

# The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'Consultative Selling Skills'



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## High Performing Sales Teams Transition Their Salespeople from Being Product Sellers to Business Problem Solvers and Consultative Sellers

Prior to launching PMI ten years ago, I held Chief Sales Officer positions with several organizations. Sometimes my Chief Sales Officer responsibilities included marketing and sometimes my responsibilities included customer service. But in all cases, it was clearly understood that I was the guy that was responsible for making the numbers. I often reflect upon these experiences in my client work today. It was probably the best preparation that anyone could have for the type of work that PMI does, and other PMI'ers with the same type of background agree: the challenges of modern sales executives are daunting and formidable, and "walking in their shoes" is the only way to truly understand the stress and difficulty of this role.

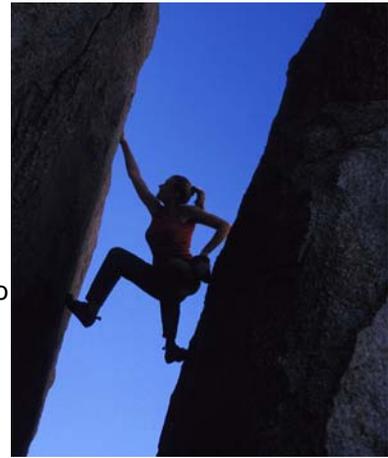


By combining my own experiences with the Chief Sales Officers that I have had the opportunity to work with, certain things stand out as best practices required for high performance. In some cases, success can be connected with a specific best practice because it has been implemented. In some cases, there has been a lack of success that appears to result from the absence of a specific best practice. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will focus on sales best practices that tend to be predictors of success in sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

### ***Best Practice: Consultative Selling Skills***

Most of PMI's client engagements begin with an assessment of what's working and what's not. Practically all of our clients have deployed basic selling skills and are looking for the types of equipping that will help them drive sales execution to the next level of effectiveness. Since every sales organization is unique in terms of its needs and requirements for growth, we believe that the best way to assess sales effectiveness is to speak with top performers, thought leaders, sales managers/leaders, customers and partners. These one-on-one conversations serve us well in providing an open environment in which we can comfortably discuss successes and challenges on an individual level.

From these discussions, we are able to conduct discovery and reach conclusions with clients about where they are, where they want to be and how to bridge their own, unique “sales performance gaps.” In nearly every example where we have completed this type of multi-level best practices analysis, there are two constants that always seem to require attention: the ability of salespeople to engage more effectively with customers through the deployment of consultative selling skills, and the willingness of salespeople to deploy proven processes that will enable predictable, repeatable and sustainable success. The remainder of this article will focus on the former, and next month's article will extend these thoughts to include the latter.



### ***The Next Level of Sales Effectiveness***

The names of commercial sales training programs can be confusing. After all, what constitutes an “advanced” skills program to one organization may be perceived by another as being quite basic, or even elementary. Yet what seems to be consistent in this quest for “something better,” at least among the clients that we serve, is that when a sales organization’s objective is to increase sales effectiveness and productivity, a good starting point is to focus carefully on the dynamics that surround customer/supplier engagement.

There seems to be agreement today that for those sales organizations engaging in business-to-business (B2B) selling, next-level sales effectiveness programs must facilitate the creation of trust-based environments in which the supplier and customer can engage more collaboratively for the purpose of mutual value creation. While this may seem obvious on the surface, try doing what we’ve been doing for the past 10 years. That is, ask customers how collaborative they find their suppliers’ salespeople, as well as how they would describe their relationships with their suppliers (Vendor, Preferred Supplier, Planning Partner or Trusted Advisor), and the responses can be disturbing.

Then, try asking specific salespeople for their perspectives on how things are going with respect to collaborative engagement and building/growing relationships with these customers and note the different perspective. Is it a surprise that a majority of the time, the salesperson has a higher opinion of his customer engagement effectiveness than does the customer, as well as a more positive view of the relationship?

### ***Innovation through Consultation***

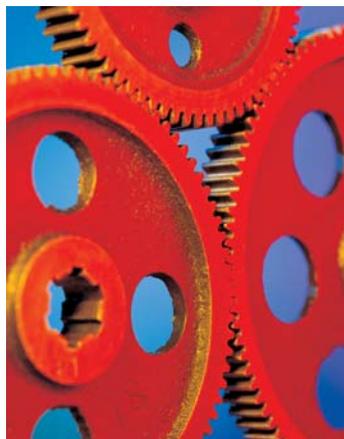
I remember a fascinating conversation with one of our clients’ most successful salespeople. I asked her to describe how and why she wins so much business (she has been a top performer for many years), and her response was: “I show up differently!” When I challenged her, she was quite adamant about this and proceeded to explain that it was how she engaged with her customers (by deploying consultative selling skills and conducting extensive discovery about the customer’s business up-front) that made the difference in winning and losing. Her innovative best practices for customer engagement differentiated her among a very aggressive field of competitors, and perhaps I should mention that her firm is typically the most expensive in their market.

