



Solving Solution Selling

by

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What is Solution Selling?

To illustrate how I would define the term "*solution selling*" let me begin with a personal anecdote.

Recently my car needed new tires so I drove over to my local car exhaust, brake, and tire center. I navigated my way through high stacks of tires and mag wheels to arrive at a service counter. The man behind the counter, Ken, greeted me. I knew that his name was Ken because of the embroidered patch on his shirt pocket.

Ken had a clipboard with a pad of paper on it. Starting on a new sheet, he asked me a series of questions, dutifully writing words and ticking boxes that reflected my responses. Did I want all-weather tires or performance? What size and profile? Which brand would I prefer? Did I want wheel balancing and new valves installed? Did I want my wheels aligned? Did I also want my brakes and exhaust systems checked while the car was on the hoist? The list of choices continued. After a few minutes he presented me with a quote, which I signed. 45 minutes later I was back on the street with a new set of all-season radials on balanced rims.

I was pleased with my purchase and with the service provided by the tire center. But was the experience that I had gone through with Ken behind the counter a solution sale? After all, hadn't I gone to the center with a problem of worn tires and, somewhat thanks to Ken, wasn't my problem solved? Well, the answer is - it depends, as we shall see in a moment.

First I want to dispel a couple of popular myths about solution selling. The first is that solution selling must involve complex products and services or at least products of significant value. According to the myth, if you are a salesperson for Boeing and the product you are selling is a 747-400, the complexity or value of the sale implies by its very nature that the sale is a solution type. Conversely, if the sale involves a pair of socks costing \$4.00 then, by implication, it must be a commodity-type sale.

Let me assure you that the even the least expensive product may involve solution selling, as we shall see in a moment, and the most expensive is not guaranteed to meet the solution sale criteria.



The second myth is the strange notion that if companies sell solutions, rather than products, they will somehow be more profitable. Not to say that this may not be the case but, in my experience, it is far from a cause and effect relationship - and I have yet to find anyone who has ever been able to articulate why they see a direct connection between selling solutions and profitability.

To answer the question: *What is solution selling?* let me illustrate how the same selling situation can be either solution selling or commodity depending on the situation.

Imagine that you live in an age that predates the modern drug store, the time of the apothecary. Imagine now, that on a particular day in that era, you find yourself suffering from a pain in your stomach and chest. Today we might easily recognize this pain as heartburn but at the time of the apothecary, to most people, the cause of the pain would have been a mystery. All you understand is that you have a burning sensation, almost akin to having swallowed a hot rock. Although you have felt this before and it has gone away, on this day it is particularly acute, so it's off to the apothecary.

You walk in the door and are faced with a long wooden counter. Behind the counter from floor to exceptionally high ceilings are endless small wooden drawers and glass jars. Each of these drawers and jars contains an amazing array of potions, lotions, salts, minerals, powders, pastes and liquids.

You walk up to the counter and are greeted by the chemist, a most serious individual. He asks you a series of questions. Where is the pain? How long have you had it? Have you had this before? What did you eat last night? How much Meade do you usually consume in an evening? After listening carefully to your responses he turns to those drawers and jars, collects an assortment of "ingredients" and mixes them together in a pestle and mortar, then presses the powder into 3 small round pellets. He instructs you to swallow these pellets with clean water, one immediately (which you do), one when the sun goes down today and then the last one when the sun comes up tomorrow. Feeling significantly better already you pay him, thank him, and leave happy.

Fast forward to today. Knowing that you are likely suffering from indigestion you walk into the local drug store and, without even talking to the druggist, pick up a bottle of Tums, perhaps a bottle of water and swallow a few down the hatch.

The Keys to the Solution Selling Process

The first scenario would be considered a solution sale while the second would not, even though the buyer in both cases apparently had the same need. The key that differentiates these two selling types is whether it is the buyer - or the seller - who has responsibility for understanding the situation and building the solution.



Paradoxically, solution selling is based, at least at first, less on the sales process and more on the purchase process. For a solution selling process to even exist two things must be happening in the mind of the buyer.

First, the buyer must perceive a *need* for value from the organization beyond the individual products or services being sold. This value usually takes the form of expertise, from the selling organization or its representative, which the purchaser believes is necessary to make a good purchase decision.

Second, they must perceive the prospective supplier, and its representative, as having the credibility to deliver that expertise while along with the purity of motivation such that the supplier's power of knowledge will not be used to take unfair advantage. In other words, the buyer must feel sufficient trust in the supplier and the representative to be willing to surrender the design of the solution to that organization.

