

5 Vital Components Of Successful Client Interviews

Tomicide Solutions

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[Blog entry](#)

As an old Chinese proverb says, “Victory goes to the one with superior forces at the point of contact.” In the age of the knowledge worker, superior force really means superior knowledge. But not superior knowledge to close the sale, but superior knowledge to establish whether or not there is a mutually beneficial reason to do business together.

In normal peddler-type sales situations, since the goal is to loosen the buyer’s purse strings and take as much of his money as possible, the first meeting is usually brutal and forceful in order to get the money.

The Basic Premise

We know that the traditional sales model is¹...



5% Qualification: Everyone with a pulse and a wallet is qualified based on the salesperson’s subjective judgement. Very few or no objective qualifying criteria.

15% Needs analysis: Everyone needs the great stuff the salesperson sells.

35% Presentation: If you can’t dazzle them with your brilliance, than baffle them with bullshit. That’s what most sales presentations are: A PowerPoint-driven intellectual orgasm for salespeople and intellectual rape and torture for buyers.

45% Closing: The salesperson and the buyer duke it out. The salesperson is willing to make the sale at any price, often even under cost.

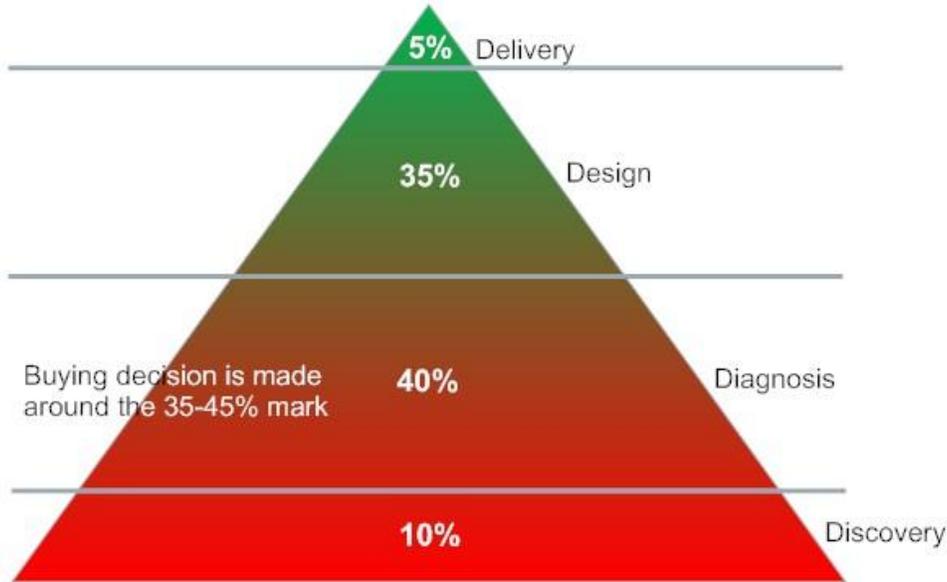
...Leading to unstable, typical superior-subordinate relationships.

¹ I’ve adapted this and the next model from Jeff Thull. And since he’s hit the nail on the head, there is no point in my -reinventing the wheel. I think his model is rather brilliant and excellently demonstrates the difference between the ways how vendors and industrial authorities sell.

Buying decision is made at the very end of the lead conversion process, after sellers have invested a lot of time, money and effort to please buyers. This is a truly adversarial process.

But when you sell your solutions as a respected and sought-after industrial authority, you can't jeopardise your brand by employing hyper-aggressive hucksters with smooth objection-handling comeback statements and tricky closing techniques.

"In the trusted advisor" situation, you have to employ straight shooters not tricksters. So, the model somewhat changes...



10% Discovery: Do we have a mutually beneficial basis for working together as peers?

40% Diagnosis: A collaborative discovery of what causes the buyer's experienced symptoms and what impact of the negligence of addressing this symptom.

35% Design: A collaborative creation the right solution that addresses the real cause.

15% Delivery: The collaborative implementation of the jointly created solution.

...Leading to trust and respect based peer-level relationships between collaborators.

The buying decision is based on the buyer's problems not on the seller's solution. A solution in isolation is useless.

Buying decision is made at the 34-45% mark of the process, so sellers don't have to invest a lot of resources to discover whether or not there is a sale.

