

THE DEFINITIVE SALES CLASSIC WITH
UPDATED INFORMATION FOR TODAY'S MARKET

YOU CAN'T Teach a Kid to Ride a Bike AT A SEMINAR

SECOND EDITION

Sandler Training's 7-Step
System for Successful Selling

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UPDATED AND WITH A FOREWORD BY
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You Can't Teach a Kid to Ride a Bike at a Seminar

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STOP SELLING FEATURES AND BENEFITS

David Sandler

It sounds heretical for a sales trainer to say: “Stop selling features and benefits,” doesn’t it? Traditionalists have been preaching features-and-benefits selling for ages.

Apparently they think it gets results, but I think it’s a lot of unnecessary hard work. It’s merely a safe way to sell unproductively. At best, it’s arm’s-length selling, and it’s not effective today. Features and benefits do not lead people to make buying decisions. Features and benefits merely confuse the issue.

Try this exercise: On a piece of paper draw a vertical line down the center of the page. At the top left side, write your company’s name. Across the page, on the top right side, write the name of your major competitor. Down the left side of the page write the numbers 1, 2, and 3. Do the same thing on the right side of the page. Now, under your company’s name, list the top three benefits

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of the product or service that you're selling. Be sure these benefits explain why people buy from you. Is it because your product or service generates increased profits? Does it maximize effectiveness or efficiency? Is it easy to use? Whatever you know the benefits to be, record them now.

I've got bad news and good news for you. If you're like most people, you want the bad news first. Here it is:

You're fired.

Now for the good news: Your competitor (whose name you wrote on the exercise above) just hired you!

It's your first day at work for your new boss. Go back to the right side of the paper. And under your competitor's name (now the company you work for) record the top three benefits of the product or service that you'll be selling. When you're finished, you'll probably discover that it's difficult to distinguish between the left and right sides of the page. The benefits of your former product or service are probably not all that different than the benefits of your new product or service. Same benefits and same features.

Can you imagine sharing the results of this exercise with your prospective customers and clients? In truth, traditional salespeople do it every day. Prospects are use to hearing the same features-and-benefits presentations day after day. Chances are, each time you make a presentation, the prospect already has heard everything you're going to say...*from the competition!* If you're selling in the traditional way, the only thing setting you apart from the competition is the company name on your business card.

If features and benefits don't convince people to buy, what does?

Traditionalists will focus on interest, arousal, and curiosity. They will appeal to the prospect's intellect, even though that's the wrong approach. They seek a prospect's interest to arouse curios-

ity about what their product or service can do for the prospect. That's features-and-benefits selling. And it doesn't work.

When people make decisions, they either move toward pleasure, or away from pain. People make decisions intellectually, but they buy *emotionally*. Benefits such as increased profits, maximum efficiency, and ease of use appeal to the intellect, but not to the emotions. Try all you want to sell intellectually; most of the time, it won't work. And when it does, it's hard work!

I suggest you choose the easy path. When you sell, pursue only the pain! *All the other emotions aren't as strong, so ignore them. Cut below the surface, uncover the prospect's real motivations, and expose the pain.*

Pain is such a strong emotion that prospects will do anything to avoid it. *When you get your prospects to feel pain, especially pain in the present, and then demonstrate that you can end their suffering and hurt, you're a step closer to the sale.*

The third compartment of the Sandler Submarine is Pain. To seal off this compartment, you have to hit your prospects right between the eyes with "pain."

I've developed a five-part formula for moving through the Pain Step, and it looks like this:

WELL TO HURT TO SICK TO CRITICAL TO MIRACLE.

1. **Look for a "suspect" (anyone who is not yet a prospect) who is Well.** A key question to ask the Well suspect is: "How long have you had this problem?" Suspects who tell you they've had the same problem for ten years will most likely keep the problem for another ten years. There's no urgency here, and probably no chance of a sale, either. Move on to another suspect. On the other hand, if the problem has existed for a day, an hour, or perhaps even a few weeks or months, the suspect might now be ready to become a prospect.

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2. **You can change your suspect to a prospect by asking questions that will cause the prospect to Hurt.** Suspects who are Well might actually see a “need” for your product or service. But with their guard up (not feeling any emotion), they will remain safe, secure, intellectual, in control, and unsellable. Make ‘em Hurt. Explore their pain.

Using features-and-benefits selling, the traditional salesperson tries to solve the prospect’s problems too quickly. Traditionalists try to close the sale in the Hurt phase of the formula, and it rarely works.

Soon into the Hurt phase you’ll hear the prospect say, “Can you help?” The traditionalist proudly exclaims, “You bet I can.”

But my approach, using the Dummy Curve, requires a different response. I would say, “Don’t know. Can I ask you a few questions about your problem?”