We captured these best practices and they are now alive and well in that organization's sales process "roadmap." But the deeper we look at winning practices of top performers, the more we find that innovation in customer engagement is typically about the creation of an authentic, leverageable relationship that is developed through the establishment of trust and credibility during the sales process. One way that a salesperson can "stand out" and develop these types of customer relationships is through the application of consultative selling skills.



### ***Consultative Selling Skills: An Opportunity to Engage More Effectively***

What does it take to engage more effectively with your customers? If it was easy, then every salesperson and sales organization would be more effective. Our perspective is that effective sales engagement between suppliers and their customers is largely a function of three components working together: consultative selling skills, sales processes and best practices. Contrary to the philosophy that has underscored much of the sales training of the past, PMI feels that the more contemporary approach is to integrate skills, processes and best practices into a harmonized methodology that is supported by relevant tools that have been customized and tailored to fit the client's business.



Think of sales execution this way: sales processes provide the salesperson with a roadmap of what to do, consultative selling skills provide the "how to" that activate and facilitate the processes, and best practices connect these into executables, activities and tools that have been proven to yield successful outcomes. Our observation in working with industry leaders from across the globe is that the deployment of skills without process can be both undisciplined and misunderstood, sometimes leaving the customer wondering what the salesperson is talking about and why they are discussing certain topics. On the other hand, process deployment in a vacuum, without the application of skills, can be perceived as "flat," and ineffective. The more modern approach is to combine skills and process with proven best practices which will not only be more effective for the salesperson, but also more engaging for the customer.

### ***What's in it for the Customer?***

Consultative selling skills equip and enable salespeople to elevate their dialogue with customers to focus more on customer industry drivers, business objectives and operational challenges and less on supplier products, offerings and pricing, at least in the early going. Consultative selling skills are more about salespeople resisting the temptation to talk, tell and sell, and more about their investing the effort to listen, discover and consult "in the moment" with their customers. Why do some salespeople revert to their comfort zones and talk too much about their products and solutions when their customer's needs are not fully understood? Because many

organizations spend more time, resources and budget conducting product training early in a salesperson's career – and hence, this is where some salespeople feel more comfortable. Think about your own experiences when you were on-boarding and ramping-up with a new employer. In most cases, the amount of time spent in product vs. skills training is significantly greater. So what do most of us do when we are with the customer and feeling stress and pressure (and maybe even a little nervous)? We tend to talk too much – about the product, a result that is the opposite of what should happen when consultative selling skills are used.

Today, many customers are tired of being sold to, yet welcome an opportunity for a consultative engagement where they are the center of attention and there is ample time placed upon their industry drivers, business objectives and operational challenges. How does this approach make the customer feel? They feel that the salesperson understands their environment and business challenges. This serves to align the customer with the salesperson and create a level of interest in what the salesperson has to say and what they might have to offer to help them solve their business problems.

In short, the customer believes that the salesperson is trying to help them versus sell them, and becomes more open to collaborative planning, problem solving and the co-creation of value. When this happens, everyone wins: the customer, the supplier and the supplier's salesperson.

## **Conclusion**

High performing sales teams deploy consultative selling skills programs to bridge their sales performance gaps and enable greater alignment between their salespeople and their customers. These organizations realize that the better equipped their salespeople are to develop authentic, trust-based relationships with customers, the more customer value they will be able to create, and hence, the more competitive advantage they will accrue.

By harmonizing consultative selling skills and sales processes with contemporary sales best practices, sales effectiveness will evolve to the next level. The salesperson that “shows up differently” by engaging more effectively with the customer will stand tall among their competition because they are offering more than the basics. Consultative selling skills can be the difference between “selling to” vs. “engaging with” your customers.



## **Next Month**

Our next article will extend **Consultative Selling Skills** to include the deployment of sales processes for predictable, repeatable and sustainable success. In today's markets, ineffective sales execution can be fatal, and the high price of rework and “starting over” is driving sales productivity down and cost of sales up for many organizations. In **Proven Sales Best Practices**, we will discuss how to increase sales productivity by equipping and enabling salespeople with proven best practices that will help them improve their sales execution by “getting it right the first time.”

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Performance Methods, Inc., recognized by TrainingIndustry.com as one of the **2009 Top Sales Training Companies**, will be featured in a series of articles that will focus on the **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams**. PMI is proud to serve the needs of a broad group of industry-leading companies and will be sharing with the TrainingIndustry.com readership how leading global firms are deploying proven best practices to increase sales effectiveness, create customer value, grow customer relationships and gain competitive advantage. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will cover a number of critical areas of sales performance and provide readers with insight into how sales best practices are being deployed effectively by world-class sales organizations in a variety of industries. These articles will provide special emphasis on key best practices driving effective sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