Here are some of the differences between the two approaches...

Vendor Selling	Expert Selling
Objective: Sell something... Anything	Objective: Diagnose prospects' situation and jointly decide whether or not there is a mutually beneficial basis for working together to improve the current situation

Vendor Selling	Expert Selling
All prospects will buy... with more or less manipulation	Prospects self-select whether or not they are ready and willing to change their situations
Always be closing. Don't take no for an answer and keep hammering prospects	Always be leaving. Allow prospects to decide what they want to do.
Persistence pays	Persistently chasing bad business and non-ready prospects is idiotic and wasteful resources
Good salespeople can anything to anyone	Good salespeople with good prospects can make the right decisions as to what to do next.
Prospects know exactly what they need and salespeople can just deliver it	Prospects know exactly what they want, but hardly ever know what they really need, so they need expert guidance.
Never walk away from business. Any business is good business.	Always walk away from inappropriate business and uncommitted prospects
Keep trying until succeed	Move on to committed prospects
Clients are always right	Clients need professional guidance to make quality decision and change
Not making the sale is the salesperson's failure.	Not making the sale is just one possibility of the prospect's yes/no decision.

What all this means is that you have to re-structure your buyer interview process if you want to be regarded as a respected expert not just another fungible vendor in hot pursuit of the next buck.

Some say you should listen more than you speak, but it depends on what you speak. I believe, asking smart questions is more important than simply being quiet and appearing to be listening.

Imagine you go to the dentist with a throbbing toothache, and the doctor just sits there listening to you. But listening to what?

The doctor has to ask deep and meaningful questions to establish what the hell is wrong with your teeth. Otherwise the doctor can be replaced with a goldfish. After all, fish are undisputed experts at being quiet.

A good first interview means that you can drastically reduce the length of sales cycles. I use the words interview because your buyer is the applicant for your help and support. That is, the buyer needs your services more than you need the buyer's money.

If you're a vendor, then the situation changes, because it's the buyer who conducts the interview, and when he say, "Jump!", all you can ask is, "How high?"

But that's a tooth-achingly painful situation, so let's not even go there.

So, let's see the five individual segments of the first interview...

1. Value discussion
2. Aspirations discussion
3. Afflictions discussion
4. Current reality (Both business and it) discussion
5. Engagement discussion

1. Values Discussion

This is a sort of discovery phase to see whether or not there is a mutually beneficial basis for working together.

In a way, you're looking for a match between your company's (hence your own) values, work and life philosophy and your buyer's values and philosophy.

The discussion revolves around the question...

"What's important about success to you?"

What creates trust here is that you let people talk about their deepest and most cherished values and the fact that you are listening to them. In this process, as people talk about their values, they articulate them what inspires them to reach new heights of success in their businesses.

2. Aspirations Discussion

Here some people may think that we're talking about positive IT goals, like...

"By the end of 2012, we want to have two 27" monitors on everyone's desk for increased productivity."

No. These goals are not server room goals but aspiration-driven boardroom goals. If at this moment you ask about server room goals, like...

"Ideally, how many terabytes of storage do you want to have in your server?"

"Ideally, how fast do you want your network to be?"

...you instantly reposition your company as a fungible vendor, yourself as a dreaded peddler and your offer as a lukewarm commodity.

These are the wrong questions, but many salespeople, especially the ones who have been heavily indoctrinated in product training but without business savvy, can't ask anything better. Due to their training, they try to ask leading questions, leading their buyers to signed purchase orders.

But the buyers can see this intention and often back off and scared by the heavy-handed approach.

So, the vital question in this section is...

"What are the tangible goals that will require you to realize the

values we discussed in the previous session?"

One more thought here. Goals can either be achieving something desirable or eliminating something undesirable.

Base on my experience, great clients' goals are about achieving something new. These goals are based on expected returns on investment. But those goals that are about eliminating something undesirable usually come from the types of clients we may not want to touch.

When a company is so cost-obsessed, then, I think, the end is near.

There is a world of difference between...

"We need a faster server, so we can improve responsiveness to clients. As a result, we can reduce client attrition and better elicit repeat and referral business."

