to help customers change their point of view. The just noted misperception about a capability is one example.

A second example is when a customer has deemed a particular specification to be extremely important, and in your experience, that priority is misplaced. This, of course, is a road to walk with care. If a customer would end up making a better decision if the assessment was different, then shaping brings value to the customer and that is appropriate. Obviously, it is not appropriate if the viewpoint shift is strictly in your self-interest.

PREPARING FOR CALLS



In major accounts, often you have access and a reason to be on the customer’s site. **How can you best leverage your time when on the customer’s site for having business development conversations?**

For example, if there is an opportunity for a two-three minute hallway conversation – what is your message? Or, if you find yourself face-to-face with someone you have been wanting to talk with but have not been able to schedule a formal meeting – what is your message?

Or, perhaps you run into a C-level person who notices your name tag and asks, “What are you doing on-site?” What would you say? These informal opportunities are invaluable in major account selling.

In this section we will look at how to leverage them. But first, let’s look at how salespeople can optimize the more traditional face-to-face sales call. After all, most customer calls do not run two-three minutes and are not impromptu!

Five best practices for preparing for formal customer meetings are worth highlighting:

Have some ideas in mind. **Pre-call planning** is one of those best practices that everyone knows but perhaps sometimes forgets. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of pre-call planning. In major accounts, pre-call planning has several components. For an important face-to-face customer meeting, think about: what is the objective of the meeting, what points do you want to make, what questions do you want to ask the customer, what questions might the customer ask of you, and what are the action steps you would like to see as a result of the meeting.

A pre-call plan can also be modified and transformed into a meeting agenda that is shared with the customer. The advantage of sharing an agenda is multi-fold. First, the customer sees an initial outline of the meeting from your perspective, and they can add to it – minimizing surprises during the meeting. Second, you can vet the agenda with others at your company who might know the customer as well as your internal champions to see how it will resonate with the customer. A small shift can often have significant payoffs.

Think about all that you offer. Although competitors may attempt to paint a picture of parity about your individual products or services, they often cannot tell a compelling competitive story when the total range of your capabilities is considered. As we said earlier, this can be a problem

because customers usually define the range of your capabilities simply as the products or services they are using – the result is a limited perspective. To change the picture, when preparing for customer meetings, think about the breadth of your capabilities and determine which ones should be highlighted to improve your competitive advantage.

Remember the power of a team sales call. In major accounts, there are a number of different strategic situations where a team call is preferred. The salesperson might want to bring along someone from top management either because of the purpose of the meeting or because of who is attending from the customer's side. Another common situation is when the salesperson has the relationship with the customer, but given the meeting's agenda, brings along a person with needed technical expertise.

The classic trap in situations like these is not having a team attending the meeting. Instead, it's just two people who happen to be in the same room at the same time. **Team selling is not an individual sport.** To avoid this trap, some **keys to successful team selling** are:

- **Communicate who is attending and why.** It is important the customer knows who will be attending the meeting and knows the purpose for the salesperson to bring other people to the meeting. Surprises are a bad idea when it comes to sales meetings.
- **Manage the call.** The salesperson should assume the role of a Call Manager. The Call Manager opens the meeting, manages the agenda, brings other people into the conversation, and closes the sales call by summarizing the meeting and proposing next steps. The more people you bring to the meeting, the more important call management becomes.
- **Avoid the talk time trap.** Research indicates that in successful calls, the customer talks more than the salesperson. When team selling, it becomes particularly important to be aware of talk time because individual talk time is being replaced by team talk time. If each member of the team talks as much as they would if they were in the sales call alone, there will be no "air time" left for the customer.

Leverage your colleagues. In addition to thinking about information from your personal perspective, a practical best practice is securing information from others when you are planning the sales call. By asking colleagues, you may find out that someone has recently visited the customer. This prevents you from being caught off guard – demonstrating internal communication is always a plus. In addition, be aware of what you have done before with this customer in your department and in other divisions and have it handy as a reference in the meeting.

Which colleagues can you turn to? Sometimes there are salespeople or a sales manager who knows the customer and the account because they previously worked with the customer. Or, perhaps the customer has recently moved to the account and a salesperson or sales manager can provide insights from working with the customer at the customer's "old job." Insights can also

be gained by talking with salespeople in other divisions or groups within your organization who are providing complementary product or services to the account.

