Introduction

On your last successful sales call, what made the customer buy? Was it what you said? No. It is what the customer felt about your offering. While logic makes people think, emotion makes them act. In fact, the very root of the word emotion is motere, the latin verb “to move,” suggesting that action and emotion are inextricably linked. Further, the strength of emotion needed to spur action is created by an experience, not sales speak. In this article we will explore the need to create an experience for your customers, and discuss specific applications for different selling situations.

Here’s an example that unfortunately has happened to most of us. Ever since the personal computer made its way into our homes the experts have exhorted us to back up our data. Most of us heard what the experts said, nodded our heads in agreement because we knew they were right, and did nothing about it. We just went about our daily business, storing more and more data, more of our personal lives, our finances, our kids’ pictures on our disk drives. And then that fateful day happened when the hard drive crashed, or the floppy disk melted or we left the flash drive in the airport. The day after, we were all about backups. Couldn’t back up frequently enough. Sometimes we’d make backups of our backups. We told our friends, “you really needed to back up your data!” They, of course, mostly went on blithely using their computers until their fateful day occurred. Why? Because it was not until we had the experience of losing the fruits or our hard work, or our vital information or our stored treasures that we had the emotional connection between the logical argument and the need to act.
The Aha! Moment

In sales we need to create a strong enough emotional state to spur action. We are not talking about having your customer break down in tears, or jump up to high-five you or shout “Eureka!” Whether we are trying to create the emotional connection with a problem our prospect is having or with his upside opportunities, ultimately we are trying to create an “aha!” moment. That moment when the buyer gets it. Because an “aha!” moment creates positive emotions and associations: elation, triumph, forward progress, achievement. It becomes clear to the buyer how he can make progress toward some goal or overcome some painful obstacle.

Path to the Aha! Moment

A logical expression of what you want in words alone rarely create enough of an experience to produce the emotional level necessary to provoke action, purchase a new product or adopt a new process. People who work with words so eloquently that they can create an experience with words alone are rare—and their books become best sellers; their speeches are recorded for posterity. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech was not a logical presentment of the reasons why racism is harmful. He did not even try to couch it in terms of logic. “I have a dream” are hardly the words you would use when walking into the typical selling situation. However, King used his words to create an emotional experience of what it would mean to eliminate racism and to live in harmony. Few of us have that level of speaking ability.
This is why in-person selling is so much more effective than advertising in terms of close ratios (not in terms of efficiency, which is a separate issue) and why remote sales techniques—e.g. tele-marketing, virtual selling—can have low success rates. This is also why TV advertising is so much more effective than radio and print. TV hits more of the senses and is therefore more likely to be able to create an experience in the viewer. The same words, the same message, the same image can be presented in a magazine, but the impact will be less. It’s not what you say that matters. It is what the listener experiences, and that is what you need to focus on to create a quantum leap in your selling success.

By the way, the ideas in this whitepaper are in complete congruence with the most accepted and successful sales techniques, like Neil Rackham’s famous SPIN selling. If you are familiar with SPIN selling you know the magic is in asking implication and need-payoff questions; e.g., what are the implications of your process being broken, or your customers not being able to find the product they want, or your sales force achieving 50% higher close rates? The focus on implications and payoffs is an attempt to get the buyer to have a richer experience of what you are discussing and create a strong enough emotional state that s/he will want to act on your solution.

How do you create the emotional state? The “aha!” moment? Is there a magic combination of statements you can make which will create the experience? Not likely. Even in successful sales calls the customers rarely remember what you said, because there is an ongoing dialogue taking place in their head. (If you doubt that, just think of how often you are already composing and refining your response while still “listening” to someone else speaking.) Therefore, it is not what we say, but what the person is saying to him or herself that is making the sale. In other words, the questions, answers, statements, reassurances which make up his internal dialogue. But how can we control, or at least influence that internal dialogue?
The Importance of Experiences

Believe it or not, quantum physics suggests an answer to our question. Quantum theorists tell us that “reality emerges from our process of observation, from decisions we the observers make about what we will see.”\(^2\) For those of us who aren’t rocket scientists: people believe what they help create \textit{and no amount of our talking and explaining takes the place of letting them create the realizations themselves}. In other words, we have to give our customers the opportunity to create the experience for themselves which will then lead to the “\textit{aha}!” moment which ultimately creates the sale.

