# CRACKING THE CLIENT CODE

## Five Insights to Becoming your Client's Preferred Vendor

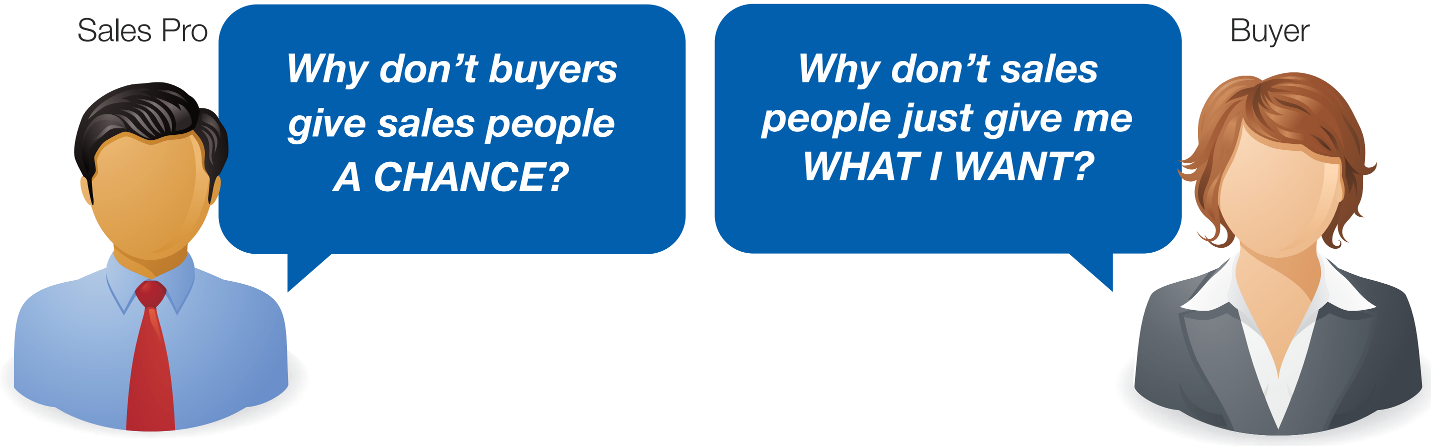
By The Canadian Professional Sales Association

Canadian Professional Sales Association
L'association canadienne des professionnels de la vente
*Since/Depuis 1874*

# CRACKING THE CLIENT CODE:

## 5 Insights to Becoming your Client's Preferred Vendor

Regardless of which side of the buyer-seller divide you fall on, you've likely felt that frustrating disconnect between buyers and sales professionals.




What's causing this tension, and how can we bridge the gap to create more mutually beneficial client-seller relationships? To answer that question, we sought out a panel of high-profile buyers and asked them to share their no-nonsense perceptions of what it'll take for sales professionals to go from good to great in order to gain and keep their business.

# THE PANEL

**Joel Marks**
Director of Merchandise
Hardlines Home Hardware

**Steve McCauley**
Branch Manager
Motion Industries

**Tara Finniss**
Marketing Manager
Sunstar Americas Inc.

**Bryon Moore**
General Manager
Grey House Publishing

**Shelley McInnis**
HR Business Partner
CP Rail

**The following factors were highlighted in our discussions with the panel as critical to contributing to the gap in client-seller efficacy:**

- **BUYER CYCLE DEMANDS AND RESTRICTIONS HAVE CHANGED**
- **SALES PEOPLE HAVE NOT YET ADJUSTEDTHEIR OWN PROCESSES TO ACCOMMODATE THESE CHANGES**
- **INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SALES & BUYERS ARE UNNECESSARILY COMPLEX**

### *What Does the Changing Sales Landscape Mean to your Clients?*

When asked what is behind the changes in the buyer cycle, our panel of buyers all agreed that the recent recession in the economy over the past several years has had a palpable impact on their businesses and their roles. More than ever, buyers are feeling the pressure to do more with less; they are given less time, resources, and finances, and yet they are expected to produce bigger and better results year over year.

In turn, these added pressures put a strain on buyer relationships with their vendors; they expect their vendors to understand the restrictions they're facing and continually adapt their own cycle to effectively deal with their changing needs. As Joel Marks, Director of Merchandise at Home Hardware put it: "Sales people have the toughest job in the world." Tough is right – they are seen as the bridge between industry and consumer, the all-seeing problem-solver, and the expert curator of relevant information. They are the business world's front-line, strategic consultants. And buyers expect them to excel in that role, because more than ever, they *need* sales professionals to help them overcome the new demands and challenges of the buyer cycle and be their go-to partners in business. According to Tara Finniss, Marketing Manager at Sunstar Americas Inc., because the stakes are higher for purchasing decisions these days, buyers "need sales professionals to make [them] look good."

# DO YOU THINK OF YOURSELF AS YOUR CLIENT'S STRATEGIC PARTNER?

It's time to step up your game. This guidebook will take you through some ways to do it.