In our apothecary scenario you knew that you had a pain but you had little or no idea what caused it or what to do to cure it - you just that wanted it to go away! In the days of the apothecary, the chemist would have been viewed as a respected individual with considerable training in human physiology and chemistry. Likely, you would have had faith in this individual's capability to prescribe and sell you a solution to your problem. On the basis of that trust, and the urgency of your symptoms, you would have been quite willing to answer the questions that the chemist posed in the diagnostic phase. You would have answered all these questions truthfully and honestly, adding information wherever you thought it would be helpful for the chemist to understand your particular situation. Then you would have listened attentively whilst the chemist prescribed the remedy and the instructions for use.

Now contrast the apothecary scenario with that of the drug store. Common knowledge of the human body has increased dramatically in the past 130 years so. In this case you knew you had heartburn pain, likely caused by the numerous tacos that you consumed the previous evening. You also knew that all you needed to make the pain go away was a few Tums, and that it would be helpful to swallow the Tums with a bottle of water. You chose to go to the nearest drug store, walk to the aisle, pick up these commodities, and pay at the cash.

In the case of the apothecary, the chemist needed to ascertain the cause of your problem from the symptoms and information that you provided and then concoct the appropriate solution. This is the key element of solution selling. In the modern-day drug store scenario, it is you - the customer - who has self-diagnosed the problem and has determined or self-prescribed the components of the solution. In this case you don't believe that you need a solution selling approach because you already know what it is that you need and want.



When Not to Solution Sell?

Let's imagine now that you faced a solution selling process when you walked into the drug store. In fact, let's imagine that you walked into the apothecary but that you had modern-day knowledge about your problem and the likely solution.

Gone are the rows of aisles and products, replaced by the counter, the chemist, and the bottles and drawers. What you want is a pack of Tums and a bottle of water. But the chemist has never heard of Tums. Whatever potential the chemist had for establishing credibility with you is now gone. The chemist now proceeds to ask you a number of questions. You view this as slowing down the overall process and as confusing, frustrating, even frightening. Why is he asking you about the last time you had your blood-let and what possible connection could there be between your case of indigestion and the removal of your nuciform sac!

You resent answering the questions and give only brief uninformative responses. The chemist becomes exasperated and tells you that he can't help you unless you answer his questions fully and honestly. Finally, in total frustration, you leave the apothecary without a product or solution and with your indigestion worse than ever!

The moral of this story is that if your customers truly are self-diagnosing and self-prescribing, don't bother trying to sell them a solution. Have the equivalent of the drug store aisles with the products on display for them to select and buy. Because they perceive no difference between one drug store and another, their purchase decision will be based almost entirely on price. The supplier must have a very efficient and low-cost selling process in order to capture and keep the client's business. As an aside, that is why we are seeing so much in the way of commodity purchasing being done over the Web. Companies that try to solution sell to prospects engaged in this style of buying will not only fail to capture customer loyalty; their process will be seen as a purchase barrier that will likely lead to frustration and loss of business.

Solving Solution Selling

We have already seen that there are two keys to starting a solution selling process: the prospect must see a need for a solution sale *and* they must perceive the supplier as credible and trustworthy such that they are willing to allow the supplier to design the solution. If customers do not see themselves as capable of self-prescription then the solution selling process can begin. Questions must be asked in such a way as to develop a full understanding of the situation and, at the same time, establish the necessary trust and credibility. When the prospect starts to respond to questions with such statements as "That's a good question" or "I never thought of that", this is a good indication that the supplier is successfully demonstrating expertise, increasing credibility and establishing trust.



Once the supplier has gained a comprehensive knowledge of the prospect's situation an appropriate solution can be designed. The solution may consist of off-the-shelf products and services; it may include elements of customization, or it may be totally unique. It really doesn't matter *how* the solution is built - what matters is that knowledge of the prospect's desires, wants, motivation, fears, anxieties and pains, enables the supplier to define and present a solution that meets the prospect's *specific* needs and the prospect believes that only that supplier can provide the solution.

Solution Selling vs. Cross-Selling and Up-Selling

Let's go back to my friend Ken in the tire company. Was he solution selling? According to what we have described above, he was not. The pain in this case was my need for new tires. Of course I also needed them mounted, the old tires dealt with, and the wheels balanced. But if we look at the two elements that trigger a solution sell - need for expertise and credibility to provide it - neither was in place.

I did not perceive any particular anxiety about my level of knowledge as it related to the tire purchase decision. I knew I wanted equivalent replacement tires, nothing exotic or fancy. I did not perceive *that* tire center as possessing any special expertise or credibility beyond that of any other tire center. And I did not see Ken as a credible expert but merely as a guy in the employ of the tire center, possibly being paid commission to push certain things on to me. The questions he asked me were essentially from his chart, and were not part of any process that would build his credibility in my mind.

