

WHITEPAPER

CONCEPTUAL SELLING

Influencing Change

Conceptual selling

Conceptual selling is arguing a case (in the rhetorical sense) that is bigger yet more fundamental than a product. It is pitching an idea, a new technology, the need for technology, a revolutionary delivery method, a different way of serving customers, a new way of approaching old problems, or innovation. Conceptual selling generally falls into one of four categories.

Perceptual

This psychological appeal asks the buyer to change his or her attitudes toward something; to view something differently from an existing paradigm or mindset; or to buy into abstractions. The intent is to change minds or viewpoints that are based largely on perception. By asking buyers to release the grip on their current way of perceiving things, the seller is petitioning the buyer to view things from a different perspective or point of view.

Emotional

When sharing a vision with buyers, the seller wants an emotional connection with buyers. The seller's passion, enthusiasm, and credibility play a major role. Asking others to buy "the dream" or "the cause" is the goal—more commitment versus mere compliance.

Change

In many cases, a conceptual sale is selling the first step of change—an openness to hearing new ideas and serious consideration for implementing something different.

Fundamental need

The basic construct of a product or the fundamental need that it satisfies is a conceptual sale. This primal need—the premise for the product—serves as a catalyst for the change that the seller petitions. If the buyer does not understand that he has this fundamental need, he will not buy the product. From this perspective, a conceptual sale is convincing the buyer first of a need.

Dynamics of a conceptual sale

If someone is not sold on the concept of marriage, it does not matter who is proposing; this un-sold person will not marry. If someone is not sold on the concept of a technology solution to a problem, it does not matter how good a computer is; the person is not going to buy it. If someone is not sold on stocks as an investment vehicle, it does not matter how good of a buy that stock represents; the investor will not purchase it. In each case, the seller should have been selling marriage, technology, or stocks as concepts first; then, sell the products that fit this concept. There are four groups of concepts that salespeople promote in Value-Added Selling.

Time

People have different temporal perspectives. Some people operate in the moment; some live in the past; and others focus on the future. How the buyer perceives time affects his or her buying decision. Short-term thinkers live in the here and now. They concentrate on the immediate trade-offs and sacrifices when they buy. This means that price is one of the most important decision variables for them. Long-term thinkers have a future orientation, which means they view what they purchase more as an investment versus an expense. Because of this longer time horizon, they focus on the return on investment, not just the price of the investment. Longer-term thinking (an extended time horizon) is a prerequisite for buyers to consider life cycle costs or ownership costs. If buyers do not process information along an extended time horizon, they do not have a method or the motivation to scrutinize cost throughout the duration of owning and using a product. For this reason, selling buyers on a long-range view of things is first a conceptual sale. If the buyer fails to view things long-term, it is difficult for the salesperson to argue that even though the acquisition price is higher, the long-range benefits of buying and using this product overshadow a difference of price on the frontend of the decision. For most sellers, much of the value-added that they deliver occurs beyond the acquisition point—during the long-term usage of a product. Unless the buyer's time horizon (temporal bias) includes this, he or she will not appreciate the all-encompassing value of a solution.

Synergy

The whole of something is greater than the sum of its parts. There is a special energy that is created when parts of something come together. It is an energy that only happens when a combined energy is harnessed. People that piecemeal cannot appreciate the value of a coherent and integrated system. This is the essence of systems thinking—that all parts working together in concert create greater value than the individual parts

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tallied up. This is analogous to the sound of an orchestra playing harmoniously versus the individual members playing a song of their choice. Even though they play it well individually, collectively it is noise. Synergistically, it is beautiful music. Buyers that make isolated buying decisions, absent the input of other departments, create noise, not music. Without the input of those that use the product or those who are affected by its purchase, buyers that treat the purchase as an acquisition-only transaction deprive their companies of the synergy of a sound purchase.

Synergy includes gathering input from other departments. It means scrutinizing the total cost of a product, not just the purchase price. A synergistic view of things paves the way for buyers to accept the concept of bundling (or unbundling, if that is the sale) or integrated supply. A synergistic view means the buyer will view the seller as a partner versus a satellite warehouse of supply items. Synergy means that the buyer will consider all the ways that a seller brings value, not just the core commodity product. All of the ways include the three dimensions of value: product, company, and salesperson.

Buyers that make siloed decisions, whether it is internal or external, deprive their companies of the synergy that comes from a systems approach to operating a business.

Action

Action dynamics include growth and contraction—doing more or less of something. In any successful enterprise, both must be operational. Contraction is doing less of something. This is at the heart of operational efficiency and provides a context for price objections. Yet, scaling back is only one way of improving an organization. Weeding inefficiencies in your organizational garden is a step in the right direction and a necessary precursor for planting your seeds of growth. One significant manifestation of contraction is the buyer who chooses to satisfice versus maximize.