Remember, people buy emotionally, so they must *feel* their pain before the sale can be closed successfully. If you move prospects through the selling formula too quickly, you’re going to lose the sale.

3. **Make your prospect Sick with “pain.”** Probe. Ask questions. Soon, the prospect becomes emotionally involved in your presentation.
4. **Continue probing until you arrive at the Critical state, when prospects are willing to pay anything, do anything, to solve their suffering and hurt.** They now *feel* their problems. Critical prospects validate their own problems without interference from the salesperson. They see the need to fix the problems immediately. Their job, their business, their future, depends on eliminating the pain.
5. **Now, perform your Miracle.** Let the prospects see that your product or service can take away the pain.

CAUTION: While this formula is very effective, and is used by hundreds of thousands of people who have been trained by Sandler, there's a drawback to it if you dig too deeply to expose a prospect's pain.

Some years ago, a student of ours had increased his sales productivity by 200 percent in ninety days and he was addicted to the Pain technique. In fact, I called him a "pain animal" because he was so committed to it. One day, he pushed too far with a prospect and ultimately lost a sale that he had already closed.

Immediately following his sales meeting with the prospect, the student later told me that he was proud of the way he had handled the Pain Step. "After ninety minutes of defense," he explained, "I finally cracked through the wall with this prospect. Any clinical psychologist would have been pleased with how I had stripped away the prospect's problem, layer after layer, from intellectual interest to bare-bones hurt. I got the sale."

But by the time he had returned to his office, his new client had called and left a message to cancel the order. "I could never reach him again. He wouldn't talk to me. Apparently, I had done such a good job of uncovering the prospect's pain that I embarrassed him. And I lost the sale."

Salespeople are not trained to pursue pain in the fashion of a psychologist, and I do not condone trying to do so. The Pain Step was not developed for salespeople to play "lowbudget shrink." However, when it's used properly, it offers the prospect more than a sales call that will merely arouse curiosity. It matches your product or service to your prospect's pain, leading to a buying decision.

By now you're probably wondering: How do I pursue my prospect's pain?

Let me rephrase that question for you. Ask it this way: How do I guide my prospects to discover their own pain?

It's important to ask the question this way because it's much easier to close a sale if the prospects have discovered their own

pain rather than hearing you disclose their pain. People don't like to admit their pain. If you pursue them and try to show them their pain, three things will happen:

1. They will become embarrassed by having to reveal their pain to you;
2. They will start to feel Not-OK about their pain (there is a Bonding and Rapport rule about never making prospects or clients feel Not-OK); and
3. They will have to admit they made a previous faulty decision which led to their current circumstances. That hardly puts them in a buying mood!

To pursue your prospect's pain, you use a combination of human-relations skills, especially *active listening* and *asking questions*. These are two of the techniques that fuel the Sandler Submarine.

How do you listen actively? Metaphorically, someone described it this way: "You are my friend when you walk in my moccasins." In other words, it's one thing to hear what a prospect says; it's quite another to understand the prospect's position, from the prospect's point of view. Active listening demands that you understand the prospect's situation or dilemma, and that you convey this understanding to the prospect. Furthermore, it's important not to judge the prospect.

Active listening promotes trust, an important prerequisite if a prospect is going to reveal pain. Traditional salespeople, with their dog and pony shows, frequently plow ahead without much regard for the prospect. In their attempt to control the selling dance, they lose control for lack of the prospect's trust.

Here are four techniques that will help you become an active listener:

1. **Tell prospects that you understand.** You'll be surprised how quickly people will trust you when you respond to

them with “I understand.” Try it. Here are several variations: “I understand what you are saying.” “That makes sense.” and “That’s not unusual.”

2. **Repeat the prospect’s words.** I call this parroting. It’s
3. not as effective as “I understand,” but it’s still worthwhile. You’ll sound like an echo when you repeat the prospect’s words, but it’s comforting for prospects to hear a salesperson “parrot” them. *“You felt the directional vectors were off as a result of a bug in the program?”*
4. **Paraphrase the prospect’s words.** Listen to the prospect, and then rephrase the prospect’s statement in your own words. It’s a good way to make sure you’re hearing correctly. And it provides a little variety to paraphrase rather than “parrot” or continue saying that you understand. *“In other words, the computer program messed up the accuracy of the vectors?”*
5. **Provide feedback about what the prospect is feeling.** Listen for words that express the prospect’s feelings. When you hear these words, store them in your memory, or take notes. Then, when appropriate, feed back the feelings. *“It sounds to me like you became frustrated with the bugs in the program.”*

Try these techniques and you’ll discover that your prospects will be inclined to trust you.