And

"We need a faster server, so we can eliminate 80% of our customer service reps and automate their work. As a result, we could save \$1.3 million per year, which the senior executives could pocket."

Personally, I would never touch the second company. But that's only me.

3. Afflictions Discussion

These are negative goals, the kind of goals that are related to the elimination of an existing condition. For instance...

"We need to repair the roof over the server room because if it starts leaking right on the new server, then everything we've done is a waste of time and money."

Now we know that some great business goals depend on a new server, but the roof of the server room has to be repaired before the new server is set up and put into operation.

While aspirations are the proverbial accelerator of the project, afflictions are the proverbial brakes. There is no point in flooring the accelerator until and unless you release the brakes.

So, it's important that we address both afflictions and aspirations.

4. Current Reality (Both Business And IT) Discussion

The key question in this section is...

"Having discussed your biggest goals, the next step for us is to diagnose your current situation, because everything we set out to achieve must start from your current situation."

And under current situation, we diagnose clients' situation from two distinctive but related angles.

1. The current reality of business
2. The current reality of IT

Clients may be surprised that you want to know about their business issues and business goals,

but realistically, IT is a support function, enabling companies to build better businesses. And for that reason, you have to know how your IT solutions better support your clients' businesses.

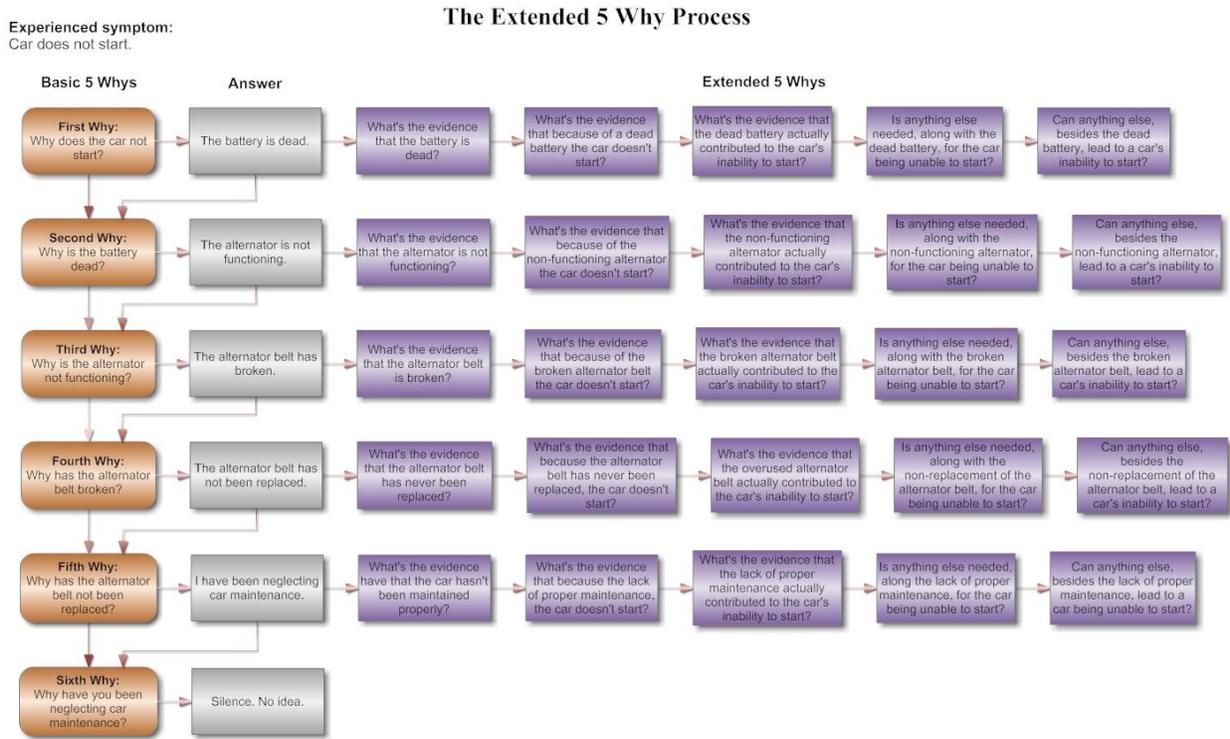
And this is the point where you want to take a closer look the company's business plan and IT plan. This is the only way to discover how improvement in IT will also achieve improvement in business.