## IN THIS GUIDEBOOK

You'll gain insights from the buyer's perspective on the following:

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE SALES PROFESSIONAL

The necessary evolution of the sales professional is evident now more than ever. Sales people who stay static and chose not to adapt will be left behind. Our panel of buyers all voiced the same belief that what is needed to bridge the gap is for sellers to step up to the challenge and go from being good at what they do to being great sales professionals. They are looking for sales people who can demonstrate a commitment to elevated standards of performance and service, adapting to the ever-changing sales landscape.

When asked how many of their current vendors they would consider to be great sales pros, all the buyers stated shockingly low figures within 8-20%. Considering how many different sales people these buyers are exposed to on a daily basis, these figures are certainly disheartening and emphasize the vast room for improvement in the sales profession as a whole. In other words: We've got some serious work to do.

We surveyed sales people, themselves, and their perception seemed to be in line with that of the buyers (see Figure 1). Clearly, they feel the disconnect just as strongly as buyers. One could argue that many factors are likely contributing to this efficacy gap, not just sales performance.

However, as professional sales people, it's the factors that we can control that we should focus our energies on. Marks poignantly remarked that, just as it is for buyers, the role of the sales professional is moving from responsibility to accountability. Great sales people recognize that doing your job is not enough anymore; they eliminate excuses and are accountable for propelling their own results forward despite compounding factors that may be out of their control.

**HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOURSELF AS A SALES PROFESSIONAL?**

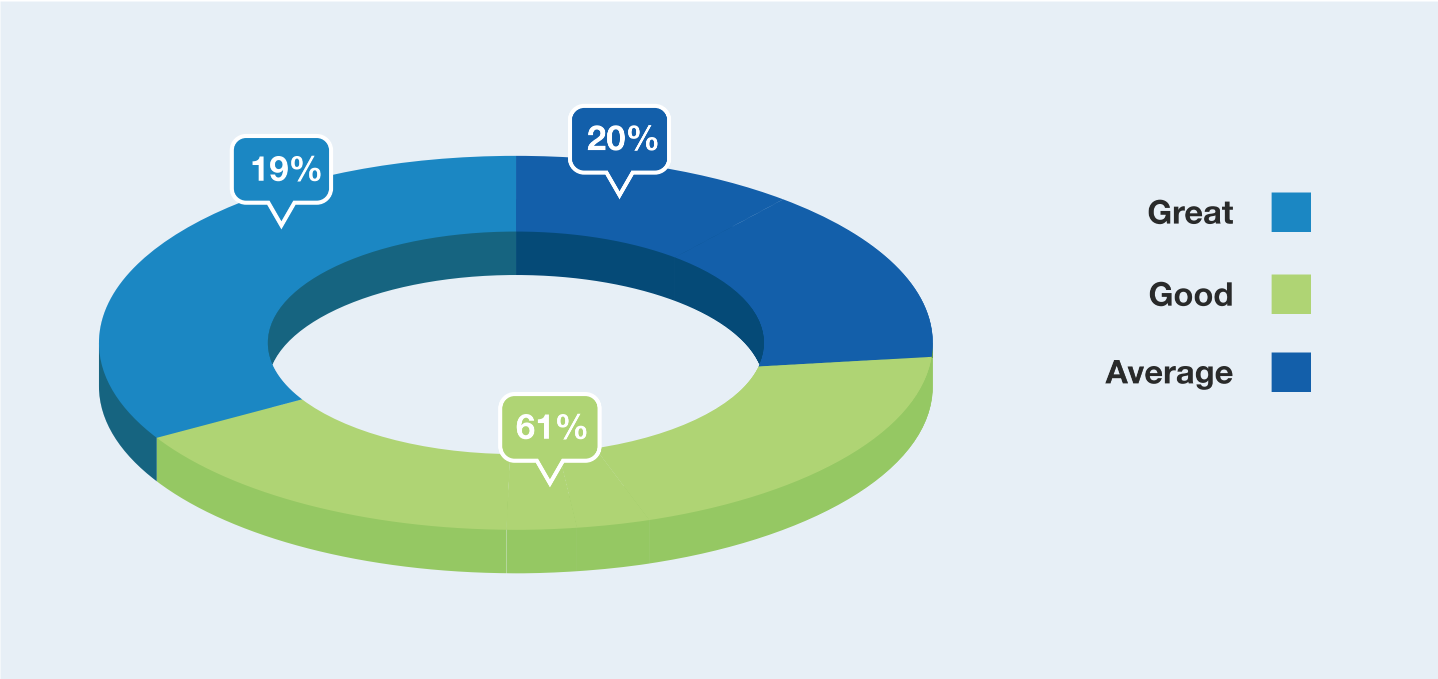



Figure 1

# BE ACCOUNTABLE:

Take your professional evolution into your own hands

# 4 CONSISTENT PRACTICES TO GET YOU FROM GOOD TO GREAT

## REFRESH FOUNDATIONAL & DEVELOP ADVANCED SALES SKILLS

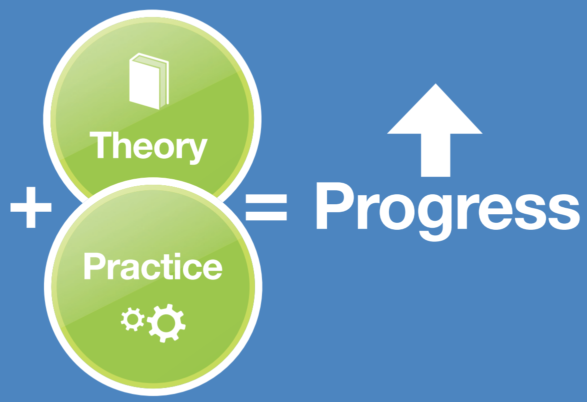

## INCREASE SELF-AWARENESS & COMMIT TO HIGHER STANDARDS

**CSP**

**DESIGNATION**

CONTINUAL INTROSPECTION, OBJECTIVE EVALUATION AGAINST COMPETENCIES, ELEVATED PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

## PRACTICE ON A CONSISTENT BASIS




## TAKE RISKS & LEARN FROM MISTAKES

# UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES THAT IMPACT YOUR CLIENT'S DECISIONS

A recurring point of emphasis among our buyer panel was that "buyers are expected to do more with less." Before calling up your prospect and trying to pitch your product or service to them, it's important to get a handle on the key factors that are currently affecting how they make their purchasing decisions. Armed with this knowledge, the sales conversation becomes infinitely more productive for all parties involved.

**"BUYERS ARE EXPECTED TO DO MORE WITH LESS."**
***– Tara Finniss***

## TAKE THE TIME TO TRULY UNDERSTAND THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IMPACTING YOUR CLIENT IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

### Financial Constraints

Since the economic downturn, buyers are being pressured to keep costs down as much as possible, and often have budgets that have been tightened to reflect that constraint. So while a great sales professional does not just focus on price in the sales conversation, avoiding price altogether is not wise either. Marks said, "Anybody that says price isn't important, I think they're a fibber." He went on to emphasize that price is a critical part of the whole package. This constraint on buyers affects their expectations of negotiations with sales people and how they compare competing vendors.

### Reduced Resources

In addition to tightened financials, our panelists also mentioned that these days, when they make a purchasing decision, the stakes are higher in general. So in order to reduce risk, buyers are seeing other resources being pared down as well. Finniss said, "We're expected to grow our business constantly, yet we're given less resources to be able to do that with." Great sales professionals take the time to identify the impact that lesser inventories, limited storage space, and fewer staff have on their client's decision.

### Increased Vendor Options

Steve McCauley, Branch Manager at Motion Industries, shared that the "...downturn of the economy has created a very competitive market place." For him as a buyer, this means an abundance of purchasing options to choose from. He says that sales professionals have to react to the increase in competition in order to win a client's business. You're not progressing the sales conversation by avoiding what you and the buyer both know. Great sales professionals seek to be extremely knowledgeable about the myriad of options available to their prospects in order to help make the buying decision easier.

### Selectivity in Time Allocation

Buyers are experiencing a saturation of their available time. Our panelists shared that they are approached by 10-50 prospective vendors a day from multiple media. They have meetings scheduled back-to-back; so for them, time is a finite resource that has to be spent wisely. They are very selective about who they allot time to and how much. Great sales people plan out their communications to make the most use of the time they are given.

Finnis said, “Sales professionals need to be more succinct and more buttoned-down to be able to justify the time that they are taking up.” Respect for a buyer’s time was highlighted as a key behaviour buyers look for in vendors.

### Aggressive Business Objectives

Buyers are feeling the pressure to demonstrate the return they will see by investing in a product or service, and how it will help them achieve their key metrics and performance objectives. So instead of basing their buying decisions on a whim, they are actively forecasting their expected results on a regular basis to ensure they can still accommodate and justify certain purchasing expenses. Great sales people look out for these cues and ensure that their offerings are in line with a business’s short- and long-term goals.

### Additional Pressures

In addition to the challenges discussed above, great sales people make sure to uncover additional pressures that their clients are facing. Consider how unique business challenges, industry pressures, and heightened service expectations all contribute to how your client makes their purchasing decisions.

# COMMUNICATE IN AN APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE MANNER

Good communication takes concerted effort because there's no one-size-fits-all solution. In discussion with our buyer's panel, it's apparent that sales professionals need to stop and think about the appropriateness and effectiveness of each communication, instead of just defaulting to what's easiest for themselves.