Fortunately, there are methods for encouraging customers to create their own experience. The methods vary depending very much on what you are selling, your ability to capture the core message tangibly, and the expense/feasibility of providing a trial of your offering. The good news is that no matter whether your sale is concrete, like a consumer product or software program, or abstract, like a process, a service, or a change in conditions, there is a method for effectively creating an “\textit{aha}!” experience.

Five Selling Situations

The chart below illustrates the different selling situations and the corresponding methods for creating an \textit{aha}! moment which leads to sales.

<table>
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<th>Tangible offering (e.g., consumer product, software)</th>
<th>Conceptual offering (e.g., process improvement, change in conditions)</th>
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Selling Tangible Offerings

In-use experience. The best and most effective approach you can use to generate sales is to let your buyer directly experience what you are selling—often called “sampling.” This is sometimes very easy if you are selling a physical product. The most well-known example is test-driving a car. Next to a house, a car is the most expensive purchase most of us make and it is undoubtedly an emotion-driven decision; a fact which car manufacturers know well. For instance Saab has found that its best chance of competing with the likes of better-known Euro-sedan kings such as BMW and Mercedes is to get people behind the wheel of one of its models. The tag line "People who test-drive a Saab usually buy a Saab" isn't just wishful thinking, but is borne out by market research (although Saab won't quantify "usually").³ Some car makers give an incentive to take a test drive and Volkswagen believes in the impact of the test-drive experience to such a degree that they actually tried to create that experience virtually (a technique we will discuss later) through their advertising. In one recent spot, a Volkswagen salesman takes a woman on a test drive. She loves the vehicle’s acceleration so much that she floors it past a highway patrolman.

If you are fortunate enough to be able to present a sample of your product to the buyer you have a huge advantage. And if you are able to give both your product and the competitive product in order to highlight your advantages, so much the better. Marketing groups in consumer package groups companies sometimes underestimate the value of their salespeople having working, physical samples of their new products. A mock-up or “package flat” is good, but the real thing is quantum leaps better.

Similarly, most software companies have realized the effectiveness of a trial version and now offer time-limited, fully-functional demo software which allow potential buyers the benefit of in-use experience. The software model has the additional advantage of delivering the in-use experience for an extended period of time; long enough to make use of their product a habit (which experts say takes 21 days of continuous use). This powerfully transforms the emotional calculus from “what do I gain if I buy this product” to “what do I lose if I give it up.” Sellers in other industries would do well to adopt this extended use trial technique if it is possible with their product.
Before you dismiss sampling as not applicable to your product or sales situation, we encourage you to ask, “If I could give a sample, what would it look like?” The answer to this question may surprise you. Can you give a sample of a book or movie? On Amazon.com you can now read a few pages from the book before buying, and one film studio is releasing the first eight minutes of an upcoming film.

*Action steps:*

- Beg, borrow and steal to get a working model of your product (if you are selling a physical good).
- Be creative about what a sample could be.
- Don’t be afraid to give something away.
- Unless you are in the business of one-time sales (coffins?), then you are better off giving a little bit to get a happy customer.

*Proxy in-use experience.* In the frequent situation where you have a tangible product but nevertheless are unable to let the buyer try your product, the next best selling approach is a proxy in-use experience. The proxy experience gives enough of the information to the buyer that he can project to the full in-use experience. For instance, when selling a custom suit the salesman will often provide the prospective buyer two proxies: a swatch of the material the customer is considering and a suit of the same cut and size for the customer to try on. The customer can then combine these two proxies to project to the in-use experience, have a positive emotional reaction and make the purchase.

