

4.1: Solving, Not Selling

Learning Objectives

- Understand how to identify needs and opportunities.

Imagine you wanted to sell a new digital camera to your teenage sister. How would you convince her to buy? You might start by thinking of the things that matter to teenagers—specifically your sister. Maybe you’d say, “It’s small and lightweight so you can fit it in your purse and take it with you when you go out with your friends. It has a new sleek design, and you can customize it by ordering it in one of six different colors.” You’ve considered things your sister might need (a camera she can take on a night out), and you’ve identified an opportunity that might appeal to a teenaged girl (a combination of appearance, style, and functionality).

Now what if you were selling the same product to your grandmother? She might be more concerned with reliability than appearance, and she might also be intimidated about using a digital camera if it’s a technology she hasn’t tried before. “This camera doesn’t have a lot of bells and whistles,” you could say. “It’s straightforward and easy to use and makes an excellent choice for a first digital camera purchase. It’s perfect for taking pictures of the grandkids. It has also been highly rated as a reliable and high-quality product.” You’ve addressed her problem (intimidation about using a new technology), and you’ve helped her discover opportunities (taking photos of the grandkids).

Even though you’re selling the same product to both people, you’re using a very different approach. Ultimately, what you’re selling is not a product but a *solution* based on your customer’s specific needs. This is the heart of the pre-approach. There are three simple steps you can follow to turn your products and services into customer-specific solutions.

Step 1: Complete a Needs and Opportunity Analysis

Great salespeople don’t sell, they solve. As you research your prospect, you should be able to identify problems that are specific to that person or organization: Do they need to reduce costs? Do they need to increase sales? Do they need to drive traffic to a Web site or generate leads for their new service? Or maybe they need something that will set their brand apart from their competitors. In the case of individual consumers, the problem might be very different: Does she want to have the latest in fashion without couture prices? Does she want the latest technology “toys” as soon as they are available? Does she want a car that is a dependable form of transportation and friendly to the environment?

Sometimes people are forthcoming about their problems, but many times it’s up to you to ask the *right* questions; the ones that will uncover what your prospect needs or where opportunities exist. For instance, if your prospect is buying from a competitor, you might ask questions like “What were your expectations when you signed up for this service? What has your actual experience of the service been? What would you like to see happen differently?” The prospect might not fully realize what his problems are. Paul Cherry, *Questions That Sell: The Powerful Process for Discovering What Your Customer Really Wants 2e* (New York: AMACOM, 2018), 25. Often, especially in B2B sales, the goal of your first sales call will simply be to identify your prospect’s specific areas of need. You won’t make a pitch; you’ll just ask questions and listen.

Asking questions often opens up opportunities you might not otherwise discover. There will be occasions when your prospect doesn’t have an immediate problem she can identify, but if you’ve done your research and know something about her goals and priorities and if you ask the right questions, you have the chance to uncover useful opportunities. What can help him achieve his goals even more efficiently? What kinds of results would he like to see? What would he like to have if he only knew it was possible?

Think about the advent of the cell phone. Consumers had a problem: their lives were getting busier, and they wanted to be able to communicate on the go. They needed a phone they could use when they weren’t at home or in the office. What do you do on a car trip if you get lost or your car breaks down? How do you find someone in a crowded place? How can people get in touch with you if you’re almost never home? Cell phone providers figured out consumers’ problems, and they solved them. Then along came the iPhone. Most cell phone users wouldn’t have said they *needed* a device that could capture videos and photographs, play MP3s, store a day planner, surf the web, run hundreds of different applications—oh, and make phone calls too—using a single slick interface. But Apple saw an opportunity, and they helped consumers to see it too: over a million iPhones sold the first weekend the product came out in stores. Philip Elmer-DeWitt, “Munster: 500,000 New iPhones This Weekend,” *Fortune*, June 18, 2009, <https://fortune.com/2009/06/18/munster-500000-new-iphones-this-weekend/> (accessed May 22, 2024).

