

Always Be Closing or Attract By Collaborating

An ABC guide to Solutions Focused Sales

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A different approach to sales

If you saw David Mamet's terrific film, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, you'll be familiar with the sales mantra 'Always Be Closing'. The unscrupulous salesmen follow the flimsiest of leads and ruthlessly close the deals on the most gullible punters. Wonderfully entertaining to watch, but it does very little for the positive reputation of sales people.

A Solutions Focused sales process looks rather different. Let's call it 'Attract By Collaborating', indicating a process that involves both parties working together to create a deal in which one is providing a service to help the other achieve specified outcomes.

The table below, based on information gathered by John Sproson during an open space session at the SOL summer university in Budapest 2007, compares a Traditional Sales approach with a Solutions Focused Sales approach. Our idea was to capture what might be distinctive in using Solutions Focus techniques to win business (whatever that business might be).

The two columns compare what might typically happen as activities lead to a sale.

| Traditional Sales | Solutions Focused Sales |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Whole market analysis | Communicate with market (e.g. round table discussions) |
| Cold calling | Know about what client might want |
| Define Client's Problem | Clarify what needs to happen |
| Propose your solution | Agree who will take next steps |
| Convince | Collaborate |
| Dealing with objections | Objection = valuable information. Finding and fulfilling clients' criteria for quality |
| Closing a deal | Negotiating, creating a deal |
| Signing contract first | Being useful to clients before you contact them. Giving a taste |

There are differences here that could make big differences. Instead of sales people facing indifferent or hostile prospects who mostly do not want to buy, we have clients who would prefer to buy. There is no need to sell if the client is not showing an interest. This alone removes the hugely pressurised feelings of having to sell, which prevent so many from even dipping their toes into selling their services. Yes, you still have to sell, as part of your business succeeding. But you do not have to sell to this person, in this conversation right now. The contamination of such conversations is over, by the minimal sacrifice of those few sales you might have been able to force by the old high-pressure methods.

Business success is founded on a different system of lead generation, using techniques such as round-table discussions and opt-in lists from presentations.

Dance and improvise

A traditional sales person has onerous responsibilities – expected to take the buyer through a fairly fixed script, knowing all there is to know about the product, service or solution, and how to deal with a wide range of objections that are likely to be raised against what's being proffered.

Our emphasis switches from an expert pushing a pre-determined solution, to a conversational expert, talking about what the client wants and how they will know they have got it. It's more of a dance or an improvisation, and the buyer will lead as much as the seller.

Together they co-create a proposal, and decide the next small steps towards implementation. This remains valid even if it turns out that you are not talking to the ultimate decision maker. The next step of your client may be to communicate with that decision maker.

The SF practitioner requires skill at 'not knowing', but of course needs some reason to be invited there in the first place. That still means you need to show credibility, and this may derive from experience and references – in the traditional manner – yet now there is more emphasis on constructing credibility during the conversation. Another shift in emphasis is away from guarantees about results, towards guarantees of best efforts, with confidence derived from previous successes and happy clients who are maintaining the relationship.

Our sales person is not concerned here (in this part of the conversation) primarily with money. Developing a relationship is more important and the aim is to be helpful. Instead of focusing on price – and the buyer's efforts to lower it – the conversation will include talk of benefits and value, with a more collaborative atmosphere creating possibilities of enlarging a project to create additional value. At the same time, a solutionist will be aiming to be brief, clarifying the point at which their services – on this project – will be superfluous.

One aim of SF is to work with what is already working, so an SF sales process will include asking the client what is currently working with respect to the project being discussed. As much as possible will be incorporated, to minimise the changes that have to take place.

Competition

How will an SF sales person fare in competition with other, more traditional sellers? Let's consider how you might be perceived if entering a competitive sales pitch with more traditional sales people. At first glance, there appear to be several advantages – such as a more collaborative approach to the sale, while you are armed with just as robust a process to form the framework of any negotiation. Are most sales opportunities competitive? Probably – the customer has a choice. We want them to make the 'right' choice. As sales people, we want them to choose us.

There is also the possibility of collaborating with the competition. More than one of my clients has asked me if I'd join forces with another service provider, for example. My positive answers were taken as an advantage.

Traditional sales are rewarded with commissions and bonuses. There would clearly be significant difference in running an SF sales team in how you set targets and rewarded them: these would start with team-based targets and rewards, increasing internal co-operation and de-emphasising the individual, competitive element.

A whole range of solution-focused concepts or technique can be applied to a sales process. So, for example, Solutions Focus practitioners will be familiar with the idea of 'more or less useful misunderstandings', and we might lend this to the traditional sales concept of Objections. Objections can then be re-cast as valuable information – perhaps about something we've not yet clearly conveyed or that one or other party has not yet misunderstood as usefully as possible.

Another example is SF conversation as a means of generating and discussing positive differences. We might discuss when aspects of the operation have been better, then ask if – with our help – you'd like more of that kind of thing. This seems a fruitful area for persuasion.

By developing these ideas, we can generate an exciting new sales methodology, changing the face of sales around the world. We will certainly find ways to improve our own sales records. We'll discover interesting insights and useful tips about the way SF grapples with a traditionally tricky set of situations. And we'll banish 'Always Be Closing' to dramatic history.