***"IT'S HARD TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP BY EMAIL."***
***- Joel Marks***

**WHAT METHODS OF CONNECTING DO YOU FIND MOST EFFECTIVE?**

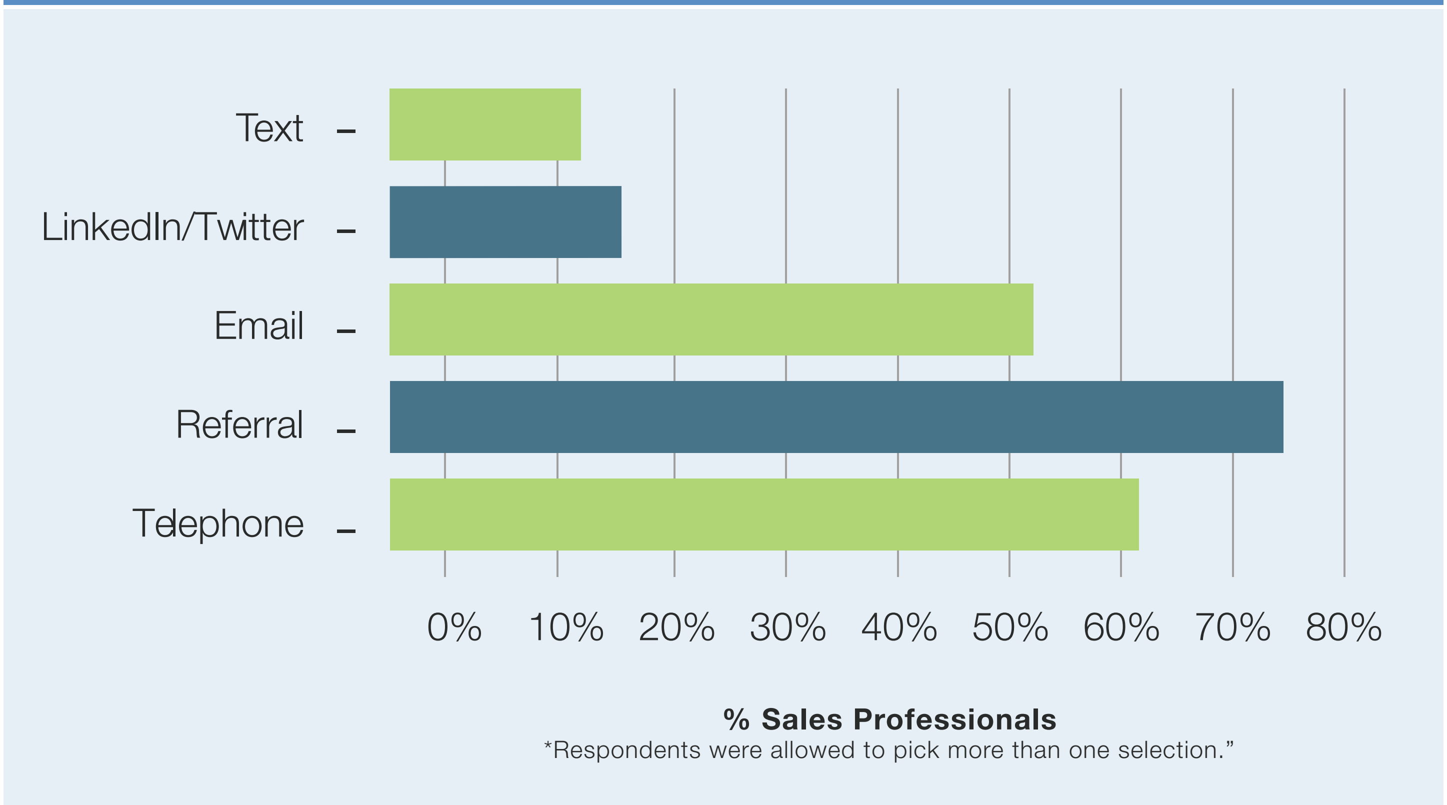



Figure 2

**BE DELIBERATE IN YOUR COMMUNICATION CHOICES IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:**

### Prospecting Channels

Buyers are feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of communications they are receiving on a daily basis from multiple inputs. Be selective about which medium you choose to approach a particular prospect. Don't forget that you can easily find out which communication method works best for them by just asking. When asked about their opinions on the most effective prospecting method, both buyers and sellers agreed that they would primarily prefer to be approached as a result of a referral, followed by phone, and then email (see Figure 2). "It's hard to build a relationship by email," said Marks. "It's easy to ignore email, to just hit that delete button."

### Message Tailoring

Our panel of buyers indicated that they are approached by 10-50 vendors in a given day. Not surprisingly, sales people need to find a way to increase the salience of their message, and create a compelling reason to convince the client to take the time to meet with them. "Customize your message to me if you want me to look at it." Finnis emphasized. Great sales people understand that this concept of customization extends well beyond just the initial call or email. Every time you interact with your customers, be deliberate in how you communicate your message in order to reinforce your understanding of their unique business challenges and goals.

