

Stop Trying to Close the Sale

By Charles H. Green

Trusted Advisor Associates

When was the last time you “closed a sale?” What’s your success rate in “closing” sales? Better yet, when was the last time someone tried to “close” you? Did it work? Was it a positive experience?

Here’s a guess at your answer. For a significant percentage of your sales, it’s hard to identify where “closing” happened—the decision just got made, or didn’t. When you do try to close, you often feel uncomfortable; worse yet, more often than not, it doesn’t work. When someone tries to “close” you, it generally doesn’t work--and when it does, you often buy despite the seller’s close, rather than because of it.

If that sounds familiar, you’re not alone. The business development process for professional services—indeed, for most intangible and complex purchases—is hindered by this vestigial concept.

You don’t need to get better at closing. You need to stop it.

The Cult of Closing

The concept of closing probably goes back centuries. Think of itinerant peddlers, carnival barkers, open-air markets. You can hear closing “lines” being practiced today on infomercials and in street fairs (not to mention automobile dealerships). Done well (think Ron Popiel) they’re part of the entertainment of buying.

By mid-twentieth century, the concept had gone mainstream. The concept of “always be closing” was taught in the well-regarded Xerox Sales approach and many others.

It lives on today. Here’s what Amazon’s search algorithm produces when the word “sales” is linked to a related term:

Sales	302,410
Sales price	24,969
Sales pitch	11,797
Sales meeting	5,608
Sales close	5,390

Sales leads	5,270
Sales buyer	4,756
Sales quality	4,616
Sales presentation	4,610
Sales decision	3,041
Sales qualify	691
Sales screen	597

Clearly, the idea of “closing” is alive and well in sales. But that doesn’t mean it’s right for you. The higher your average sale price, the more complex the sale is, the more relationship-driven it is, and the longer it takes—the less “closing” is likely to help you.

What Closing Is

Did you ever notice that all sales approaches seem to use arrow diagrams? It’s because they conceive of sales as a process that is linear and rational.

Here is typical language, taken from an 8-step version of a sales process model:

The sales person checks that if they can meet the specification then the customer will give them the sale ('If I...would you...' trial close). After dealing with any objections, the target solution is presented:

- *Show features that meet customer needs (in priority order).*
- *Show additional advantages.*
- *Describe benefits that the customer is really buying.*
- *Explain how it works (but don't over do it!).*
- *Confirm that they are comfortable with all of this.*

The customer now makes the final selection of the product to meet their specification and criteria and hence solve their problems.

The sales person summarizes benefits (Summary Close), asks for the sale (using their favorite close), discusses any logistics detail and reassures the customer that they have made a good decision.

There are two critical assumptions buried in this approach:

1. the purpose is to get the transactional sale
2. buying is a sub-category of rational decision-making.

These assumptions are what make you as a professional squirm in your seat when trying to “close” a real-life professional services client.

Motives Matter

Why do (most) automobile salespeople try to close you?

- to qualify you as a lead, so they can focus on likely-to-buy customers
- because if you walk out the door, you probably won't come back
- because they feel you need that little “push” to make a decision

The first reason is all about them, not you; they come across as selfish and manipulative.

The second is only a disguised version of the first.

The third infantilizes you the buyer; fine for the emotionally needy, not for most competent buyers.

Of all the components of trust, the most important is low self-orientation. Think of low self-orientation as client focus for the sake of the client, not for the sake of the seller. Most client focus is the client focus of a vulture; when we find someone who actually seems to care about us as an end, not as a means, we are positively inclined to trust them.

This is the first major problem with closing: it is inherently seller-oriented. It is all about this transaction, here-now. It casts the buyer in the role of means to the seller's ends. It makes the customer an object.

It's bad enough when you're buying a car. How much worse is self-orientation when you're an accountant talking to a CFO? A publicist talking to an artist? A consultant talking to a CIO?

Motives matter. Closing is an inherently selfish perspective. To close is to put your needs ahead of the client's. That doesn't work.

How Clients Buy

The other assumption buried in “closing” is the belief that buying is about rational decision-making. (Ironically, the old-time closing techniques stay purely emotional—see infomercials for an example; the rational add-on is one from modern corporate sales models).

If they haven’t bought, so the logic goes, there must be a reason. If I can uncover the reason, I will remove the blockage to their buying. Repeated attempts to close (the ABC rule, Always Be Closing) make sense based on this logic.

But it’s not quite right. As Jeffrey Gitomer puts it, “the buying decision is made emotionally, and justified rationally.” Lawyers, consultants and accountants think this doesn’t apply to their clients, but it most often does.

In almost all cases, you know more about your service offering than the client does. That’s why they’re buying you. But they don’t want to become experts in your area of expertise—instead, they want to find an expert they can trust. Their need is not to make a rational decision—their need is to feel comfortable with a rational decision they have to make.

Unfortunately, the “closing” model plays right into three of the largest problems professionals have:

- a. we talk too much about ourselves
- b. we talk too much about our product or service offering
- c. we push too fast to move to action steps.

When buyers buy, it isn’t because their objections have been met, or they have been persuaded by rational arguments. It’s because they’ve gotten comfortable with the decision. If they come to feel they trust you—that you have their interests at heart, you understand their concerns, you can be relied on, you will have a commitment to dealing rightly with the inevitable unforeseen circumstances—then they will hire you.

In Place of Closing

The very concept of “closing” is misplaced in professional services. It presumes a transactional, seller-centric, linear, rational model of decision-making about a product or service. Instead, what is needed is a client-centric model of arriving at a level of trust in the seller.

What does that look like? Probably a lot like what you do when you're successful:

1. a focus on the relationship, not the transaction
2. sample selling that applies competence to the problem itself, rather than talking about qualifications (I call it Selling by Doing, not Selling by Telling)
3. a lot of listening—open-ended, plain old, paying attention for its own sake
4. envisioning—helping the client envision an alternative view of reality, in rich detail.

As always, with trust, there is a paradox. If you stop closing, you'll close more deals. But only if you do it for the client's sake. You actually have to care about the client.

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