Satisficing is settling for an option that is merely good enough. The focus is on minimum standards for performance. Typically, buyers will ask, “What can we live with?” Then, they embark on a journey finding something that will be just good enough to get the job done. Satisficing is a combination of satisfying, sacrificing, and sufficing. Buyers that satisfice make price decisions. On the other hand, maximizing is seeking the best possible alternative—the best way to address an issue or solve a problem. Buyers that maximize ask, “What is the best way to handle this?” This is typically the most they can do versus the least they can live with.

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The difficulty for a business that only focuses on contraction—that is, cutting back—is that they soon realize that you cannot cut your way to success. To prosper, organizations must grow. Growth dynamics mean expansion, traction, competitive advantage, upgrading, innovation, modernizing, and enhancement. This continuous investment in growth is what prevents organizations from becoming stagnant, inconsequential, and eventually obsolete. If contraction is at the heart of operational efficiency, growth is at the heart of organizational effectiveness. Organizations that thrive continue to evolve from their present state into something of value. This ensures their long-term viability. Charles Darwin wrote that it is not the most intelligent or strong that survive, it is the most adaptable that survive ... and thrive.

If the buyer is not sold on growth and development (as a concept), he or she will focus only on contraction. These buyers soon discover that they cannot shrink their way to prosperity. Contraction (cutting back) is a short-term, defensive strategy that only focuses on not losing. Winning requires more than not just losing.

Economics

The buyer's view of the economics of a purchase dominate price shopping. For some, price is the sole determinant. That is because they fail to consider long-term issues like total cost, life cycle cost, increased leverage of resources, or greater productivity and performance. The price buyer's definition of money is a cheap price. Money is bigger than price; it includes profit and value. Money is always a better conversation to have with a buyer than price. Buyers that have a long-range view of things understand the investment value of money—that you must invest money to make money. Consequently, they view purchasing as an investment, not an expense: "How can we turn this expense (a necessary cost of doing business) into an investment. This type of thinking means that buyers appreciate the value of leverage—a concept that you have sold previously.

Common to all of these dynamics is that price shoppers are small thinkers. They think small when it comes to time—they think, plan, and execute shortterm. They think small when it comes to their needs—they consider only acquisition needs and view sellers as satellite warehouses of products. They think small when it comes to success—for them, success means not losing.

They think small when it comes to money—price is their primary focus, not return on investment.

How to sell concepts

Fundamental to conceptual selling is a basic openness by the buyer to hearing the seller's ideas. Hearing does not mean that they will agree with the seller, simply that they will openly and actively listen to what the seller has to say, and possibly acknowledge their understanding of the seller's point of view.

Planning and strategy

Conceptual selling requires a plan and a strategy. These tips will help you organize your approach and prepare for your presentation.

- Treat your concept as a product. This means that you can use a feature-benefit approach when constructing your argument. This also makes the concept more tangible, which is a challenge in selling ideas. For some people, concepts are too abstract, and they need help framing these concepts into something more concrete.
- Deconstruct your idea or product to its elemental parts. What incremental decisions must the other person make to buy into the broader concept of what you are selling? Will there be a sequence of smaller steps that the buyer must go through? These small wins create a momentum for the larger decision to act. Small wins represent the next best step that someone must make to implement a change.
- Dismantle, brick by brick, the wall of resistance that you face by using tip number one. Identify the perceived obstacles and barriers to implementing your ideas, and own them before the buyer raises them. When you study the excuses that the buyer may make for not accepting your concept, you can deal with them in advance by conquering them individually. Then, you can build a step-by-step argument for your concept or idea.
- If you are selling a dream, get the vision right. Help the other person understand the power of implementing this idea. Your passion for this dream and your skill at articulating it will encourage others to buy into the magical feeling you create. Create visuals for this vision to make it real. Shoot for commitment, not just compliance. This emotional buy-in creates a powerful dynamic force that will help buyers implement your ideas.
- Go higher in an organization to sell your ideas. High-level decision makers have a conceptual grasp of situations. Strong leaders typically see the underlying structures and dynamics of events. This means that they can process relationships between ideas and see the broader context of your argument. The higher you go, the bigger the thinker that you will deal with. Small thinkers struggle with concepts; they prefer the concrete to the complex.

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- Recruit allies, supporters, and coaches to soften the battlefield of the decision maker's mind. Allies can provide you with valuable inside information and steer the internal conversation in your direction. If they have the ear of the decision maker, they can suggest that their company implement your ideas. Seeking input and support from multiple sources helps you sell the synergy of your concept. It encourages the buyer to avoid one-dimensional decisions based solely on price. The input from others coupled with viewing things from different perspectives encourages the buyer to perceive your concept from a systems point of view.
- If you encounter critics or saboteurs, meet with them in private. Seek their input to understand fully the nature of their resistance. Then, acknowledge (not necessarily agree with) their concerns. Giving them this respect and permitting them to air their concerns may deflate the intensity of their insurgencies. Involving others, in public or private, can tear down silos that may impede buying into your concept. Soliciting their help, even from the most vocal critics, may be the most politically sound strategy in your preparation phase.
- Patient persistence steadily applied can wear down the most resistant objectors. Many salespeople quit too early when convincing others of the merits of their ideas. Early rejection does not necessarily mean an outright rejection of the value and viability of an idea. It may be the buyer's way of trying to process the benefits of your ideas. It is analogous to weeding the gardens of their minds of things that obscure their seeing fully the benefit of your argument.
- Plan your strategy for early, visible, and leverageable success. Plan to be a part of the implementation strategy. You must position yourself as a change agent, helping the buyer succeed from the start. This breakthrough strategy reassures the buyer that your idea will succeed and that you are there to ensure that it happens.