I was retaining control of building the solution. I knew I wanted four name-brand tires, and did not want the wheels aligned, the brakes checked, or new chrome wheels. So I was basically looking for the best price. I chose the tire center due to its convenient location and recently advertised specials.

Companies often confuse cross-selling/up-selling, or the bundling of products and services, as components of solution selling - they are not. These are simply an attempt to sell more products to a given prospect. In itself this is not bad, and can be the most efficient and profitable process in many cases, but it is not solution selling.

Solution Selling Out of a Box

The very notion that a sales force can be transformed to solution selling through a training course, or some other out-of-a-box approach, is flawed and it is this notion that can be blamed for the lack of success that companies have had in trying to implement "solution selling" processes. Successfully transforming an organization to a solution selling process usually takes an overhaul of the company's entire sales and marketing system. That transformation must be founded upon a realistic understanding of the prospects within the target market place and the knowledge that these prospects will view



the supplier organization and its representatives as credible enough to surrender the diagnostic and prescriptive phases of the sales/purchase process.

Once determined that the target market will indeed engage in a solution sales process, the organization then needs to ensure that all of the customer touch points, and all those that support them, are aligned and coordinated around this different style of selling. Gone are the company and product pitches, to be replaced with the tools that allow the sales representatives to ask questions and to develop a broad and deep understanding of their prospects. The sales organization must then be equipped to build solutions and present these in a manner such that each prospect believes their unique needs will be met. Examples of some of the differences between the sales and marketing system, in a solution selling process, and for those organizations not engaged in selling solutions are given in the table below.

Component	Solution Selling	Non-Solution Selling
Web Site	Building credibility as industry expert	Product descriptions
Customer Collateral	White papers and case studies	Product spec sheets, product brochures
Sales Presentations	Short, focusing on capability and philosophy	Lengthy product overviews
Selling Style	Ask questions and listen	Pitch and present
Proposals	Unique and custom	Boilerplate
Sales Cycle Length	Longer	Shorter

Changing the Way People are Buying

Can we take the individual that walks into the drug store and sell him a solution? As we discussed above, these prospects have self-diagnosed and self-prescribed; therefore the supplier is simply the organization that is going to fulfill their needs. We also discussed how, if we try to engage this prospect in a standard solution selling process, it will likely result in frustration, confusion, and even a lost sale. However, that doesn't imply that we can't change the way they are buying.

Going back to the two starting points for a solution selling process to occur – need for expertise and credibility and trust to surrender the diagnosis/prescriptive phase - let's explore how we may be successful. At the risk of stretching the analogy, let's imagine the drug store scene.



Just as our hero is picking up the Tums a very respectable white-coated woman passes by – obviously the pharmacist – and engages our suffering individual in conversation.

“Good morning. Didn’t I see you in here just last week picking up Tums? What’s the problem? Indigestion again? Do you have a minute? I may be able to see if we have something more effective? While I’m at it, do you mind if I take your blood pressure? You may have an ulcer or hernia. Here you are. These pills are considerably more expensive than TUMs but are designed to coat the stomach lining and reduce the inflammation. And why don’t you consider coming back next week for our health and fitness check-up? We can see if your problem has improved or if it’s time to visit the doctor.”

Many folk will still just grab the Tums and run. However, there is likely to be a portion of the market that now views this individual as a credible resource and may well sign-up for their check-up program. And, in so doing, they are surrendering the diagnostic and prescriptive process over to someone else.

Even my buddy Ken at the tire store might have been able to turn me into a solution sell prospect. But the nature of his questions would have had to bring out some unique aspect in my situation that would have caused me to re-think my conceived solution. For instance, if he asked me how happy I was with the original set of tires I may have responded that I liked them but would have preferred to have something with longer tread life. At that point, he could have shown me his expertise by telling me about some new tires on the market that, for a few dollars more, would give 30% more tread life without compromising the softness of the ride. Then, I likely would have seen Ken and the tire center in an entirely new light. I may have gone with his recommendation and would be far more likely to return when I needed new brakes or exhaust.

Apothecary or Drug store?

Look at your prospects - do they want to come in the door of an apothecary or a drug store? Is there an opportunity to understand their needs, sources of pain, and desires or will this just lead to confusion and frustration?

Look at your company - are you an apothecary with a credible chemist at the counter, or are you a drug store with aisles and products? If your prospects are only looking for a drug store, are your aisles easy to navigate and do you have a good choice of easily available product for them? If there is the opportunity to diagnose and prescribe, how well do your processes transform their shopping needs from the drug store to the apothecary? And are your diagnostic and prescriptive processes in place? Will they see you as a credible source and will they trust you with the responsibility of providing them with a solution to their needs?