



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND GREATER SALES BY SELLING DIFFERENT CUSTOMERS DIFFERENTLY



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Today's marketplace is global in nature and more competitive than ever. More competition means more comparisons being made among vendors. Customers know they have more choices.

To make sure they make the right choices, customers have become more knowledgeable about the products they buy. Many organizations have put more checks and balances into the buying decision. As a result, the selling cycle has been lengthened and made more complex. The organization and the sales force need to differentiate themselves from their competition.

In addition, more competitors often means not much difference between one product or service and another. How is it possible to influence the customer's buying decision, when so few distinct advantages exist? Our own experience and common sense tell us that the decision to buy from an organization often comes down to the difference between the relationship between the buyer and the salesperson.

What attributes do we usually associate with a successful salesperson? In the current market, salespeople need more than the essentials (professional appearance, product/service knowledge, deep understanding of the customer organization) — they need a competitive edge.



Among the questions that one needs to ask and answer are ... how to personally stand out from the crowd ... how to make yourself the competitive plus. We believe that the salesperson must develop a unique relationship with each unique customer. A salesperson develops strong and binding relationships by recognizing that he/she must be good at “selling different customers differently.” How do you do that? Start with a clear picture of each different and unique customer. What does that mean?

Customers today want salespeople to understand them — both their business needs and their personal needs. Personal needs boil down to the way the individual wants to be treated, not just how a product or service will benefit him/her.

Armed with this understanding, the salesperson can actually offset the lack of clear product differentiators or some of the perceived negatives of a product or service. When the salesperson develops a trusting relationship, the customer regards him/her as an advisor. Customers are more inclined to buy from an attentive salesperson who meets their personal as well as their business needs.

We see it every day in our personal lives. Quite often, we'll forsake convenience and efficiency by going an extra mile or paying a few dollars more to buy a product or service from a company who treats us better. You can stand out from the crowd by focusing on the customer developing the skills to:

- Recognize the differences between individual customers
- Adapt sales behavior to the needs of each customer
- Build trust and get commitment by fulfilling each customer's unique needs.



Traditional, needs-based selling is too simplistic for the intense competition facing today's sales professional.

Think about the competition again. Think of the number of vendors who may offer products or services so similar that there is virtually no difference. When almost anything in the marketplace could potentially satisfy a customer's business needs, competitive knowledge won't help, nor will product knowledge.

The only skill that can provide an advantage is the ability to recognize and satisfy personal needs. Uncovering personal needs demands full concentration on the customer — total customer focus. This requires skills that are not included in traditional sales training.

Traditionally, salespeople are taught to handle a "typical" customer with a single, rigid approach. It doesn't take a salesperson long to discover that the only "typical" customer is the one in the training session.

Customers are different. It makes sense that they have different needs. You can uncover those needs by observing each customer's behavior.

For example, a customer who views the sales call as a contest, who wants to argue and control the call, is obviously different from a customer who is guarded, indifferent, and hard-to-read. The sales approach that works with the first customer will fail miserably with the second and vice versa.

Psychologists have noted for years that people express their personal needs through their behavior. How can you learn to do this? Let's look at two customer examples.





The first customer is combative — a person showing this behavior has underlying needs to be in the forefront, to be respected and satisfy ego needs. Meet this customer's personal needs by demonstrating how your product or service is exclusive, has been used by leaders, or boosts status.



The second customer is almost the opposite, with underlying needs for keeping things as they are and minimizing risk. Stressing a product's safety, reliability, or long-term warranty will help meet this customer's personal needs.

The same real product or service benefits remain unchanged for both customers. However, highlighting *different* benefits makes the difference.

Detecting the differences among different customers and recognizing underlying personal needs helps tailor a sales discussion, ensuring that both product and personal needs are specifically addressed.

But knowing how to size up a customer's behavior is not enough: The salesperson also needs to understand how his/her own behavior determines customer willingness to listen, consider, and move towards a buying commitment.