While listening actively, it’s also necessary to ask questions to uncover a prospect’s pain. Here are some generic questions that lead to pain in a sales meeting:

- How do you feel about that?
- How serious would you say the problem is today? What were you hoping I could do for you?

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- Is there anything about your present situation you don't like?
- What are you thinking about?
- What do you like about what you are currently using? What would you like to change or improve, if anything? How do you see that working for you?

Sounds like no matter what I say or what our system can do, it wouldn't make any difference.

Isn't what you already have doing the job? How long has this been a problem?

What's the real problem?

In the industry we've noticed a problem with.... Have you experienced anything similar?

If you were to change today, what would you do differently?

Does that mean that you're not open to new ideas?

If you were to pick one thing that you didn't like about that, what would it be?

Do you have any problems in relation to...?

How do I tell you you're making the wrong decision without your getting upset?

Where do you see a need for improvement?

When did you first decide you should look into...? Why am I here?

Good. So, what I hear you saying is that finding a better way of helping the (blank) isn't that critical. Am I right or wrong about that?

Why did you agree to see me?

How long have you been thinking about this? And you never have a problem with...?

That probably means you are happy with...? How much is the problem costing you?

The list of pain-probing questions is endless, and it's important

for you to develop questions that you can ask comfortably. It's a good idea to take notes when you begin asking questions. People love to be interviewed, especially if they're talking about something near and dear to them, and that certainly describes their pain! Act like a news reporter. Gather information from the prospect and write it in your notebook.

Continue asking questions until you uncover the prospect's pain. A rule of thumb is that you'll need to ask at least three questions to get to pain. The first two responses to your questions will result in what I call Intellectual

Smoke Screens (ISS). They're pain indicators, but they're not real pain. When you hear ISS, continue asking questions!

How will you know when you've succeeded? How will you know your prospect is in pain?

You'll know because you've never heard it before. The prospect's responses will become emotional, not intellectual. The prospect's words will be different. *A prospect in pain uses words such as worried, concerned, frustrated, wasted effort, angry, upset, afraid, lost all hope, terrible situation, disappointed, et cetera.*

For example, imagine an accountant calling on a prospect. The accountant asks the prospect, "How can I help you?" The prospect says: "I would like to pay less taxes and keep more money in my pocket." That may sound like pain, but it's ISS. It's not an emotional response. If the accountant tries to close the sale now, it's too early. There's no pain. When the prospect says, "I'm tired of giving away my money to the government, and I'm not going to do it anymore," or something similar, with emotion, *that's* pain.

In addition to using emotional words or statements, a prospect in pain uses different body language. If the pain gets severe, the prospect may get up and walk around the room, or look out a window, almost ignoring you. Some prospects lower their heads, shake their heads, lower their eyes, or slouch in their chairs. That's when you know they're feeling pain.

It's not unusual to get excited the first few times you successfully lead a prospect through the Pain discussion. After all, you know you're that much closer to the sale. But don't show your real emotions. Pain is never a pleasant experience. Your prospect shouldn't see you smiling. Take your lead from the prospect. Shake your head sympathetically. Empathize with the prospect's pain. At this point, selling is acting.

You can't sell anybody anything – they must discover that they want it. Good pain questions help you define the extent of the prospect's perceived problem. Ask them!

We're often asked to condense the Sandler pain questions into a short list that's relevant and useful to each and every salesperson. Although the list of possible pain questions is endless, and the specifics of your own market and your own experience should guide your discussions with prospects, we can tell you that any short list of effective initial pain questions is likely to include the following.

- “Tell me more about that.”
- “Can you be a bit more specific? Give me an example.”
- “How long has that been a problem?”
- “What have you tried to do about that?”
- “And did that work?”
- “How much do you think that has cost you?”
- “How do you feel about that?”
- “Have you given up trying to deal with the problem?”

– David H. Mattson

I believe in allowing the prospect to define the boundaries of the sales meeting. I believe in creating a win-win proposition in which both prospect and salesperson can get their needs met. I think prospects should have the opportunity to match their pain with a product or service, and to fix their hurts. And I think salespeople should have the opportunity to capture new customers and go to the bank as often as possible.

I can live with laying back while the traditionalist pushes hard. I can live with helping prospects close themselves while the traditionalist has to force the close. I can live with showing my prospects empathy while the traditionalist feels pressure throughout the sales meeting. I can live with relaxing and having fun while the traditionalist must work hard to hide his tactics. I can live with disqualifying suspects early on while the traditionalist must present, present, and present to make his numbers work. I can live with developing pain while the traditionalist sells features and benefits.

Most of all, I can live with using the Sandler Submarine, feeling proud that I stayed out of the way while my prospect charted his or her own course, free to choose or reject my offer.

Did you enjoy this sample Chapter?

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