

## **Why Technical Salespeople Fail . . . And What to Do About It**

### ***Introduction***

There are many reasons why salespeople can fail. Stand around the water cooler after disappointing sales numbers are announced, and the litany of excuses is recounted in agonizing detail. But over the years we have noted that ‘technical’ salespeople face a unique challenge – the ability to communicate value to the customer in the customer’s terms rather than technical terms. Because of training or habit, salespeople in technical industries like to talk about technology. Customer value, however, is rarely found in the technology itself. This fundamental breakdown in communication can have tragic consequences, but there are several straightforward ways to redress the problem. Below we will discuss three tactical options for improving the communication capabilities and overall effectiveness of your technical sales force.

### ***The Customer “Just Doesn’t Get It”***

It rarely fails that when we speak to sales executives in even modestly technical industries, a portion of their sales force is struggling with their fundamental mission – to identify and solve customers’ problems. Rather, they detail and praise the technical capabilities of their products to buyers who are often non-technical to the core. This observation is not restricted to common ‘technical’ roles such as software integrators and telecommunications engineers. Included are manufacturer’s reps, accountants, designers, architects, and many other professionals whose products or services are founded in a level of detail beyond the necessary knowledge of the customer. These are very intelligent, enthusiastic professionals who systemically struggle to separate the features and functions of their product from the benefits that the customers will realize.

To anyone who has never encountered this reality, it may not seem a significant obstacle to overcome. However, it can be significant, and it can be very costly. Particularly in a slow economy, the amount of effort it takes to get in front of a real buyer is enormous. To say the wrong thing (or rather, to fail to say the right thing) at the moment of truth is like running out of gas on the final lap of an epic race. Your salesperson has done all the work by the numbers: they generated the lead, qualified the prospect, scheduled the meeting, researched the company, re-scheduled the meeting, researched the competition, re-re-scheduled the meeting, and then . . . after weeks of effort . . . when the prospect is engaged and receptive . . . the salesperson rambles on about the gigabit Ethernet port adapter on your new model of router, while the prospect waits to

hear about his return on investment. The irony: they are the same thing! The adapter will allow him to integrate the new equipment with his current equipment – he'll save millions on hardware upgrades alone. But, the moment is gone. The busy executive mistakenly concludes that your product doesn't fit his need. It's like two ships that collided in the night and remember nothing but a loud clanking sound. Both parties leave the encounter confused, and the salesperson has yet another story about the customer who "just didn't get it."

### ***The Salesperson Just Didn't Give It***

Unfortunately for the jilted salesperson, the customer doesn't have to *get it* – the customer already has it. The customer is the only one who knows (whether or not explicitly) what will make him purchase. The customer is the only one who has the perceived need and the only one who will recognize the solution. This solution is the *value* that the salesperson has to make apparent and align with the customer's need. When a good sale goes bad, it is not because the customer didn't get it. To the contrary, it is because the salesperson didn't *give it*. The salesperson must put "it", the value, into the customer's terms and hand them the value proposition on a silver platter. Don't trust the customer to think through it, the salesperson has to think through it for them.

The ability to give it, the ability to frame value from the customer's perspective, is a capability unique to the sales force. The sales force is distinct from other channel types, such as the Internet, because of its ability to interact with the buyer. A live salesperson can listen, interpret, and react to the customer. A salesperson can detect underlying customer issues and probe them more deeply. In short, a salesperson can make the customer get it. If a salesperson is only reciting features and functions without regard to the needs of the audience, then the salesperson has become a very expensive brochure. It seems obvious, yet we repeatedly observe this type of "gigabit Ethernet port adapter" behavior in practice. Why? And even more importantly, how can we stop it? Let us examine both of those questions in turn.

### ***Your Job Is to Simplify It for Me***

I will never forget a recent interaction I had while searching for a new accountant. On a referral from an acquaintance, I met with a partner of a small accounting firm to strategize for my coming tax year. There was another accountant in the room with us, and the conversation quickly degenerated into a volley of accounting terminology between the two tax technicians. Fighting the desire to throw myself out of the 10<sup>th</sup> floor window, I tried to intercept their discussion by asking a closed-ended question that was certain to return the focus back to me, the customer. The accountant's response will forever play in my head, "Well, most people think that is a simple issue, but it's not – It's really very complex." I

responded as calmly as I could, “Actually, I *know* it’s not a simple issue. That’s why I need an accountant – Your job is to simplify it for me.”