You want to make sure that your client's IT strategy is in synch with overall business strategy. For instance, if your client projects to do web-based payment transactions in the 10s of millions per year, that client needs a sturdy server to handle a powerful payment system. Fiddling with Paypal from a laptop won't cut it.

Of, if your client wants to reduce and eventually eliminate \$1.5 million annual pilferage, then that client needs a serious security system above and beyond the owner's cocker spaniel.

And that system is needed even if your client is the proud owner of the ferocious Rabbit of Caerbannog² or the vicious Chicken of Bristol³.

Since this is a diagnostic process, you can successfully use Toyota's 5 Whys process. It's a questioning process to find the root cause of symptoms.



Enlarged version of this model is [here](#) (PDF) or [here](#) (JPG).

² See Monty Python and the Holy Grail

³ Ditto

5. Engagement Discussion

The key question for this section is...

"What you are looking at is your IT Roadmap. We've reached the point when we have to decide whether or not we want to work together to put your IT Roadmap into action and to help you to achieve your goals.

It means, we're going to create a comprehensive, specific, written step-by-step action plan to address 4⁴ key areas of your IT system.

- Are #1 explained
- Are #2 explained
- Are #3 explained
- Are #4 explained

And now we both go home, and in the next 48 hours we can ruminate over whether or not we want to work together. At this time, the day after tomorrow, we get on the phone and discuss our decisions.

If we have a mutually beneficial basis for working together, we both will know it. And if we don't, we'll know that too."

As you can see, this is not the typical salesperson approach. You're not selling per se. You and your buyer jointly establish whether or not there is a mutually beneficial basis for working together.

You have to be careful here because your behaviour demonstrates whether you're an IT professional or an IT peddler. Respected experts diagnose the situation and then improve it. Salespeople merely match products to superficial wants. And in my experience, wants usually are the proverbial magic pills and silver bullets, based on experienced symptoms, but needs are the proverbial complete and correct solutions, based on root causes.

Some Considerations

If this is a repeat client, you can go for a proper project, but with new clients, I prefer to go for small projects that are short in time and fairly low in investment.

For the first project, basically to test whether or not you and the buyer have a good match to work together, you can offer an IT audit with three investment options.

1. **Option #1:** Action plan (based on the buyer's explanation)
2. **Option #2:** IT audit and broad brush action plan (based on the your audit findings)
3. **Option #3:** IT audit and detailed action plan (based on the your audit findings)

Let's say the buyer takes option #3. You do the work, and then you can put forward an implementation plan for consideration. But that's a new project with that buyer for a new

⁴ Of course, change the number based on your services.

investment.

Yes, the buyer may hire someone else, but by now you his business and IT infrastructure better than anyone else. It just doesn't make financial sense to hire someone else at this point.

After the First Interview

So, 48 hours later you and the buyer get together and whether or not you're going to proceed to work together.

If the buyer gives you some hoops to jump through, just say...

"I guess we've just found a reason for not working together. Would you agree? So, why don't we both just go home and carry on with our lives as if we'd never met. What do you think?"

Most buyers backpedal and you can continue. But buyers must see that you're willing to stand up and walk away from the negotiation table.

Summary

Yes, the first meeting is always a bit tricky because we never really know what to expect, but I also believe that if you have a process that is drastically different from what most salespeople use, then you can win.

You simply impress your buyer with your non-salesy sales approach. And your willingness to walk away from business will make them hang in for dear life.

But this walking-away bit shouldn't be manipulation but your search for the path of least resistance. If the buyer is a struggle to work with before the project, he'll be the same later too.

And if you have good marketing in place, you have healthy deal flow anyway, so losing a buyer here and there is no big deal.

About The Author



Since 1998, after a 14-year industrial stint as an electronics/computer engineer, project manager and technical buyer, Tom "Bald Dog" Varjan has been working with privately held information technology companies and independent IT professionals to market and sell their complex, high-ticket and hard-to-explain IT solutions to high-end clients.

For Tom's free white paper, "More Brain Less Brawn: High-Leverage Client Acquisition Strategies For Privately Held IT Companies In The Knowledge-Based Economy", go to <http://www.varjan.com>