Don't forget that even the digital or print sales collateral that you distribute to prospects impacts your messaging. Of course, it's not practical to customize each brochure to a particular client, but be selective in the type of collateral you provide depending your client's stage in the sales cycle. For example, don't provide generic product overviews to prospects who are farther down the pipeline and are already familiar with your offerings. Great sales people have collateral prepared to reinforce the key messaging the client needs at each particular stage of the sales cycle to advance the decision-making process.

### Presentation Methods

Great sales people are conscious of selecting presentation methods that are purposeful and add value to the information they are delivering. They think about how the information will be viewed from the perspective of the client: Are the visuals distracting or helpful? Is there too much technical info to convey on a slide? Is the flow of information confusing? Marks made reference to vendors who use PowerPoint as their go-to medium for all presentations, even when it's clear that a live demo, handout, whiteboard, or some other medium would be a better choice.

## BUYER PET PEEVES OF POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS:

- ✗ **Vendors don't bring hard copies of the presentation** - Hard copies facilitate your client's ability to follow along and take notes
- ✗ **Vendors depend on the client's resources and equipment** - Vendors should bring their own equipment and resources to avoid technical or other issues
- ✗ **Slides are overly complex** - Each slide should only convey one main concept or message; there should be a balance between content and whitespace
- ✗ **Visuals are irrelevant or poor quality** - Images, charts, or graphs should be well-labelled, undistorted, easy to absorb info at a glance, be relevant to the main message of the slide, and be large enough to make out the details
- ✗ **There is too much text on-slide** - Use less text and more relevant visuals
- ✗ **Content is read directly off the slide** - The presenter should know the material well enough that they can use on-slide cues versus having all their verbal content on the slide as well. Clients can read just as well as you can.

### Communication Styles

Understand that each client is a unique individual with a specific way of learning and communicating. Great sales people adapt their communication style to their client's needs. Some clients tend to be more analytical and want the details and numbers upfront; others will get overwhelmed and turned off by too many facts and would prefer high-level, conceptual talk first to get them comfortable. Likewise, some people are naturally indecisive and need more guidance, whereas others may be more independent. In each case, your communications have to be carefully worded and the content selectively chosen to appeal to that person's communication style.

### Communication Frequency

Our panel of buyers expressed their frustration with sales people who follow up too frequently, without giving the buyer the chance to respond. Finniss emphasized that sellers should tailor their calling cycle to the client they are working with. Great sales people take the time to determine and document an appropriate follow-up schedule depending on the client and opportunity.

# THE FOLOW-UP: TOP BUYER EXPECTATIONS

### Purposeful Communications

Marks expressed that sellers need to ensure that every call has a purpose and adds value to the client's experience. Shelley McInnis, CP Rail, said that "referrals, references, testimonials, and success stories are also very critical,"
so these are great reasons to schedule a follow-up with your client that they will find valuable.

### Accessibility and Responsiveness

Buyers value sales professionals they can depend on to respond to their inquiries in a timely fashion, especially when they are in a bind or feeling the pressure of a deadline.

### Follow-Through on Action Items

Finniss shared an experience with poor follow-up – she had to make the same request for information 3 times before she received what she needed. Your client should never have to chase you for information. Always follow through on action items from the last conversation. Finniss emphasized that being detailed and organized is key to a good follow-up.

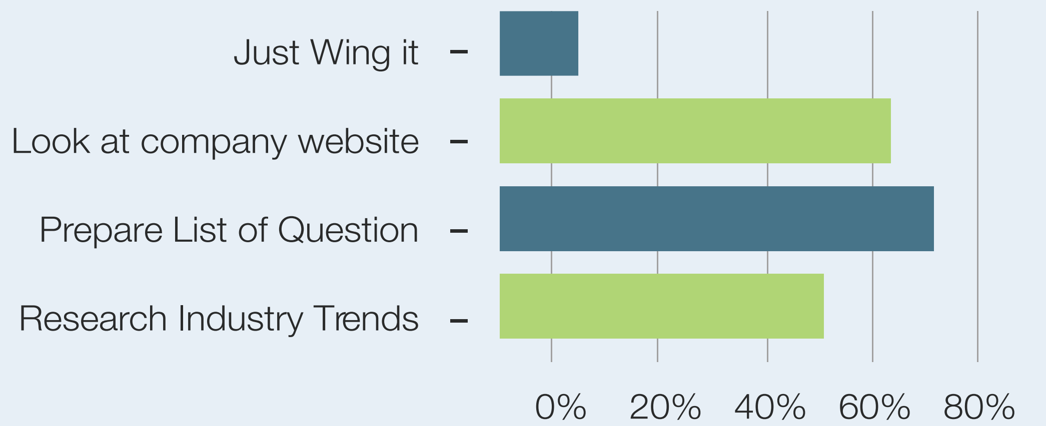
BRIDGING THE BUYER-SELLER GAP: INSIGHT #3

# PREPARE ADEQUATELY PRIOR TO CLIENT INTERACTIONS

We asked sales people how much they prepare before they meet with the client or prospect (see Figure 3). Only 3% of respondents indicated that they wing it, but our panel of buyers were surprised that this number wasn't significantly higher based on their experiences. Clearly there's a discrepancy in buyer-seller perceptions of whether sales people are adequately prepared for their client meetings.