Step 2: Brainstorm Solutions and Generate Ideas

Once you've identified your customer's problems, take the time—either with a team or on your own—to brainstorm solutions and opportunities that address your prospect's specific needs. Sometimes solving your prospect's problem is a straightforward task, but often with larger sales, particularly B2B sales, coming up with a solution that is tailored to your customer's needs requires time and thought. No two prospects are the same, so no two solutions will be exactly the same. As a salesperson, your job is to solve customer problems, *not* push a product. In other words, you're offering solutions that include unique and different ideas, not selling products. For this reason, brainstorming—the process of generating ideas—is a crucial part of the selling process.

When you go into a brainstorming session, there are several techniques that will help you generate effective results.

- **Know your problem or opportunity.** If you've already completed your needs analysis, you're off to a good start. According to James Feldman, a Chicago-based idea-generation consultant, "Most people do not identify their problem correctly" going into the brainstorming session. Once you have a clear idea of the problem or opportunity, set it out in specific terms to guide your brainstorm. Just make sure you don't define the problem so narrowly that you'll limit your results. Start the session by stating the objective. What problem do you want to solve? It also helps to frame the question in positive terms. For example, rather than asking "How will this company's new computer system change the way they do business?" you could ask "How can this company get the most out of their new computer system?" Allison Stein Wellner, "A Perfect Brainstorm," *Inc.*, October 1, 2003, www.inc.com/magazine/20031001/strategies.html (accessed May 22, 2024).
- **Generate; don't evaluate.** Brainstorming isn't about coming up with the best, most carefully polished solutions. Get your ideas out there, on paper, without disrupting the flow. Once you've exhausted your resources, you can worry about sorting out the stronger ideas from the weaker ones. If you're too critical of your ideas to begin with, you'll never access that part of your brain where the creative ideas are generated. Team Asana has curated a robust list of techniques to optimize brainstorming sessions. Team Asana, "29 brainstorming techniques: effective ways to spark creativity", February 4, 2024, <https://asana.com/resources/brainstorming-techniques> (accessed May 22, 2024).
- **Push beyond the wall.** At some point during every brainstorming session, whether group brainstorming or individual, people tend to hit a wall. Ideas flow quickly, and then they seem to stop altogether. Cognitive psychologist Paul Paulus says this point in the session may seem like a wall, but in reality it's just "a space in [the] brain." Pushing past this space often leads to the best ideas. Allison Stein Wellner, "A Perfect Brainstorm," *Inc.*, October 1, 2003, www.inc.com/magazine/20031001/strategies.html (accessed July 15, 2009).
- **Seek strategic stimuli.** Sometimes you have to disrupt your normal routine to get the ideas flowing. Putting yourself in a new environment or doing something with your hands—molding clay, for instance—can often be a surprising way to unlock ideas in your subconscious that your rational mind might otherwise block off.

Brainstorming, as an idea-generation tool, is a proven and powerful part of creative development. However, keep in mind that some of the ideas you come up with in the brainstorming process will be stronger than others. A great idea has two important elements: it solves your customer's problems and, in B2B sales, it reinforces your customer's brand. Consider consultant Mike Rubin's solution to a problem faced by one of his customers, a Harley-Davidson dealer, who wanted to boost sales and appeal to a broader customer base. Mike's Famous Harley-Davidson Dealership was already drawing in the "hard-core" bikers, but the store's owner wanted to reach the more conservative, baby boomer demographic too. By turning the dealership into a destination, complete with a Harley museum and restaurant, Rubin hit on a solution that both addressed the customer's problem and remained true to the Harley brand image. The restaurant, designed to resemble a factory cafeteria, appealed to tough bikers and families alike, and the museum—also a family-friendly draw—was laid out in a warehouse style that reflected the company's brand image of independence, toughness, and the open road. The result? In three years, bike sales increased from 800 to over 1,700 annually. Donna Fen, "(Re)born to Be Wild," *Inc.*, January 2006, www.inc.com/magazine/20060101/reborn.html (accessed May 22, 2024).

If you are working out of your home and you don't have a group of people with which to brainstorm, it's not a problem. Get your colleagues in other areas involved by having a brainstorming conference call. Or have a virtual brainstorming session through Teams or Zoom, or getting ideas from connections on LinkedIn, or creating a **wiki** where people can share ideas at any time and see the ideas that others have created.