Plan both the information to obtain from and to share with the customer. It is helpful to **plan for both the information you want to get from the customer, as well as, the information you want to give to the customer.** In either direction, constructive information dissemination is not a simple matter of “more is better.” Thinking in terms of both giving and getting creates a balanced walk-away for the customer.

Back to the impromptu sales call. Here are some specific ideas to keep in mind for the two-three minute hallway conversation. For discussion purposes, let’s assume you know you are going to run into a person or two in the hall or at the coffee machine, and you know you will have only a few minutes of conversation time. Some ideas to keep in mind:

Take a one-size-does-not-fit all view. There is no such thing as an effective “preparation” that fits all situations. This is why management cannot craft some generic “elevator speech.” Instead, what you do is best generated for each individual for each situation. But you can get a head start – think about a message or two you would like to share and then modify as appropriate. The flip side is also true ... think about a few questions someone might ask after seeing your company affiliation printed on your visitor badge. What would you say if they asked you, “What’s going on today?” or how would you respond to the simple question, “What’s new?” If you’ve thought through a primary point or two, you can then massage it to fit the person you’re talking with.

A problem-centered approach works best. Because issues and challenges have center stage in awareness in the customer’s mind, a problem-centered approach is preferred. As is always the case, the focus needs to be on the customer. When visiting a customer, organize what you know about the issues and challenges the customer may be facing. Preparing for the short hallway conversation means crafting short, punchy talking points. In the first thirty seconds of a two-minute conversation, relate the talking points to a customer problem; then immediately shift the conversation, so the customer is doing the talking.

Share short success stories. Sometimes you have a chance encounter with a customer that you never thought you would meeting – so you have no plan for the interaction. Here, the best preparation is simply always being aware of the most current success stories in your relationship and any objections that have taken on a high profile.

Remember to follow up. Regardless of the type of interaction, some type of short follow-up response is always a good practice.

HANDLING OBJECTIONS



In major accounts, objections are often subtle and require clarifying and problem solving. The customer may present you with objections like: “I’m interested, but I can’t sell it internally” or “I need to run this by others before talking about next steps.” And let’s not forget, “That seems expensive.”

It is important to address objections like these in a way that is satisfactory to the customer and to you. To achieve mutual benefit, some best practices for

handling typical objections are:

Anticipate the future. A vast majority of the objections likely to occur can be anticipated. If an objection can be anticipated, a solution for resolution can be planned and rehearsed. If someone you are not familiar with is attending an upcoming sales meeting or you anticipate an objection and are struggling for a good response, discussing the situation with your sales manager or a colleague can be helpful.

Bring it up first. If you anticipate a particular objection is likely to come up in a meeting, it may be better for you to surface the concern before the customer does. This is particularly true if the objection is a “Showstopper.” Showstoppers are objections that originate due to some policy or regulatory or legal consideration that prevents you from doing what the customer may need. It is better to get the Showstopper on the table early so alternatives can be explored rather than in a subsequent meeting way down the road.

Avoid creating price objections. It was noted earlier that jumping in too soon to start talking about how a problem might be solved before there is a complete understanding of the scope of the problem is a trap. One of the consequences of falling into that trap is the creation of unnecessary objections. Imagine you are providing a comprehensive description of a particular approach, and you are pointing out all the Features of that approach. But, because there is not a total understanding of the problem, some of the Features may not be connected to the customer’s problem. Then those Features are simply items that must be paid for but have no value in the eyes of the customer. What is the reaction from the customer? A price objection!