Needless to say, I settled on an accountant who is excellent at distilling the incredibly complex and ever-changing tax code into meaningful advice that applies to my situation. Although my annoying accountants didn’t recognize it at the time (and probably never will), they were committing a classic mistake of many misled technical sellers. They were attempting to establish credibility by demonstrating their mastery of the subject matter. But in reality, I *expected* them to know enough tax code trivia to solve my problems – their credibility was assumed by the time I agreed to meet with them. What I wanted was for them to assess my needs and offer me valuable advice in my own terms. By bombarding me with meaningless technical curiosities, they added confusion to my situation rather than clarity. Their misguided desire to impress me with their expertise actually *diminished* their value to me and cost them the sale. In short, salespeople should never intentionally complicate the issue to demonstrate knowledge of their own product; they should simplify the issue to demonstrate an understanding of the client’s problem.

There is also a more benign reason that many technically-grounded salespeople tend to find their way into technical monologues . . . It is simply within their comfort zone. Sales is hard stuff, and it can be extremely uncomfortable. Think about it. Salespeople go into new environments, meet with strangers, ask probing questions, answer probing questions, respond to objections, try to be persuasive, and think on their feet. Who hasn’t been beaten up so badly in a sales call that you couldn’t wait to get back to your car? With so much discomfort in the air, it’s no wonder that conversations gravitate toward topics that make salespeople more comfortable. For technically trained and technically-oriented people, the comfortable stuff is the technical details. It’s really just human nature.

### ***What to Do?***

Let us then accept that technically-inclined salespeople in technology-focused industries can face an additional hurdle in selling to non-technical buyers. The mental database that these people possess is a double-edged sword. Their extensive knowledge makes them very credible resources, and they are capable of answering critical technical questions that will arise throughout the sales cycle. However, it is often difficult for a specialist to blunt his sword and converse with the layperson. What then can be done to complement their technical expertise with the ability to demonstrate value from the customer’s perspective?

There are three relevant sales force effectiveness strategies outlined below, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Depending upon your target customers, resource constraints, and current sales force skills, any of these

strategies can be employed to improve the performance of technical salespeople who struggle with the symptoms described above. While they are discussed individually, they are best used in combination for maximum impact.

### ***Safety in Numbers***

Many companies handle the need for a sales force with various skills by creating sales teams. Whether formal or ad hoc, the concept is the same. Different resources with the appropriate skills are brought in throughout the sales process to add their specific sliver of value to the customer. An account executive will identify a client need and present the value proposition, then bring in the technical, financial, or subject matter experts to interact with the client as appropriate. For example, in many engineering-centric industries such as telecommunications it is common practice to supplement generalist 'hunter' salespeople with a technical sales support staff to assist with the needs assessment and proposal writing stages of the sales process. Thereby, a virtual super-salesperson is created with incredibly deep knowledge in all relevant contexts.

The value provided to the customer through this approach is indisputably superior to other one-man-show alternatives, since the customer is provided with high levels of expertise throughout the sales cycle. But there are two notable drawbacks. First, the amount of coordination required is substantial. Having been in these situations before, it is often hard to quickly locate the exact technical resource that is needed, and then the resource is always at another client site across the country on the exact day of your big meeting. And if the stars happen to be aligned and the technical specialist is available, then there are still many hours of knowledge transfer and background education necessary for the sales team to appear coherent and professional in front of the client. In short, the teaming sales model requires formidable amounts of effort and organizational dedication to be executed well.

The second drawback to the sales team concept is that it is relatively expensive. When you account for the additional cost for the technical talent and the opportunity cost of lost revenue (if the technical resources are billable resources, which they often are), you can easily double the cost of every sale when this model is implemented. For large systems integrators or other high-margin, high-dollar businesses, the cost of sale is not prohibitive. However, for most companies today struggling to cut costs, the team selling model is an unaffordable luxury. Yet sell you must. What then are you to do, if you already have a technical sales force in place and restructuring it is not an option? How can you increase the ability of your existing technical salespeople to communicate customer value from the customer's perspective?

