

CUSTOMERS DON'T KNOW HOW TO BUY - OR DO THEY?

By Sharon Drew Morgen



My friend Jill Konrath returned from the recent Sales 2.0 conference and told me of a complaint she heard several times from attendees: "Customers don't know how to buy."

This, said by sellers blaming buyers for not behaving as sellers would prefer. Or not responding appropriately to seller's selling patterns.

Let me reverse the issue: Sellers do not respond appropriately to buyer's buying patterns! Indeed, have they helped their customers:

- manage the range of internal decisions they need to make as they construct a buying decision?
- discern their criteria for resolving a need that resides within a tangle of other problems?
- identify the criteria for adding a solution to their status quo in a way that won't create disruption?
- discover the most efficient route through the breadth of decisions and decision makers, to help them manage their newly-challenged organizational issues with stakeholders, budgets, and personnel issues?

THE SYSTEM BEHIND THE BUYING DECISION

I suspect buyer's criteria for buying are different from what sellers would like them to be. It's always been that way (which accounts for sales' abysmal closing ratios) given sales is based on product placement and need, rather than systems management.

How do I know? Because after 15 years as a very successful sales person, I became a customer and realized what the problem was.

As an entrepreneur of a start-up tech company, my problem was never the 'need'. The 'need' was just the observable factor (think tip of the iceberg) of a conglomeration of internal issues within my system of people, policies, relationships, and initiatives; it was never resolved so simply as finding a solution to one of the elements. There always seemed to be a trickle down factor.

Indeed: there are a few givens that sellers forget when it comes to customers 'knowing' how to buy:

1. buyers don't want to buy anything. They want to resolve a problem. Period. They will resolve their problem with the most efficacious means, so long as it happens with a minimum level of internal disruption. If it means using a work-around that might fit better into the existent system of people and policies than bringing in a new solution or vendor, that's the decision. If the status quo – incomplete and problematic as it might be – is better than having to shift initiatives, dislodge jobs, or uproot long standing and collegial vendors, then the status quo is the best resolution.

An outside observer, such as a seller, cannot understand the ramifications of a customer's decision when there is so much more than just the Identified Problem at stake.

2. sales treats an Identified Problem as if it were an isolated event. It forgets that the Identified Problem was created over time, by a series of idiosyncratic decisions and adjoining elements that continue to hold the Identified Problem in place. Invariably, there are a series of problems – long standing personnel issues, problematic initiatives or relationships, new rules being developed but not completed – that circle the Identified Problem like a vine; one piece cannot be resolved without consequences to the rest.

Think Pick-up-Sticks. When you played that childhood game, remember how many sticks you had to pick up before you got to the primary one? And remember how difficult it was to avoid moving the sticks because they were all so intertwined? This is what a client's environment looks like, and the problem you can resolve with your product is that primary stick hidden within the tangle of others that need to be disentangled before they can buy.

Remember that, when you think you have THE obvious solution to a buyer's Identified Problem. The solution you have will only manage one single aspect of a buyer's Problem Space, and the elements that caused it are so far afield of your solution that even gathering data about the buyer's 'problem' will not elicit the necessary data to help you sell. This fact alone is responsible for the unnecessary doubling of the length of the sales cycle.

3. the job of sales has focused on uncovering need, creating a trusting relationship, and presenting an appropriate solution. It's ultimately about product placement and need. But imagine if your job included helping buyers manage all of the non-problem-related internal issues they must manage BEFORE they were able to make a decision on the solution. Imagine if the first stage of sales was to teach customers how to manage their internal people/policy/personnel/political decisions, much like figuring out how to safely uncover the lead pick-up stick. They have to do it anyway – with you or without you. They might as well do it with you.

The time it takes buyers to come up with their own answers is the length of the sales cycle.

SALES DOESN'T SUPPORT SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

Instead of blaming customers for not knowing how to make a buying decision, maybe you can blame the sales profession for not giving you the skills to truly support and manage all of the decision criteria that buyers must address before they choose you.

No matter the industry or the size of the sale, whether it's on the phone or in person, buyers have to somehow resolve a problem by not upsetting the rest of their status quo, and by managing the adjacent problems simultaneously. And your solution is merely one aspect of the types of decisions necessary.

Buyers must figure out how to solve their entire tangle of issues that have created their imperfect status quo. Your solution may be one of the elements that will address their resolution. But they also may discover that buying your product – or any product - may not be their best solution.



[Check out 2 free chapters of *Buying Facilitation: The New Way To Sell That Expands & Influences Decisions*](#)

Your choice is to sit back and wait for them to buy – or not – or call and call and call, and lower your price, and make-nice, or add another set of skills to your sales skills. You can use [Buying Facilitation](#) to help buyers recognize and manage all of the internal, idiosyncratic, systemic issues they need to address as they resolve their Identified Problems. It's not sales – it's a precursor to sales, but a skill you might want to consider in this new economic environment. Again, buyers have to do this anyway. They might as well do it with you. What else do you have to do now anyway?

Every sale is now a complex sale due to internal, endemic issues that we (as outsiders) can not understand. Enter the buy-seller relationship as a decision facilitator first. Then you can either accelerate the ultimate decision one way or another, or you can get on the decision team.

Customers know how to buy. They just aren't making the decisions you want them to make in the way you want them to make them. And, by focusing on product sale and need, you're not helping them.