Acknowledge, clarify, and test the solution (ACT). Many objections are poorly handled because the person doing the handling does not understand the true nature of or reason for the

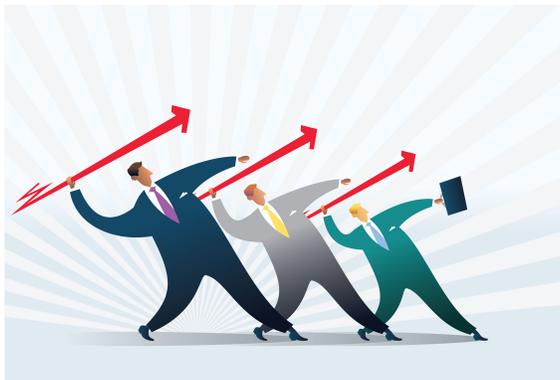
objection. Think of the alternative reasons why some customer might say – “I’m interested, but I can’t sell it to others.” If you don’t know the “why” behind the objection, it is difficult to arrive at a mutually beneficial solution. A strategy for dealing with this dilemma is:

- **A**cknowledge – Stop and recognize that the customer has just noted an objection rather than continuing the conversation and getting back to it later.
- **C**larify – Make sure you really understand the objection and the reasons behind it.
- **T**est the Solution – When you provide a solution, check to see if the customer understands it and feels that it is truly an answer.

If you don’t know, don’t pretend. Sometimes you are in a meeting with a customer, and out of the blue, an objection is raised. The customer feels strongly about the concern, and it is an objection not easily resolved. This is a case where it is best to acknowledge the objection, get a better understanding, and tell the customer you will get back to them with an answer. The point is don’t guess or attempt to just “smooth” over the objection hoping it will disappear.

Handle conflict situations. Sometimes objections are not about specific price, resource, or timing issues. Instead, the situation is better characterized as one of conflict resolution – the concern is you see things one way and the customer holds a different view. Success rests with approaching the conflict from a problem-solving perspective. The key is determining “why” the customer holds this point of view. Traps to avoid include: attempting to resolve the conflict by the “power of your argument,” providing an extended set of options that you think are answers, or simply reassuring the customer that things will in fact be all right.

OBTAINING COMMITMENT



In major accounts, obtaining a commitment requires developing a shared vision with the customer about establishing the next step for moving forward. Agreeing on a next step is useful in every customer interaction. The commitment could vary from an agreement for a subsequent meeting to an agreement or a demo or a product evaluation. If a shared vision can be achieved for moving forward, that result has significant positive payoffs for both you and the customer.

With the purpose established, what are some of the best practices for obtaining commitments in a major account environment?