### ***Teach a Man to Fish***

The most obvious way to get technical salespeople speaking customer value is to teach them how to tease it out of their prospects. This is accomplished by training salespeople on the processes and skills of selling. Many technical salespeople began their careers as technicians or engineers and then migrated into sales roles. Therefore, they aren't inherently 'sales professionals,' if such a designation really does (or should) exist. The knowledge that they bring to the sales role needs to be supplemented with frameworks and tactics to enable them to sell effectively.

Educating salespeople on the process and skills of training will teach them how to prepare for sales calls, ask targeted questions, identify customer pains, and relate your product's value to the customer's need. There are many successful sales training programs available that are proven to dramatically increase the effectiveness of a sales force. They enable a salesperson to enter a sales call like a world-class interrogator and leave behind a stunning value proposition that was developed right in front of the client and tailored to the client's needs. With training, practice, and reinforcement, most people can be taught to quickly identify a prospect's hot buttons and formulate a compelling response.

The only real disadvantage to sales training for technical salespeople (or any salespeople, for that matter) is the time and expense required. Good sales training programs can easily cost \$2,000 or more per person on the front end, with additional ongoing costs to reinforce and sustain the performance increases. Additionally, training takes salespeople out of the field for several days, which makes most sales managers want to cry out loud. While the cost-benefit analysis of sales training is indisputably positive, it does require a substantial investment of dollars and time. If your sales force is relatively stable and engaged in highly-consultative selling, then investing in their skills is probably the best money you can spend. If turnover in your sales staff is high or their client interactions are reasonably simple, then full-scale sales skills training may not be the first option to pursue.

### ***Take the Words Out of the Customer's Mouth***

A third alternative, should teaming and training not fit your business model, is to provide technical salespeople with the tools necessary to deliver the right message at the right time. The term 'tool' can mean anything from sales force automation software to a pencil. However, in this instance we are addressing items such as sales presentations, marketing collateral, call scripts, and other tactical implements that help the salesperson communicate more effectively with the prospect in a controlled, premeditated fashion. With tools that are carefully designed and purposefully crafted, a sales force can reap amazing increases in effectiveness with relatively little effort expended.

For sales tools such as these to be properly developed, they must be founded in primary customer research. While plenty of marketing and sales collateral has originated in conference rooms adjacent to the marketing VPs' offices, we feel strongly that customer-focused messaging can only be derived from the customers themselves. Anything else is just guesswork. By surveying the marketplace for the top customer pains and needs, you are basically taking the words right out of the customers' mouths and feeding them back as your value propositions. Nothing could be simpler or more intuitive, yet few companies research customer needs, and even fewer use the information in such a tactical way.

To make this effort effective, two key methodological steps must be followed:

First, the customer population needs to be appropriately segmented by market. More specifically, the market must be segmented according to customer needs – not by their geography or your product line. Improper market segmentation is one of the most fundamental errors that most companies commit, and it is surprisingly difficult to overcome (especially in companies with regional profit centers or institutionalized product silos). With rare exception, customer needs are not met by proximity or product lines. A customer may require speedy service and defect-free products to eliminate downtime, but they do not really care where the service originates or the products are manufactured. Customer needs are independent of a vendor's organizational structure, but few organizations approach their markets that way.

Second, within each target market, the unique buyer types must be identified to some level of granularity. Like market segments, buyer types must be separated according to their needs, since the point of the exercise is to develop unique messaging for each. For example, suppose you find that your salespeople regularly interact with three types of buyers in a certain industry: a user, a technical buyer, and an economic buyer. Each of these customer types will have their own intrinsic needs and should be approached accordingly. The user may want a product that is simple to use, while the technical buyer might be focused on ease of deployment. The financial buyer is most certainly looking at the cash expenditure and return on investment. An example of such buyer segmentation is shown below.

