

# How to Sell Professional Services

By Tony Reiss

As the markets for professional services became de-regulated and as partnerships competed more aggressively with each other to win new clients, firms started to look at how to develop greater skills in selling.

Partners accept intellectually that they need to develop such skills but most partners hate this aspect of their job. Just the word "selling" conjures up images of foot-in-the-door, getting-past-the-secretary, smooth talking about benefits and clever manipulative techniques to close that sale! How demeaning!

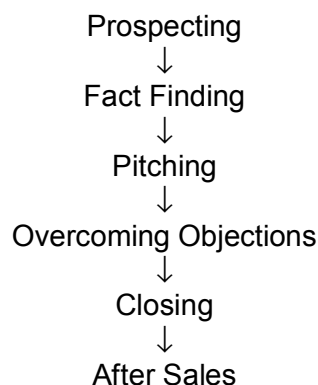
And it's not just the professions that think this way. Despite the fact that there have been more people employed in selling than manufacturing in Britain for several years now, sales people have a social standing probably just one notch higher than politicians! This stereotype is so strong that many sales people now have to call themselves consultants to avoid the stigma.

Most firms have probably, by now, run some sales training courses, even though they may have called them something else, like business development training. Some will have been judged successful but many won't. The main reaction from firms that have not had a successful experience with sales training courses is that the models used do not relate to the professional services market.

This article provides a synopsis of the different selling models that have been successful in the commercial world and helps to explain why the models that succeeded for the Procter & Gamble's of this world are useful but not wholly relevant to professional services.

## The Basic Selling Model

This model was developed more than 50 years ago by the American companies that sold either to other companies or sold direct to consumers or retailers. It can best be shown in the form of the following process:



The basic idea is that the company gets a list of potential customers, called prospects, and then goes about finding out whether they have a need for the product or service. This approach is sometimes called funneling. The sales person spends a good period of time listening to the prospect and gathering all the important facts before going into some kind of prepared presentation that matches the benefits of his particular products to his potential customer.

The classic skills of the sales person using this model are good questioning, good listening, the ability to let the prospect do most of the talking and the skilful dealing of objections.

### **Adapting the Sales Style for Different Prospects**

Then came a useful adaptation of this approach as it became clear that, because clients seemed to have different personalities, the good salesman needed to adapt accordingly. One of the main models used to demonstrate this was developed by David Merrill, a Denver psychologist, who proposed that there were four types of managers.

<b>The Analytical Type</b> Thinking	<b>The Commander Type</b> Action
<b>The Amiable Type</b> Relationships	<b>The Expressive Type</b> Intuition

In terms of being persuasive, the basic messages are:

With Commanders: Be brief and to the point  
Stick to business and skip the chit-chat  
Persuade by citing objectives and results

With Expressives: Entertain, stimulate, be lively  
Ask for their opinions  
Keep your eye on the big picture not on the technical detail

With Amiables: Take your time and learn the whole story  
Ask "how" questions to draw out their opinions  
Assure them that the decision at hand will not harm others

With Analyticals: Prepare your case in advance  
Be clear and avoid emotional argument  
Draw up action plans

This can provide some useful insight but in practice it is hard to classify your prospect short of giving him a diagnostic questionnaire to fill in. Some may superficially come across as Amiables but deep down they're Analyticals. So you need to be careful.

### **Strategic Selling**

In the mid-1970's came a methodology that was originally developed by Hewlett-Packard. It was called Strategic Selling and was further developed by Robert Miller and Stephen

Heiman. This approach was helpful for situations where there were several people in the client organisation that needed to be involved in the sale. Hundreds of companies put thousands of people through special training programmes to learn this new approach.

Miller and Heiman recognised that there were different categories of buyer:

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Economic Buyer:                     | Might be represented by the CEO, Board or Finance Director<br>Releases the money and wants to see value<br>Has veto to block the purchase  |
| User Buyer:                         | Will use or supervise the use of your service<br>The sale will affect them in their day-to-day jobs<br>Can usually get the sale without their approval, but often things go wrong afterwards and you lose the business |
| Technical Buyer<br>(or Gatekeeper): | Their job is to screen out on technicalities and say "no"<br>Often seen as a source of recommendations<br>Usually do not have authority to say "yes"   |
| Coach:                              | Their role is to guide you through making the sale, helping you interpret the politics<br>May not be there so the skill is to develop one  |

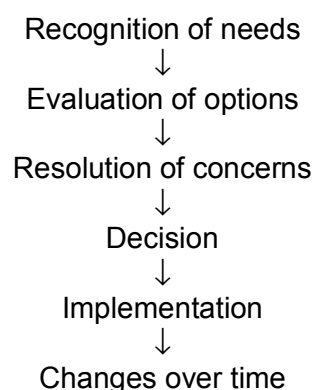
The Miller Heiman philosophy encourages the salesman to adopt a win-win approach and to look out for potential obstacles, which were called red flags.

The approach also involves developing a detailed plan to guide you through the sale to ensure you succeed.