In the industrial market, it is quite common and effective to use samples of other customers’ products as “case studies” or proxies for the sale. Never pass up the opportunity to show your prospect live examples of your product, even if those examples are not directly related to the customer’s need. As long as some aspect or benefit of the solution you are selling can be experienced by the customer, you are one step closer to the “aha!” moment which locks in the sale. Remember, it is easier to make progress from, “this is great, now tell me how you customize it to my needs” than from, “tell me *again* what this is going to look like.”
**Example of a proxy experience**

- Sample of material
- Different product of similar weight
- Competitive product
- Sample of finish

*Action:* A proxy experience *always* involves an actual in-use experience of some sort, as opposed to virtual and projected experiences which are discussed below. To effectively apply a proxy experience you must:

- Develop proxies which allow the buyer to experience at least parts of your product’s benefits
- Give as broad a range of sensory or interactive experiences through proxies as possible
- Use a combination of proxies which give the buyer the best chance of projecting to a full in-use experience.

**Virtual experience.** You may want to resort to a virtual experience if you have a product which can be experienced physically (i.e., it is not an abstract concept) but is impractical or impossible to literally put in front of the buyer. For instance, travel agents typically don’t spray your face with salt water and turn on the heat lamp when they are convincing you to take a Mediterranean cruise. Rather, they try to create a virtual experience. This technique relies on the clinically documented observation that there is no physiological difference between the brain’s reaction to a well-imagined thought and an actual sensory experience. Our brains trigger the same release of hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) whether we hear the burglar breaking into our house or whether the ill-timed crash of a tree limb through the living room window makes us *think* we hear a burglar’s entrance.
Selling with a virtual experience is similar to using a proxy experience insofar as you are attempting to transport your buyer to a place which elicits the *emotions* associated with whatever you are selling, without them actually having the experience. The difference, however, is that virtual selling relies more on your buyer’s imagination since there are no proxies from which the buyer can build. Advertising is a ubiquitous use of virtual experience to sell and Madison Avenue ad agencies typically start with a creative brief which explicitly indicates what emotion the advertising is supposed to evoke. Television advertisers use every visual technique at their disposal; radio ads often include sound effects to help you “visualize” the scene and get into the experience.

One of the cleverer or more sinister (depending on your orientation) applications of the virtual concept exploits the strong linkage between scents and emotionally charged memories to create an “aha!” moment. These are sometimes called “Proustian moments,” after the French novelist Marcel Proust, whose lifelong obsession with recapturing the lost time of his youth was set off from the aroma of a *petit madeleine* dipped in lemon-blossom tea; an experience which filled him with “a feeling of inexplicable happiness.” Cinnabon, for example, entraps many walkers by with its purposeful broadcast of sickly sweet cinnamon scents, the inhalation of which can immediately trigger a salivatory reaction, happy memories of childhood and the unconscious opening and emptying of one’s wallet.

**Action:** Legions of books have been written about advertising and the techniques for building an effective picture inside a customer’s mind. Therefore, we will skip a recitation of techniques but note that when selling with a virtual experience, those same rules and techniques apply. A few general guidelines to create the most effective virtual experiences in sales situations:

- Be creative about ways to stimulate a virtual experience; use as many senses as possible to “surround” the customer
- If possible, convey the moment of emotional payoff; this is often referred to as the problem resolution
- Leverage your customers’ past experiences which are easily accessed and which are strongly associated with an emotion which will spur action
Determining Which Experience Method to Use for Tangible Offerings

The determination of which method to use—In use, Proxy, or Virtual experience, is a function of the cost of creating the experience versus the incremental power of the experience on sales. (See Figure below.) A careful evaluation of prior results and competitive results with different selling techniques may give some indication of the sales power of the different techniques, which can then be compared to the cost of producing a trial or proxy experience. However, few companies build truly powerful experiential selling processes, and it is almost always worth turning the question “Can we create an in-use or proxy experience for our customers?” into “How do we create an in-use or proxy experience for our customers?” Once you set your goal as creating the more powerful experiential methods, you may be amazed at the creative solutions you develop. At the very least, we recommend a test of the different methodologies to determine their power in your sales situation.