***"DO YOUR RESEARCH, AND PROVE YOU'VE DONE YOUR RESEARCH WHEN YOU MAKE THOSE PHONE CALLS."***
***- Joel Marks***

**HOW MUCH DO YOU PREPARE BEFORE YOU MEET WITH A PROSPECT?**




**% Sales Professionals** *Respondents were allowed to pick more than one selection."

Figure 3

## BEFORE PICKING UP THE PHONE OR ATTENDING A CLIENT MEETING:

### Do your Research

Nothing frustrates a buyer more than a sales person who clearly hasn't gotten to know the client's company in order to understand if there is a fit and make the best use of the meeting time. Marks said, "Do your research, and prove you've done your research when you make those phone calls." He suggested having an account with Equifax and setting up Google Alerts as ways to stay in the know.

**Client Industry**
What are the key challenges affecting this industry; who are the major players; what percentage of the field do they control; where does the client's company fit in the mix?

**Company**
Mission statement, reference financial statements, websites and social media pages, many product lines, main decision-maker structure

**Business Objectives/challenges**
Key metrics, strategic direction, organizational changes, current issues

## Know What You're Representing

It goes without saying that sales professionals should know inside and out the company and products they are presenting to a prospect. However, your phone call or presentation should never be all about your products.

A great sales person knows their offerings well enough to synthesize this information into concise phrases that connect with what the client is saying. Joel Marks unscored that this allows the client to understand how setting up a meeting will be mutually beneficial.

### Your Products

Don't make it all about your product by just reciting the features and benefits; instead create saliency by making connections between those benefits and the client's needs.

### Your Brand

How does your brand align with that of the client's company? Are you presenting your products within the appropriate context of your brand?

### Unique Value Proposition (UVP)

Finniss says, "To be a great sales professional, you really have to find something about your company that is unique that is going to solve my issues." Differentiating yourself as a sales professional or your company with your UVP is especially critical with the heightened competition that the economic downturn has caused.

## Map out a Meeting Plan

The most effective meeting or phone calls follow a pre-planned structure to make the most efficient use of time. Great sales professionals recognize that they cannot cover everything in a given meeting, and determine in advance what is critical to the current conversation based on the situation.

### Be respectful of the time you are allotted

When securing a meeting time, don't ask for 5 or 10 minutes, if what you really need is 30 minutes. Be realistic and use the first 5 minutes to prove to them why the rest of the half hour would be worthwhile to them. Finniss said that buyers appreciate sales people who demonstrate that they are watching the time closely: "Nothing makes me more excited than when I'm in a meeting and a sales person takes their watch off and puts it by their laptop."

### Key objectives

What information, questions, and decisions do you want to address in this meeting? Prioritize this list based on the client's current stage within the sales cycle and what absolutely needs to be covered now. Be prepared to move everything else into a follow-up conversation if needed.

### Key messages

Before engaging in conversation with your prospect, you should already have an idea of the 1-2 key ideas you want your contact to walk away from the meeting with. Develop and practice a few key phrases that you can insert throughout the conversation to emphasize these ideas. Remember your key messages should not be all about your products, but should centre around your UVP and the relevant solutions to your client's objectives or challenges.

### Key questions

Develop a series of effective questions that will steer the conversation in the right direction in order to accomplish your meeting goals and convey your key messages. Our buyers emphasized the importance of a good question. Finniss said simply asking the question, "What can I do to make you look good?" shows the client that you know the pressure they are under to justify their purchasing decisions and are serious about creating mutual benefit. This will usually open them up to discussing their hesitancies and challenges.

## Build in Ability to Adapt

Having a plan and following a structure during your meeting does not mean being inflexible. You cannot predict every curve ball the client will throw at you, but you can adapt. If you are truly prepared, you will feel comfortable excluding, reordering, and reframing aspects of your key messages depending on what you uncover through your conversation with the client.

Finniss shared her experience with a vendor who came in to the meeting, already understanding her business and competitors, with several different PowerPoint presentations. Before displaying any of the presentations, he initiated a conversation in order to probe for items that Finniss was specifically interested in for the short-term. Then he presented only the relevant parts of his presentation instead of a default presentation. This example demonstrates the importance of effective questioning, listening, and collaboration in order to customize your presentation. Be prepared to change your game plan and tailor your presentation on the fly in response to new information you've just received:

**New Focus on Business Objectives**
Skip over parts of presentation that are irrelevant to new objectives

**Additional Challenges & Constraints**
Make sure to address these and how it will affect what has been discussed already

**Change in Timing**
Have alternative dates ready in anticipation

**New Decision-Maker Introduced**
Bring a summary of previous info shared up to this point

**Additional Client Personalities/Communication Styles Introduced**
Be prepared to adjust how you deliver certain content to suit

**Technical Difficulties**
E.g. lack of internet, broken projector, etc. - bring your own equipment, print copies of the presentation, bring copy on USB

BRIDGING THE BUYER-SELLER GAP: INSIGHT #4

# SIMPLIFY THE SALES PROCESS FOR THE BUYER

From a buyer's perspective, sourcing a new vendor or product takes a huge investment in time and resources, and unnecessary complexities hamper that experience. Great sales professionals try to make the decision-making process as simple as possible for the client. They work to reduce the amount of work a buyer has to do and become turn-key suppliers.