**Sample of Targeted Value Propositions**

*Product: Remote Network Access Software  
Target Market: Large Independent Insurance Agencies*

	<b>Financial Buyer</b>	<b>Technical Buyer</b>	<b>User</b>
<b>Common Titles</b>	CFO, CEO, President, Budgeting Committee	CIO, IT Director, Systems Administrator	Varies: Marketing Director, Finance Manager, Account Executive
<b>Unique Value Propositions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing IT investments are leveraged resulting in lower cost and higher return on investment</li> <li>Increased access to customer information increases productivity and efficiency</li> <li>Remote access lowers overhead as employees can work from home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rapid deployment of technology</li> <li>Increased control over application management tasks</li> <li>Disparate platforms can be integrated and maintained from a central location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased access to customer information improves ability to serve customer</li> <li>Redundant data entry is reduced, lowering error rates and improving efficiency</li> <li>Remote access via low bandwidth networks means employees can work from home over existing phone line</li> </ul>

Therefore, you will need to design tools to enable your salespeople to address each of these distinct pressure points. If the tools are well-developed, your technical salespeople will be able to very adeptly communicate compelling value propositions that are targeted to each buyer type within each market segment. These tools may take the form of demonstration materials to show a product's simplicity to the user, or testimonials from past clients to illustrate the ease of deployment for the technical buyer. Of course, the financial buyer will be presented with financial projections to excite his soul.

The specifics of the tools will vary depending on the audience, but the result is the same. Without an organizational restructure or extensive retraining, your salespeople will be able to communicate on the plane of the client with great ease and conviction. Effectively, you have institutionalized and centralized many of the sales activities you would have otherwise trained the salespeople to perform. In advance of the sales call you have established credibility, asked probing questions, anticipated/handled objections, identified client needs, and

effectively communicated your customized value proposition to the prospect. And though all sales people benefit from such customer-focused tools, technical sales people are particularly receptive to these types of aids. Individuals with technical backgrounds are usually very comfortable using charts, diagrams, tables, and other instruments to evaluate, categorize, and communicate information in a structured manner.

We have used this approach to great effect with past clients, compiling 'playbooks' that detail the selling processes and appropriate messaging for specific target markets. If the customer research is done in an objective manner and the tools are well-designed, the power of this technique cannot be overstated. With minimal disruption to your sales force, you can successfully convert conversations in the field from "gigabit Ethernet ports" to return on investment and productivity. The salespeople like it, the clients like it, and the results will speak for themselves.

The advantages to this approach are clear, but it too has limitations. When using standardized messaging to communicate with the marketplace, there is always the chance that you have misread the marketplace. A highly skilled salesperson can assess the situation and frame customer value on the spot, but depending too heavily on prepackaged communication is like leaving the office with only a hammer assuming that the client needs to drive a nail. In reality, you are certain to miss the mark some percentage of the time. However, the odds are weighted heavily in your favor if the messaging is based on good customer research. Additionally, the tools are there only to *support* the salesperson, not to replace the salesperson. As a consequence, this is an excellent sales strategy when your markets are segmented discretely enough to allow for targeted communication and when the customers' buying processes are reasonably similar. Absent these conditions, investing in skills might be more fruitful than investing in tools.

## ***Conclusion***

In summary, there are several ways to help technically-centered salespeople improve their ability to communicate with non-technical buyers. The methods range in complexity and cost, and they each have their respective strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned previously, the ideal approach is to combine the methods to achieve the greatest possible impact. In fact, we have seen the effectiveness of sales forces more than double with both customized training *and* supporting tools based on extensive customer research. Depending upon your unique circumstances, there is some combination of these tactics that will produce similarly remarkable results. An overview of the options is provided below.

**Summary of Alternatives**

<b>Alternative</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Applicability</b>
<b><i>Teaming</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High levels of skill at all appropriate times in the sales cycle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Difficult to coordinate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High dollar value sales</li> <li>• Long, fragmented sales cycle</li> </ul>
<b><i>Training</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skilled salespeople capable of handling ambiguous situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Requires an investment in individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable sales force</li> <li>• Highly consultative sale</li> </ul>
<b><i>Tools</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively low investment</li> <li>• Highly leveragable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Playing the odds'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrete markets</li> <li>• Uniform sales processes in each market</li> </ul>

If your technical sales force is struggling to connect with customers on the customer's level, then thinking through these options can be an eye-opening exercise. Identifying a customer's need and offering a value-added solution to their problem is the primary dictate of the professional salesperson. The inability to communicate your product's value from the customer's perspective negates all of the salesperson's preceding activities. Improving the capability to engage the customer at the moment of truth will dramatically increase the success and satisfaction of the struggling technical salesperson.