Selling Intangible Offerings

If you are selling a concept or a process rather than a product, you have the most difficult selling task of all, because it is the hardest situation in which to create an experience with the purchaser. In these cases there is no *direct* sensory implication to the buyer; rather, he or she has to realize an impersonal benefit from your proposition (e.g. increased profits,
reduced errors) then connect that benefit to the emotional benefit which drives the “aha!” and closes the sale.

Further, to be successful you also need to be talking to a buyer with strong enough strategic and conceptual abilities to be able to make the cognitive leaps from what is being presented, to the experience and the subsequent emotional associations. There is no question that conceptual sales are the most difficult, which is why salespeople who excel in this arena are often the highest paid and move up to higher levels in their organization.

There are two methods for creating the aha! moment in a conceptual sale: test experience and projected experience.

**Test experience.** In many cases you can demonstrate the benefits of a conceptual offering by running a small trial or test — particularly when the cost of test implementation is low. Keep in mind that the cost to the customer is as important or more important than your cost of running a test. The customer’s cost includes any financial outlay, time commitment, other resources which will need to be devoted to the test and, importantly, the expected cost of failure.

The robustness of your in-market test depends very much on the type of buyer you are facing and, especially, the expected cost of failure should the buyer roll out your offering beyond the test. Our experience is that in most cases sales research/testing does not need to be extraordinarily robust. Most sales do not require the rigor that the FDA demands of new drugs. Nevertheless, it generally pays to spend extra time in the design stage so that your test will head off buyer objections:

- If the impact of the offering is not undeniably obvious, a test control for comparison should be included. For instance, if you were demonstrating the effectiveness of a
sales training program with a trial on a handful of your client’s salespeople, you also need to set up a control group with similar quotas, customers, and territories.

- Ensure that your measurement protocols actually measure the benefits you are trying to demonstrate. Don’t just measure what is easy to measure and fall short of the elements which are needed to create an experience. For instance, if your customer is highly motivated by profit, but your test only measures sales, you must find a way to reasonably estimate profit. A buyer engaged in correcting the assumptions you used to translate sales to profit is more likely to reach an aha! than a buyer whose profit hot-button is never pressed at all.

- If at all possible, demonstrate reliability through a series of small tests for your customer. For example, multiple test locations, multiple runs through the test process, or tests under different conditions will all help make your results more convincing.

Delivering positive results from a test of your offering does not suffice to create an effective experiential sale. In fact, setting up and implementing a successful test of your offering is no guarantee of sales success. Many salesmen have had the frustrating experience of completing a successful test, presenting the results and still finding buyer resistance. Often, this is because the total offering experience is not strong enough to spur action.

**To test or not to test?**

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Financial outlay
+ Time commitment
+ Expected cost of failure
Test offering

Cost

Financial outlay
+ Time commitment
+ Expected cost of failure
Don't test offering
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Action: These guidelines will help you have better results from your investment in in-market tests:

- Design the test so that the measures are aligned with criteria which will have an emotional impact on the customer. Identify these key measures with implication questions and need/pay-off questions. (See Neil Rackham’s *SPIN Selling* for more information on these types of questions.)

- If at all possible, design the test so that the offering can be observed in action; i.e. a change in process or environment can be observed and experienced by the customer while test results are being generated. In this way the customer is connected experientially to the test results. For instance, if you are testing a change in the manufacturing process, have the customer visit the manufacturing floor and observe the new process and talk to the workers on the floor.