> ***"IN TODAY'S LEAN ENVIRONMENT, [...] SURPRISES ARE NEVER WELCOME."***
> ***- Tara Finniss***

## PROVIDE CRITICAL INFO AT A GLANCE

Don't overwhelm your prospect with too much information that isn't focussed. Make sure to underscore the following information and make it easy for your client to reference and share with other stakeholders:

- **How are you different from the competition?**
- **Why are you the right fit?**
- **What will they get out of it?**
- **How will it resolve specific issues/ concerns of theirs?**
- **What info do they need to know to make a decision?**

  Pricing models – Finniss says, "In today's lean environment, everything is budgeted down to the very dollar, and surprises are never welcome."

  Transparency – Are there any criteria, restrictions, potential challenges that they should be aware of?
- **What does it look like once they say yes?**

  Lay out the next steps, timelines, critical paths
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

## REDUCE THE WORK FOR THE BUYER

### Minimize ambiguity and interpretation

When presenting your solution or UVP, don't leave the information up for interpretation. Instead, demonstrate how the information your sharing applies directly to your client. Avoid leaving it for your client to figure out. And certainly, don't provide irrelevant info that forces the client to sift through for meaningful information.

### Get to the point quickly

Our panel of buyers were in agreement that they need sales people to cut down the fluff and make their case concisely. With adequate preparation and practice as mentioned in an earlier section, presenting your key messages concisely should not be a problem. Additionally, great sales people provide summary sheets outlining the main solutions directly to your client to make it easier for them to evaluate the offering and come to a decision.

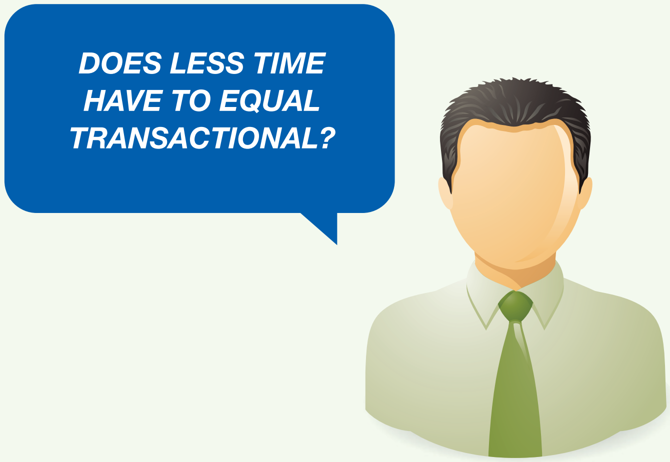
### Identify next steps and set expectations

Clients appreciate a clearly-defined implementation structure to follow, so they feel supported and understand what progress or success would look like. Clearly outline timelines, critical paths, with corresponding goals and targets, as well as service and support expectations.

BRIDGING THE BUYER-SELLER GAP: INSIGHT #5

# EMPLOY CONSULTATIVE SALES PRACTICES CONSISTENTLY

Just like buyers, it's apparent that sales professionals have to do more with less. When asked which aspect of the sales process they find most challenging, 35% of respondents indicated prospecting (see Figure 4). Digging deeper, given that increasingly buyers don't have much time to hear them out, most sales people are finding it challenging to be consultative in their prospecting and qualification efforts. After all, providing consultation takes time – the one thing that no one has enough of. The resultant conversations are more transactional, lack rapport, and further exacerbate the client-seller gap.




## WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE MOST CHALLENGING PART OF THE SALES PROCESS?

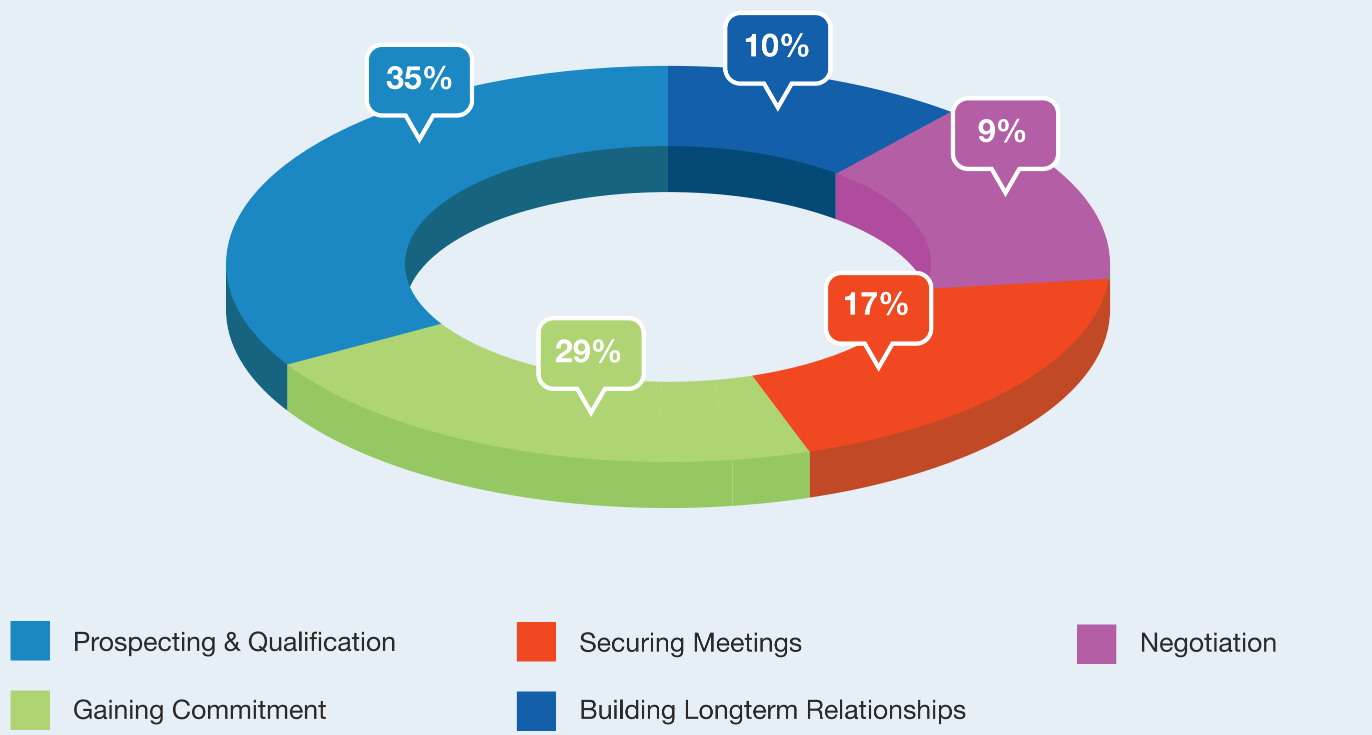



Figure 4

## SALES CHALLENGE: DOES LESS TIME HAVE TO EQUAL TRANSACTIONAL?

The answer is no. Even though everyone is pressed for time, this shouldn't compromise the integrity of the sales professional and the purchasing experience for the buyer. Some sales people have the best intentions when it comes to using the consultative tactics they've been trained and coached on, but then in practice, when they are given a short amount of time, they just go for the close without following the Consultative Selling Process (Learn more at Professional Selling) to gain commitment in order to proceed to the next step in the cycle.

## GREAT SALES PEOPLE MANAGE THEIR TIME AND REMAIN CONSULTATIVE IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

### Pre-work

Rather than trying to uncover all the information from your client in one meeting, get as much as possible out of the way before your call or meeting. As mentioned in Insights 1 and 3, preparation is key. Don't forget that you can make use of your other contacts at your buyer's company, such as gatekeepers – they have access to a wealth of information that can help you gain a better understanding of your client's needs.

### Think from a buyer's perspective

At the heart of true consultative sales is always putting the customer's needs first, not your own. When you put your own interests on the back burner, the conversation will be more focussed to items that your client can connect to. Great sales people demonstrate excellent listening and questioning skills that will show their clients that they are there to help them, not sell them. They will undoubtedly move up in priority for the client, and will gain more time or additional meetings.

### Earn the right to ask the questions that matter

When time is of the essence, it's even more crucial that you are able to ask the hard-hitting questions that will help you build your case as a consultant, such as financial or constraints information. Our panel of buyers said that sales people have to earn the right to get at sensitive information. So how do they do that? By building trust, being reliable, following through on commitments and promises, and being attentive – basically, practicing ethical sales conduct. While it's in the client's best interest to share this crucial information, they won't share it with just any vendor, so great sales people make them feel comfortable in doing so.

### Take charge of meeting flow

Even though your client will do the majority of the talking, you should use effective questioning techniques to rephrase key points that the client has raised and guide the conversation to keep it focussed. Make use of meeting agendas and manage your time wisely. Great sales people prioritize items that need to be covered, and eliminate time-engrossing obstacles and objections in advance.

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## About The Canadian Professional Sales Association (CPSA)

The CPSA is Canada's leader in developing and serving sales professionals. We are dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, and professionalism within the sales community. Since 1874, our 27,000 members have been selling more, and saving more. Become a member today, and enjoy special travel and business discounts, as well as access to exclusive sales and business resources.

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