Discovery and acknowledgment

Acknowledging the need to change is a necessary step for buyers in a conceptual sale. Insight and understanding are prerequisites for acknowledgement. These tips will help you help the buyer understand and accept the need for implementing your idea.

- It is not so much that people resent change; they resent being changed. Change that emanates from within is easier to accept than change that comes from outside. This is the reason that buyers place more value on what they discover than what you tell them or sell them. Helping buyers discover the need to change is an effective application of this reality. Conceptual selling is helping buyers discover the need to do something different—to change!

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- Use time to your advantage. Stretching the buyer's time horizon opens them to a broader definition of their needs and creates a longer time line to assess the value of your ideas. Setting target dates for specific actions or activities moves along the concept you are selling and creates positive action—small wins. Time lines create a positive sense of urgency, which is necessary when people resist change.
- Use emotion to your advantage. Fear and greed are powerful motivators. Fear causes people to act defensively. Greed causes people to make decisions that defy logic. Raising the buyer's pain level with the status quo and giving them a glimpse of a better life are powerful ways to sell concepts. Change without some pain is unlikely. When buyers realize and accept this, their resistance thaws. Once buyers realize that no decision is a decision, it softens their resistance.
- Ask questions to build insight. Questions facilitate an awareness that comes from within. Ask questions that nibble at the edges of resistance so that buyers will re-think the status quo. Ask questions that stretch their time horizon and enlarge their view of their needs to pave the way for their understanding the value of your ideas. Questions that encourage buyers to dream awaken their restless spirit for growth. Questions that push their limits tease their curiosity about their potential. Questions that make them realize that money is a bigger concept than price challenge their small thinking. Questions that make them aware of missed opportunities in the past make them long for a chance to act again more decisively.

Pitching your ideas

Pitching your ideas and selling conceptually means connecting with the buyer on three levels—emotional, rational, and personal. These tips will help you connect with the buyer and present your argument successfully.

- Seek emotional buy-in. Connecting your vision to the buyer's vision creates a powerful emotional dynamic. Encouraging the buyer to dream and envision a better way awakens their creative and pioneering spirit. Demonstrating how others have taken advantage of this concept lowers the perceived risk and reassures the buyer. Offering free trials helps the buyer "own" with minimum risk. Rarely will you face rational opposition. Most of the reasons that people resist new ideas are because of the grip that the old has on them. Humans are emotional creatures but often use reason to justify their emotional decisions. Buyers want safety and reassurance, even when they are acting on the self-interests to grow.
- Seek rational acceptance. Appeal to the buyer rationally. Give rational arguments to accompany your emotional appeal. Reason makes buyers think; emotion makes them act. Educate and inform them of

the advantages of your proposal. Use analogies of other changes that they have made that are similar to the change you are proposing. Adults act on precedent. When you demonstrate that the change (concept) you propose is similar to other things that they have done in the past, buyers are more open to trying your idea. Explain the risks and give yourself an opportunity to assuage their concerns with proof sources. Demonstrate the purpose-price-payoff of your argument. What is the cost of moving forward and the cost of inertia (missed opportunity cost)? Provide for the “Aha” moment when the buyer fully engages your argument and “sees the light.” Support this insight moment with something tangible to make it real. This could be a graphic, a profit example, or a vision of the future.

- Seek personal connection. When the buyer trusts you, it makes it easier for him to say yes to your new ideas. Work on your credibility. Express empathy and understanding of their situation. Acknowledge their concerns as real for them. Demonstrate your personal commitment to successfully implementing your idea. Show how you will be there to make the implementation run smoothly. Explain how you will support them throughout the process. Reassure the buyer that your success is tied to their success. Be on hand to support them and reinforce their decision at every step along the implementation path.

Summary

Conceptual selling is like every other need-satisfaction type of sale. The buyer has some need—known or unknown—and must act on it, whether or not he or she understands the urgency to do so. Framing your concept or idea as a product and de-constructing it to its elemental parts allows you to sell the buyer on change, one step at a time.

About the Author



Tom Reilly is co-author of *Value-Added Selling*, 4th edition (McGraw-Hill 2018). Additionally, he has written twelve other books including the hot-selling *Crush Price Objections*. His award-winning column appears in *Industrial Distribution Magazine*. Tom has a Master’s degree in psychology and is a faculty member at the University of Industrial Distribution. He began his career as a salesman for a Fortune 500 chemical company and then opened his own distribution company in Houston, Texas. He sold that in 1981 to pursue a full-time speaking and sales training career. You may contact him through his website www.TomReillyTraining.com.