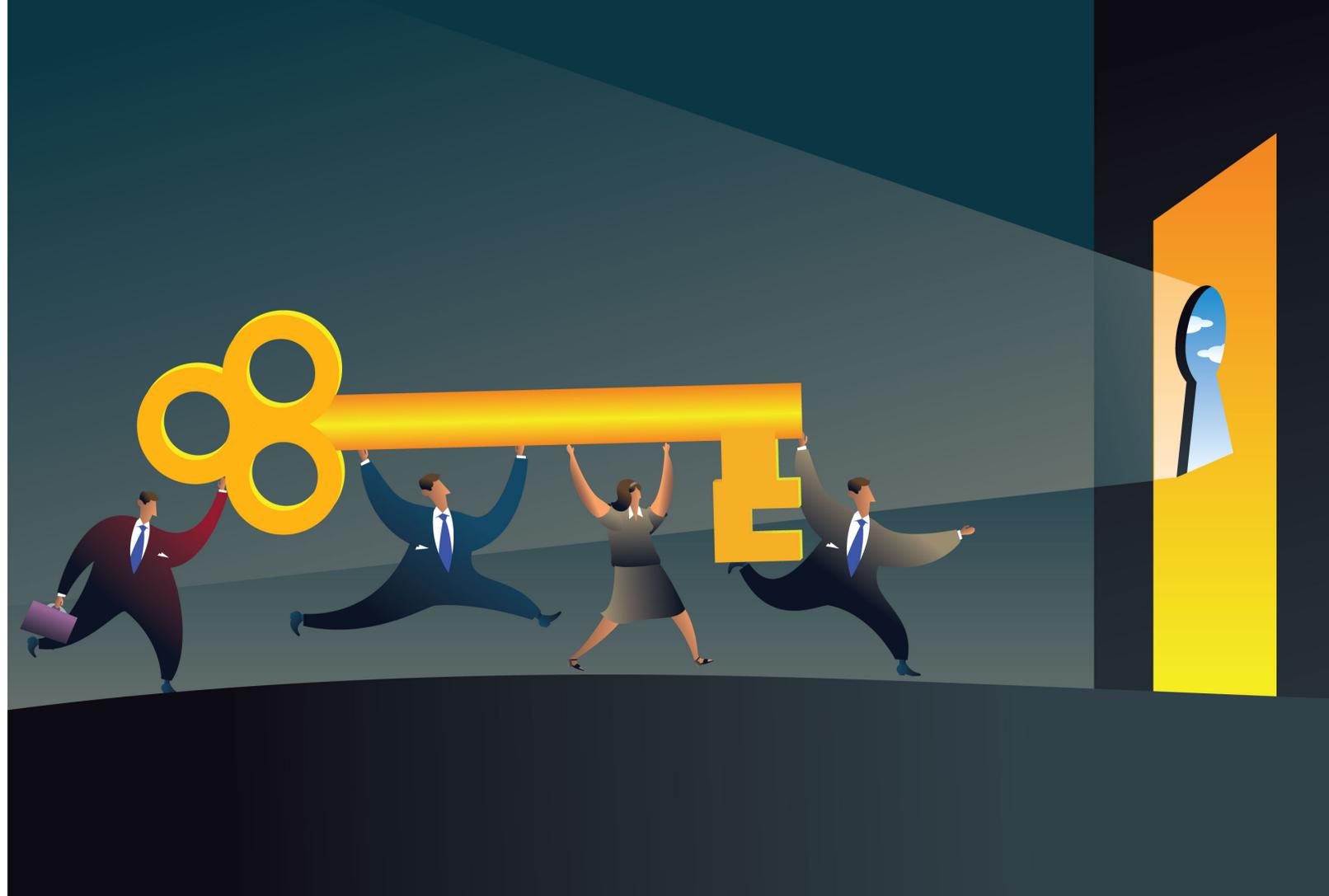
- **Plan for several commitments**, including a “best case” commitment.
- Have back-up alternative commitments in mind in case the call goes better or worse than anticipated.
- Assess and adjust the commitment you seek as the customer interaction unfolds.
- Summarize the major points of the conversation before proposing a commitment. “So, it sounds like if you could fix *X* and change *Y*, you would be able to improve performance by taking twenty-four hours out of each cycle.”
- Make sure the commitment results in a benefit to the customer and to you.
- Propose a commitment and check the fit – “So, given what you have just talked about, I would suggest that we ... does that sound right?”

All commitments are not equally effective. Some even constitute traps. Some guidelines for determining whether one commitment is better than another are as follows:

Commit the right level of resources. A trap is making commitments that involve lots of resources when the lead doesn’t justify it.

Avoid one-way commitments. The idea is to move the process forward by having both parties commit to a next step. For example, if the customer is willing to commit to a subsequent meeting, it could be appropriate for you to provide access to additional expertise, like bringing along someone from marketing, product development, or technical support.

Be clear. You should go the extra mile in making sure both parties have a common understanding of the commitments.



We hope applying the ideas in *Mastering Major Account Selling* will lead you to more sales success. To help you do this:

Select one new skill at a time. It is difficult to master multiple new skills at a time. So select one new skill to start, like asking questions, and focus on getting it right. Then add another new skill ... and so on.

Maximize practice and feedback. Practice doesn't make perfect; it is all about practice plus feedback. So look for safe opportunities to practice and get feedback on the skill set you selected to master.

As *Mastering Major Account Selling* is the first book in the *Sales Mastery* series, we would very much like to get your feedback for improving the books, so they are more valuable to our readers. We would also appreciate any suggestions you have on topics that you have found important in major account selling.

We can easily be reached at 480-513-0900 or via email: Richard at rruff@salesmomentum.com or Janet at jspirer@salesmomentum.com.

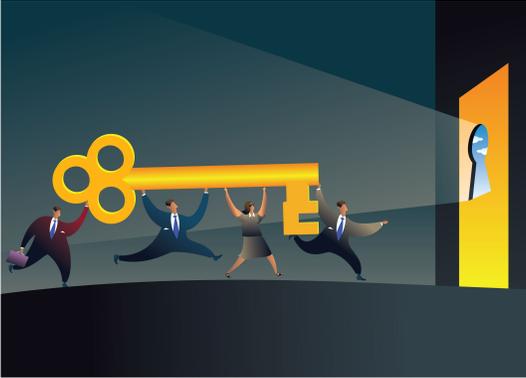
You can also read more about sales best practices on our blog – the [Sales Training Connection](#).

