



NetApp: Applying Value-Focused Selling for a Sales Transformation

In today's business environment, organizations must either evolve their business practices and products or risk being left behind by the competition. Facing increased pressure to meet the demands of today's consumers, business leaders must have an agile mindset to move with the market. This is a challenging reality for established companies that hold legacy products with a seasoned sales team.

NetApp, a market leader in data management, recently revamped its portfolio of products and services to respond to market changes and meet customers where they are, or where they are heading – the cloud. Transitioning from a product-focused data storage organization to a cloud-focused data management company, NetApp needed to change how its sales team engaged customers.

This transition “required a different sales approach and whole different conversation with the customer,” said Keith Gilbert, manager of sales training for NetApp University – “one that requires more of a value-based, customer-first discussion.”

With a new business portfolio of products and solutions to sell, Gilbert and his training team set out to find a sales methodology that was the right fit for NetApp, a global technology company with a tenured sales force. After extensive research on industry-wide sales models, NetApp partnered with Performance Methods Incorporated (PMI), a sales performance consulting and training organization that delivers customized solutions to global companies.

“The simplicity of PMI’s sales methodology resonated with NetApp’s leadership,” said Gilbert. “It focuses on the customer’s business pressures, objectives and challenges before introducing any company products or solutions.”

This framework would allow salespeople to co-discover value with their customers through authentic conversations and collaboration, allowing solutions to arise organically in discussions. It was exactly what NetApp was looking for.

The Solution

Motivating people to try something new is a challenge. Imagine asking a global sales force to change the way it's been selling for the past decade or more. This issue was a top challenge for NetApp when undergoing its sales transformation.

“Half the organization has been with NetApp for more than 10 years,” explained Gilbert. “We have tenured salespeople who have been selling a portfolio of legacy data storage products and hardware for a long time.”

Under NetApp’s previous sales model, the marketing team was the voice of the customer. Marketing would inform the sales force of the challenges facing customers, and the sales team would step in and recommend products to solve that problem. There was little discovery or co-creation of value occurring with the customer.

John DeMasi, a district sales manager, recalled that the previous sales process involved a more prescriptive approach, directing the conversation toward specific products. But with the addition of new company solutions and services, “there’s a lot of opportunity out there that we might not recognize because we’re not asking the right questions,” he added.

Now, using PMI’s Value-Focused Selling methodology, salespeople are tasked with uncovering customer challenges for themselves. Through this consultative approach, salespeople have clarifying conversations with their customers to get to the heart of their challenges and then position NetApp’s unique value in the context of the customer’s problems.

“The methodology allows salespeople to focus 100 percent on the customer,” said Gilbert. By focusing on value rather than products or price, salespeople are now able to create a shared vision with their clients.

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The Rollout

PMI developed a three-year rollout plan to transform the sales culture at NetApp. The first year focused on the learning and application of the Value-Focused Selling methodology, with the second and third year focusing on behavior change and sustainability of the concepts.

PMI used a blended learning approach to develop and launch the program within a five-month window. During development, the training and development team worked closely with the marketing team to create case studies for in-person training. This partnership helped ensure alignment and consistency of the content and presentation.

“It’s unusual to get this level of buy-in from marketing ahead of such a big event,” remarked Gilbert. “It was a breath of fresh air and a positive experience.”

In the lead-up to the two-day training event in Las Vegas, Nevada, the training and development team deployed three hours of e-learning modules

to introduce the framework to participants. When NetApp’s global sales team arrived in Las Vegas, they had already been exposed to the framework and were ready to learn how to apply it.

In-Person Training

The two-day training workshops brought together over 3,200 salespeople to learn how to apply the methodology, or Advanced Value-Selling, as NetApp coined the method. There were 25 rooms with over 100 people in each. Sitting at round tables, sales reps teamed up with district managers, who served as table coaches.

The first day covered PMI’s value selling approach, including the co-discovery of customer pressures, objectives and challenges and creating alignment around the needs of the customer. A whiteboard exercise illustrated how to effectively document the customer’s journey from challenges and objectives to solutions and value. There were multiple exercises throughout the session to engage learners as they workshopped real accounts and live opportunities. The day concluded with the application of the tools and framework to specific, relevant case studies.

On the second day, learners brought a live sales opportunity to workshop with their team members. Each table worked through the opportunities using the whiteboard exercise to discover customer challenges and objectives, and connect with company solutions and value. By the end of the day, over 1,000 whiteboards had been created, were taken back to the field and used with customers.

“The training introduced a new way for salespeople to have conversations with clients,” said Gilbert. “The customer-first approach really resonated with them, and everyone connected with the simplicity of the methodology.”

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Measurable Impact

Although still early in their deployment, NetApp is already realizing the benefits of PMI's value selling methodology. The simplicity of creating a customer-first mindset and allowing the conversation to naturally flow from the customer's challenges and objectives to solutions and value resonates with both the sales team and the customers.

John DeMasi believes that the PMI approach has allowed his sales team to have more consultative conversations that uncover the needs of their customers. "We're not selling them anything but learning what they need and what their challenges are," added DeMasi. "Selling is hard enough. It's hard enough to understand your products. It's hard enough to show up on time. This is a very comfortable framework, because you're not selling anything. You're having a conversation."

Mark Goldberg, an account executive at NetApp, echoed DeMasi's sentiment and said he frequently uses the framework for strategic conversations. "It's very versatile and allows you to stay focused or broaden the conversation," he said. "It's a very healthy approach to running a meeting."

And customers are noticing the difference. "This approach has created a marked change in customer perception of NetApp," said Gilbert. In fact, he recalled one testimonial from a client, who said, "Vendors never talk to us about our objectives; they only talk to us about their products."

Goldberg has also heard positive feedback from customers on the thoroughness of the dialogue and conversations, which has made customers feel like they're being listened to as opposed to being sold a list of products. This approach enables Goldberg and other sales reps to keep drawing upon their customers' business objectives to continue the conversation, helping to create long-term relationships.

"The PMI sales methodology is valuable because customers are able to do most of the talking and show how to take the business forward," said Goldberg. "When used correctly, this approach has the ability to disarm people. It allows us to be more efficient and effective in the way we approach customer meetings."

To encourage the use of the framework, NetApp is tracking successes and communicating those wins across the company, engaging sales reps and reinforcing what works. Sales reps are encouraged

to share their success stories, which aren't just about closing a deal; they're also about the change in perception of the company through the eyes of the customer.

"Over our three-year rollout, we want to build Advanced Value-Selling into the DNA of our global sales organization and recognize people for their successes co-creating value with their customers," said Gilbert. "This new methodology is going to drive revenue, and it's uncovering more opportunity in customer meetings than ever before."

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