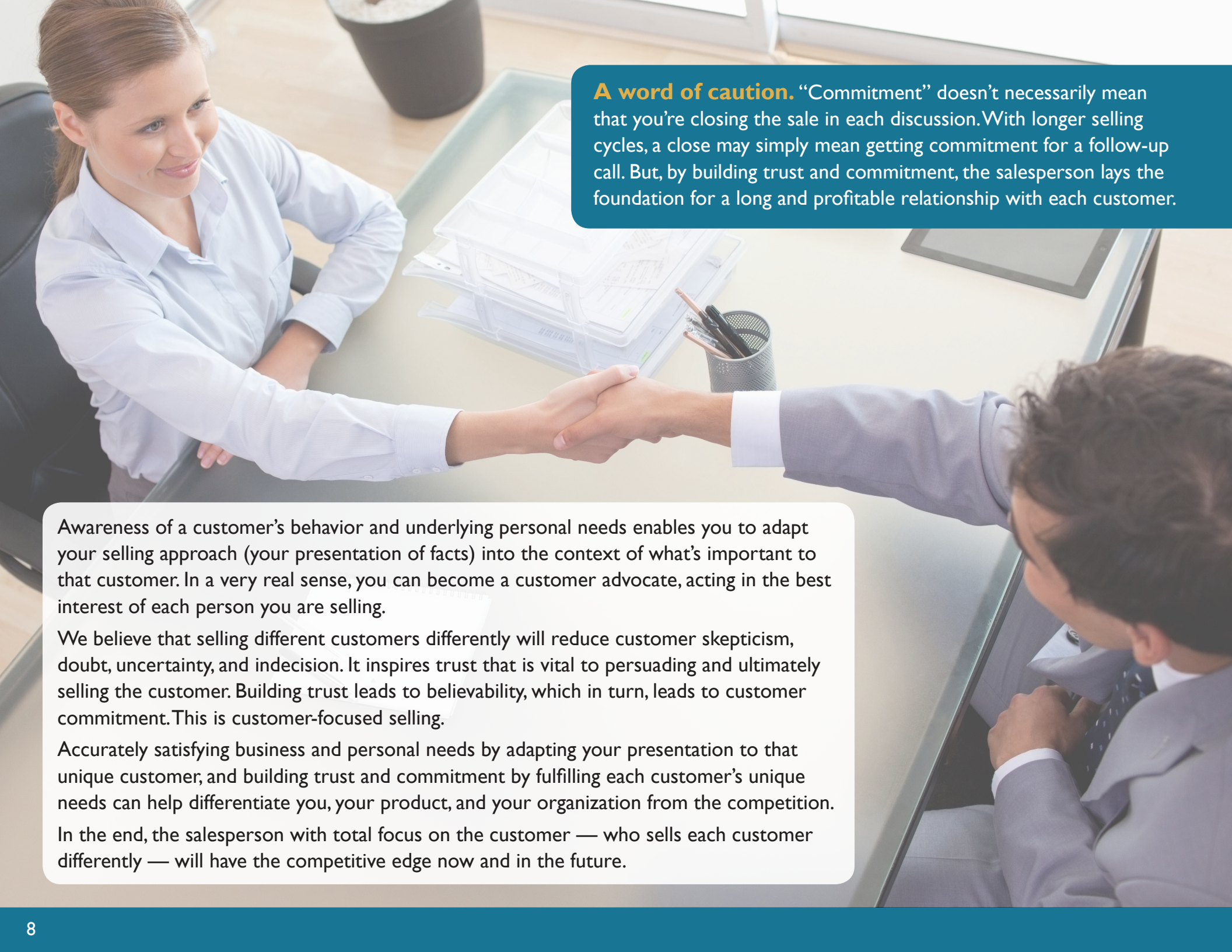
This requires a second skill in customer-focused selling: adapting your own sales behavior to effectively respond to different types of customer behavior.

Let's consider again the combative person who views the sales call as a contest. If a salesperson matches this customer's behavior with an equivalent combative approach, the exchange becomes a contest; he/she may win some arguments or demonstrate superior knowledge of the product and the market, but, in the end, will probably lose the sale.

However, by allowing the customer to talk, vent, and demonstrate knowledge; presenting facts when the customer is listening; and giving the customer opportunities to consider alternatives without losing face — that same salesperson can satisfy the customer's personal need for being outspoken. By encouraging this type of discussion, the chance of making a sale will be greatly improved.

A passive and aloof customer, by comparison, may view the sales call as a threat. Involving this customer in the call will require extra patience and support. By slowing the pace and by using nonthreatening, open questions, the salesperson can help the passive customer to recognize the meeting as an opportunity instead of a threat. Continue to be patient; present benefits deliberately, a little at a time, and ask questions to get the customer's feedback. Make sure not to overwhelm the customer with information.



A woman in a light blue button-down shirt is sitting at a desk, smiling and shaking hands with a man in a light blue suit. The man is leaning over the desk. On the desk, there is a white paper tray, a pen holder with several pens, and a tablet. The background shows a window and a black trash can.

A word of caution. “Commitment” doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re closing the sale in each discussion. With longer selling cycles, a close may simply mean getting commitment for a follow-up call. But, by building trust and commitment, the salesperson lays the foundation for a long and profitable relationship with each customer.

Awareness of a customer’s behavior and underlying personal needs enables you to adapt your selling approach (your presentation of facts) into the context of what’s important to that customer. In a very real sense, you can become a customer advocate, acting in the best interest of each person you are selling.

We believe that selling different customers differently will reduce customer skepticism, doubt, uncertainty, and indecision. It inspires trust that is vital to persuading and ultimately selling the customer. Building trust leads to believability, which in turn, leads to customer commitment. This is customer-focused selling.

Accurately satisfying business and personal needs by adapting your presentation to that unique customer, and building trust and commitment by fulfilling each customer’s unique needs can help differentiate you, your product, and your organization from the competition.

In the end, the salesperson with total focus on the customer — who sells each customer differently — will have the competitive edge now and in the future.