- Whether or not the test can be observed in action, consider building an experiential selling tool which depicts or simulates the test as well as the direct connection to the customer benefit.

Projected experience – How do you create an aha! experience with your buyer when your offering is conceptual it is too expensive, impracticable or impossible to run a test? This is the hardest selling situation of all and requires the use of a projected experience. The good news is you are probably already incorporating a key component of creating a projected experience without realizing it: story-telling. Story telling is the ability to weave a tale which draws your buyer in.

Note that a story is different from a dry recitation of the facts which support your sale, or a passionate demonstration of superiority versus your competition. A story builds from an initial sketch to a fully articulated landscape, with extraneous details included to help the buyer travel from his place of skepticism to your favorable scenario. (For an interesting read on this concept, pick up Annette Simmons’ book, *The Story Factor*.) Of course, few buyers are going to sit for hours with rapt attention while we recite the Arabian Nights, so it is critical that you refine your story and polish it through practice, drill, and rehearsal.
Some sales coaches talk in terms of “finding the customer’s pain,” then presenting a solution which provides relief. This approach is exactly right; however, it will only get you halfway home because you are still trying to create the experience of pain relief yourself, rather than finding a way for the buyer to create his or her own experience. To truly excel at conceptual selling you also need the ability to go one step further and have the buyer tell the story to himself. More accurately, you need to tell the story with your customer. When the buyer helps build the story he is projecting himself into the situation, molding the experience and moving toward the emotional catalyst for action.

In practice, adding an experiential component to your story can range from hokey to extremely sophisticated. Some leading edge sales forces are turning to custom experiential selling tools, which are usually interactive programs designed to allow your buyer to create your intended message by entering his own situation or data. Consumer Reports’ website and CarTalk.com have a version of this type of tool which is used to help car shoppers wade through the myriad choices. Cisco Systems uses a very slick tool in their presentations which allows an IT executive to model the savings he will realize if he adopts their system. These types of sales tools can be an enormous boon to your selling process, since they are specifically designed to allow a buyer to help build create the story and project to the successful benefit.
Even if you employ an experiential sales tool, conceptual selling situations usually have a relationship component also; therefore you generally will want to retain responsibility for connecting the projected benefit to the emotional win, rather than relying on the tool to make that connection.

**Action:** To leverage projected experiences in your selling approach:

- Understand the motivating factors which will lead to your desired action. What constitutes a win in your buyer’s eyes? Maybe it is increased profit, but maybe there are “softer” motivators like recognition for taking a bold leap, or pride in being on the cutting edge of the industry.

- Take the time to envision all the ways you can create a connection between your offering and the motivating factors. Remember, your ability to create an experience which creates emotions then actions is directly related to the perceived size of the win and the bond between your offering and that win.

- Ensure you have the compelling points of your sale clearly defined. More importantly make sure you do have a compelling story before creating a projected experience, lest your buyer’s feelings coalesce around disapproval.

- Create an engaging gateway into the experience. A slick looking software tool or an unusual or intriguing device might initially be dismissed as “fancy” or “gimmicky,” but if it draws the buyer in then it has done its job.

**Conclusion**

The irony of writing a whitepaper entitled “Nothing You Say Matters” is not lost on us, and the truth is you will need to experience many of the techniques we have described yourself to have your own aha! moment. An old story tells of a toothbrush salesman who appears fairly dim-witted to his colleagues, yet outsells them by a mile month after month. Finally an outclassed salesman goes to see the leader in action and finds he has set up a booth announcing “Free sandwiches!” A passerby sees the sign, takes a sandwich then promptly starts spitting and spluttering. “This tastes like rotten eggs!” cries the passerby. “It is,” says the salesman, “Wanna buy a toothbrush?!” Whether you are selling pretzels or processes, new clothes or new ideas, you will gain incremental sales when you focus less on what you are saying and more on what your customer is experiencing.
References


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