The bottom line is that selling is all about selling your brand (remember from Chapter 1 that a brand is unique, consistent, and relevant and has an emotional connection with its customers). When you really understand your customer and their needs and motivations, you can be extremely creative about the way you position and tell the story of your brand.

Step 3: Identify General and Specific Benefit Statements

Once you have brainstormed a customer-specific solution, you want to find a way to showcase your solution in the best light. How will you present this idea to your prospect so that he can immediately see its relevance to his situation? How will you establish the value proposition you have to offer? How will you position your idea as a benefit to your prospect, not a self-serving sales pitch? As part of your pre-approach, you should identify both a general and a specific statement to highlight the benefits of your solution or opportunity. When you deliver value to your prospect, you earn the opportunity to be a business partner, not just someone who is trying to sell something.

Imagine you work for a dairy products distributor that sells wholesale to restaurants. You’ve researched one of your prospects, a downtown deli, and have identified one of its major problems: the company is losing business to the sandwich place across the street. Your prospect may not yet realize the source of the trouble, but you have an idea. It seems that the prospect’s competitor has cheaper sandwiches, and you know for a fact that part of the problem lies in the cost of the ingredients. Your prospect currently pays 10 percent more for the cheese it gets from its current vendor than you would charge for the same product. If the deli started buying cheese from you, it would be able to lower the cost of its sandwiches to a more competitive price and draw some of the sales that are going to its competitor. You have also brainstormed how the deli can create a “signature sandwich”: a unique combination of meat and cheeses that only it offers. The sandwich provides a point of difference for the deli and a reason for previous deli customers to come back. In other words, you are helping to build your prospect’s brand and business with a great idea.

This is a good solution, but you can’t walk into the deli and tell your prospect, “I want to sell you some cheese.” Your prospect doesn’t need cheese; he needs to increase his sales, and he’ll probably tell you to go away because he already has a dairy products vendor. It’s your job to frame the solution in such a way that your customer can easily see its relevance to his problem; you want to answer the “What’s in it for me?” question early on in the sales call. Todd Natenberg, “What’s in It for the Prospect? Everything—If You Tell Them,” SelfGrowth.com, <http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/Natenberg12.html> (accessed May 22, 2024). Begin by drafting a **general benefit statement**, a statement that gives the big picture of how your solution will meet your prospect’s need. For instance, you might say, “I have an idea for a way to increase your sandwich sales by 15 percent.” Your statement showcases a solution rather than a product.

General benefit statements, as opposed to specific benefit statements, are broad enough that they would be important to most people. They might address things like improving company visibility, expanding the business, increasing profits, or cutting costs. The **specific benefit statement**, on the other hand, comes once you’ve grabbed your prospect’s attention. It identifies the particular way your solution applies to your prospect, and it demonstrates that you’ve done your research and understand the needs that are unique to his company or situation. For instance, you might say, “Your food cost is too high, and it’s keeping you from competing with other businesses. I can help you cut your food costs so that you can afford to sell your breakfast burrito for under \$3.99. Would that be something you would be interested in?” If you’ve done your research and brainstormed an effective solution, your benefits statements are the tools that will give you the power to convey that information clearly and effectively.

Table 4.1.1: Benefit Statement Examples

| General Benefit Statement | Specific Benefit Statement |
|--|---|
| I have an idea that can help you lower your labor costs. Is that something you might be interested in? | If I can prove that I can help you reduce your labor costs by 10 percent, would you be willing to make a commitment? |
| I have some ideas about how to increase traffic to your Web site. Is that something that is of interest to you? | If I can show you how our social networking tool can drive 15 percent more traffic to your Web site during key seasonal periods, would you be willing to consider it? |
| I have some ideas about how to decrease your transaction time and take care of more customers every hour. Is that something you are interested in? | If I can show you how our product can decrease your transaction time for each customer by at least one minute, would you be interested in looking at the proposal? |

Key Takeaways

- Good salespeople don’t sell products; they sell *solutions* to their customers’ problems or challenges.
- Your research, including the questions you ask your customer, should help you identify needs and opportunities.
- Once you have identified your customers’ problems and goals, brainstorm solutions and opportunities that will meet their needs.

- Knowing the best solution for your customer will help you craft a **general benefits statement** and a **specific benefits statement** that will help the customer envision the way your solution or opportunity meets his needs.

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