



The Value of a Sales Approach vs. Sales System

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



Some companies employ a “selling system”, a very structured sales process with templates, flow charts, scripts, and specific offers intended to make their sales process more efficient. When sales go down though, regardless of the reason, a common reaction is to reevaluate these selling systems. It is then that I receive questions like, “What selling system is the best?”, or “What selling system do you teach?” My response which surprises many is “We don’t use any of them and we don’t teach any of them.” The next question of course is “why not?”

In my experience, particularly in selling enterprise solutions, sales systems focus sales people on the wrong mindset and behavior. They focus on selling and in particular selling tactics. Great sales people instead focus on the buyer. They focus on the opportunity. They focus on principles, not techniques. They have a more external perspective giving them more insight, empathy, and providing the customer more value.

Great sales people focus on enabling the buying process, not on memorizing a selling system. When you do the former, you focus on the customer, not a mindless scheme. You get away from manipulating tactics. Instead of focusing on commoditizing specifications, you focus on your customer’s needs and differentiating yourself based on meeting them. You focus on the customer’s goals and what you can do to help reach them. You create long-lasting relationships. You don’t merely go through the motions as if checking off steps on a form. Instead of missing out on important subtleties that can increase the size of your sale or the value to the customer, you pick up on them.

To be clear, I’m not abdicating being influential. Having the ability to influence people is crucial in selling. The subtle difference is that sales people who employ an “approach” versus a “system” use their brain instead of following a standard set of questions, techniques, and steps. The memorizing they do is of principles. Unlike a tactic, employing principles enables adaptability. Principles are mental guideposts which give you clear direction, no matter what the circumstances.

For example, a selling system might tell you specifically how to establish your prospect’s needs before talking about the solution you will propose. Your system might tell you to say something like “how often does your current solution cause you a problem?” or “what does it cost you when your current solution goes down?” While these are great questions in some circumstances, they can be awkward in others. Better guidance would be to “find the pain” or simply “uncover their detailed requirements” and teach the sales person how to ask open-ended questions in general. That way, should a unique set of circumstances come up, they are better able to deal with them. They would be more likely to find a relevant question to ask than defaulting to one that doesn’t fit the particular context.

From a customer’s perspective, being put through a company’s selling system is like being processed. It is like being forced through a mechanical production operation. You feel nothing special or anything of unique value. You feel like a number. Even if the supplier was able to differentiate itself, it doesn’t. You get the same treatment, spiel, and feeling as does everyone else. The net result is that as a supplier you miss out on opportunities to differentiate yourself from your competition. You force yourself to compete on price. You miss opportunities to take advantage of unique circumstances that might increase the scope or profitability of the sale.



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To be a great sales person with significant influence and to truly differentiate yourself, employ a selling approach based on principles, not a system based on tactics. Identify the guiding principles by which your customers will experience the most value and let these principles form the basis for your selling approach. Put the principles into an order to give your sales approach structure and accountability, but not as in a sales system which limits your effectiveness. Instead of memorizing clever questions or cliché's, memorize principles and let them instinctively guide you through the customer's buying process.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.activatingyourambition.com), and president of Alpine Link Corporation (www.alpinelink.com), a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.