### **Huthwaite and SPIN**

Then around the same time came Huthwaite who conducted a large piece of empirical research into what it was that successful sales people were doing that was different to the others. One fundamental difference was that they looked at the situation more in terms of what needed to be said or done to help the person buy.

The Huthwaite selling model (or should that be buying model) looks like this:



Huthwaite make the distinction between *implied* needs and *explicit* needs. For example, if a potential buyer says there is a problem, it doesn't mean he has a need to do anything about it! A lot of salesmen mis-read whether a prospect is giving them clear buying signals and waste time trying to sell to people who have no intention of buying!

To help the client recognise they have a need that you can help them address, Huthwaite developed a sophisticated technique called SPIN, as follows:

- S: SITUATION questions to seek out relevant background
- P: PROBLEM questions to help identify the buyer's difficulties
- I: IMPLICATION questions to allow the buyer to examine the consequences of these problems
- N: NEED PAYOFF questions to explore the value to the client of solving the problems

One of the interesting aspects of this model is that if you try to ask a PROBLEM question too soon (ie before you've asked enough SITUATION questions), the prospect lets you know by backing off.

A tried and tested methodology, but quite tricky to do. Ideally one should master the basic questioning and listening skills before attempting SPINNING!

## **Behavioural Science Systems**

This is another approach from a group that has carried out extensive research on the management of client relationships. They believe that clients have four distinct requirements and that each needs a different approach, as follows:

- **The Reliability Approach**
  - This approach emphasises a consistent approach to quality.
  - Fundamental belief that excellence sells itself
- **The Trust Building Approach**
  - This approach is often important where there is little apparent differentiation between providers of service
  - Emphasis on building a strong personal relationship
- **The Benefits Approach**
  - Focuses on the positive aspects of your firm's products or services
- **The Solutions Approach**
  - Most effective when client has unique or complex problems
  - Focuses more on working in partnership with the client

Partners that are successful developing work from clients have tended to know intuitively what each of their clients were looking for and found ways of delivering.

Behavioural Science Systems have developed a self-diagnostic tool to help partners assess their natural style.

This is an interesting approach and intuitively makes a good deal of sense. It also explains why there have been so many disagreements in professional firms as to the right way to sell services and why there has been so much tension on some of those key account teams. Typically an Audit partner should be adopting more of a *trust* approach and the Management Consulting partner more of a *solutions* approach.

### The Maister Philosophy

David Maister reminds us all that going out and winning new clients is not what it should be all about. He also believes that cross-selling is fundamentally flawed as a concept.

He argues that the essence of good selling is doing such a good job for your client that they ask you to do more and ask what other services your firm offers.

To help you do a great job he advocates really getting to understand your client's business and their market. Read their trade journals. Attend their conferences. Ask them to run seminars for you, rather than the other way round. Offer secondments. Show that you really care about their business and about them as people.

As a vision, this seems to make good sense, but partners need more help in terms of practical tips to being more persuasive.

### Reiss's Model for Selling Professional Services

All of the models or philosophies have something to offer professional service firms but they are incomplete on their own. There should be a different mindset in professional service firms, particularly for those wanting to develop long-term relationships with clients. The following table compares traditional selling as we all experience it and professional selling:

	<b>Traditional Selling</b>	<b>Professional Selling</b>
<b>Style:</b>	Manipulative Exploitative Adversarial	Facilitative Co-operative
<b>Mindset:</b>	Taking	Giving
<b>Time frame:</b>	Short term	Long term
<b>Aim:</b>	Get business	Develop trusting relationship
<b>Division between sales and delivery roles:</b>	Usually different person	Usually same person
<b>Attitude towards confidentiality:</b>	Bragging is common!	Very discreet regarding client names and work done
<b>Methods of prospecting:</b>	Advertising, cold mailshots, neon flashing lights!	Personalised letters and low key approach

I offer the following recommendations for partners:

1. **Learn to listen more and speak less.** As an expert in your field, you will find this difficult, but those who can learn this simple skill will be loved by their clients.
2. **Bear in mind that your potential buyers are different** and you may need to reflect a different aspect of your personality to impress each one. But don't try to be someone other than yourself. Everyone can spot a fraud.
3. **Consider whether there is more than one person** who has an influence on which professional firm gets the business. If there are other influencers, work out a strategy for meeting them and persuading them.
4. **Try to put yourself in your potential buyer's position.** Try to see selling more in terms of helping people buy.
5. **Distinguish between people who say they have needs (but never intend to do anything about them)** and those with real problems that they are not happy with.
6. **Consider what type of relationship your prospective client wants.** For example, is it solutions or a relationship of trust? If you don't know, just ask.
7. **Be confident about your ability to provide a service** that will be of value to your clients. Too many partners have inner doubts about this and their propositions come across unconvincingly. If you have doubts, your prospects will.

But the biggest tip I can offer concerns your whole attitude to bringing in business. If you go into your meetings with the objective of selling, you have probably lost before you have even started. Selling professional services is probably best done with a frame of mind that says:

- how can I build credibility, trust and rapport with this person
- what can I do or say that demonstrates that I truly care about this *organisation* and its success
- what can I do or say that demonstrates that I truly care about this *person* and his/her success

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