We appreciate your interest in *Mastering Major Account Selling* and wish you success in your sales career!

To learn more about the authors and our company, we've included:

- Section 1 - About Sales Momentum
- Section 2 - Sales Training and Blogging

ABOUT SALES MOMENTUM



For more than thirty years, Richard Ruff and Janet Spierer – the founders of [Sales Momentum](#) – have worked with the Fortune 1000 to design and develop sales training programs that make a difference. By working with market leaders, we have learned that today’s standard for a great sales force significantly differs from yesterday’s picture.

Today, a sales force not only needs to be able to sell a competitive advantage ... they must *be* a competitive advantage. Because salespeople must learn more than ever before, and master it to a higher level of proficiency, the demand for an entirely new class of effective sales training programs has emerged. Sales training programs must be qualitatively different from sales training offerings of the past in how they are developed and priced. They must be designed to impact business results and priced affordably.

In 2010, we also began to offer our sales training programs to mid-size and smaller companies under our [Sales Horizons](#) brand.

Dr. Richard Ruff has spent the last 30 years designing and managing large-scale sales training projects for Fortune 1000 companies. These projects have varied in scope from targeted sales training efforts for launching new products to international sales training engagements.

Richard spent the first part of his sales training career with Neil Rackham during the start-up years for Huthwaite, Inc. In 2000, Richard and Janet founded Sales Momentum. Sales Momentum specialized in designing a new generation of sales training programs that focus on helping Fortune 1000 companies achieve high-impact business results.



Richard has authored numerous articles related to sales effectiveness and co-authored [Managing Major Sales](#), a book about sales management, [Parlez-Vous Business](#) which helps salespeople integrate the language of business into the sales process, and [Getting Partnering Right](#) – a research based

work on the best practices for forming strategic selling alliances.

Dr. Ruff received his Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from The University of Tennessee and a B.S. from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.



Dr. Janet Spirer has followed two complementary paths. First, as a B-School Professor, she taught marketing, sales, and business strategy courses. She also managed a consulting practice focusing on sales productivity and marketing.

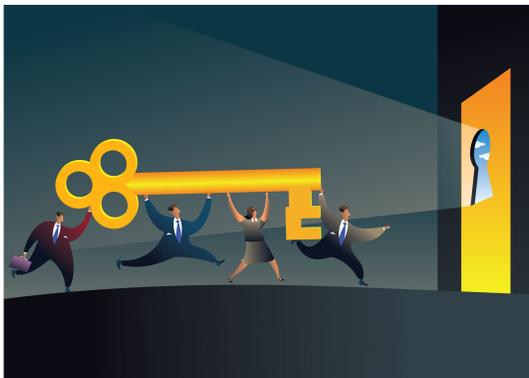
Pursuing both a consulting and an academic career has provided Janet with a unique perspective – keeping up to date with current thinking in the field, as well as seeing these ideas implemented in the marketplace. She translated those experiences into [Parlez-Vous Business](#) – a book that helps salespeople develop the business savvy to sell successfully.

Since co-founding Sales Momentum in 2000 with Richard, Janet has worked with Fortune 1000 clients across industries to design customized sales training programs to improve their sales effectiveness.

Dr. Spirer received her Ph.D. from The Ohio State University, an M.P.A. from The University of Texas at Austin, and a B.A. in Economics from Brooklyn College. She holds the appointment of Professor Emeritus at Marymount University.

SECTION 2

SALES TRAINING AND BLOGGING



Our sales training programs cover a variety of sales skills to help salespeople master major account selling, including:

- Sales Call Essentials
 - Sales Strategy
 - Selling Economic Value
 - Sales Negotiations
-
- Sales Coaching
 - Launching New Products

We also offer **Sales Simulations** that can be customized by industry to the sales challenges and sales skills issues a company is facing.

Learn more about our sales training programs by looking at our **website** – or by contacting Richard at rruff@salesmomentum.com or Janet at jspirer@salesmomentum.com. Or call us at 480-513-0900.



And, you can find a lot more information about sales effectiveness on our blog, the [Sales Training Connection](#).