

# Selling by Doing, not Selling by Telling

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I found myself on the dais at a law firm offsite with the chief counsel of a Fortune 50 company, who told this story.



“We were going outside for some specialized counsel; we had reviewed the specs of a dozen firms, and really wanted top-notch capabilities. We narrowed it to three, and invited them in for 90-minute presentations.

The first one was excellent; great expertise, clearly knew our industry, and had done some homework that even gave us a few free answers. I thought it was over right there.

Then the second firm came in. They were if anything even better—more expert, more experienced, more value-added. Now we had a tough decision.

Then came firm 3. They said, “We have 90 minutes with you. We can either do the march of a thousand slides—which we’re happy to do—or we can get started, right now, and begin to work with you. After 85 minutes, we’ll stop, and you’ll have first-hand experience of just exactly how it feels to work with us.”

You know, I think they had me right there. But we did the 85, and sure enough they were very competent. There was no question about our decision; they had focused on us, not themselves; we got to know them better; instead of making great guesses, they asked us. They came to listen and to work, and to show their smarts in real-time, on our issues. You just felt you could trust them.”

What this firm did was simple and sensible. But just what did they do? Was it listening? Client focus? A sense of theater and willingness to take risks? A shrewd way to differentiate?

It was all these. But first and foremost, it was Selling by Doing, not Selling by Telling. Most providers of complex intangible services (law, accounting, consulting, software systems, commercial banking) think there is a big difference between doing and selling. Some even distinguish the roles. The good news is—the best selling is doing.

That is good news because we professionals already have confidence in our ability to deliver—it’s selling that’s often scary.

## **Why Is Doing the Best Selling?**

Complex, intangible services are—well, complex and intangible. They cannot be grasped physically; even their consequences are hard to evaluate. They are hard to understand, even for buyers of those services. The seller knows more than the buyer; in fact, it is access to precisely that expertise which the buyer seeks.



Buyers thus have a choice—they can try to evaluate the expert’s level of expertise, or they can assess how much they trust the expert. To properly evaluate expertise, the buyer would have to possess the very expertise he is trying to acquire. Not surprisingly, buyers prefer to screen on acceptable levels of expertise, then base final decisions on trust.

Complex intangible services have one thing in common with perfumes and wines—they are best bought by sample. Sampling an expert means having them practice on your own issues—not on someone else’s. You can hear lists of qualifications, but you don’t know if they apply to you. You can hear a dozen testimonials, but you have no way of knowing if your situation is comparable. A 3<sup>rd</sup> party’s opinion doesn’t carry the same emotional weight as one’s own direct experience.

Selling by Doing means giving samples--doing real client work, in real-time. It makes all that abstract expertise directly relevant. Selling by Doing shows an other-orientation, demonstrates a willingness to take risk, and exemplifies collaboration. It adds value rather than talking about adding value, and shows a commitment to the client.

Selling by Doing adds value, feels genuine, is client-focused, collaborative, and makes the abstract feel tangible. No wonder it beats Selling by Telling.

## **So Why Do Sellers Still Sell by Telling, not by Doing?**

Two factors lock sellers into “Selling by Telling,” not Selling by Doing. First is that Selling by Telling is the norm in other businesses, and therefore the norm for most sales books, sales training and salespeople.

But other businesses are different; here are just a few examples. Quality in other businesses consists of zero defects, not of an unlimited upside. Sales contracts typically imply a change in legal title, with financial implications like insurance and liability. You can touch and see the goods. And most sellers speak plain language, rather than that of a profession.

Secondly, sellers overrate the importance of expertise. They do so because of the huge investment they have made in mastering their area of expertise, and because all of their career—including rewards and reinforcements--has been focused on increasing technical mastery. Buyers contribute to this as well; for their own complex set of reasons, buyers also act on the surface as if the evaluation of technical expertise is what is important to their buying decision. They frequently ask technical questions, even if they're not sure how to evaluate the answers, because they feel it is a required part of their role as buyer.

Most sellers therefore practice Selling by Telling. They put a great deal of stress on credentials, qualifications, years of experience, office locations, functional depth of capabilities, industry credentials, and so on.

Credentials are key to getting in the door. Once in the door however, the continued repetition of credentials is useless or even harmful. Doing so is about the seller, not about the buyer, whereas every buyer prefers to talk about him- or herself rather than about the seller. And it doesn't provide the opportunity to buy by sampling.

Think back to the most recent client sales opportunity you faced. Ask yourself what proportion of your prep time was spent on how to communicate credentials and qualifications, vs. how to ask great questions and engage the client in meaningful dialogue about the real issues at hand.

Then think about your concerns just before the meeting. Were you worried about how to control the meeting to get your points across? Or about how to collaboratively move toward a joint understanding of the issue at hand? Finally, in the meeting itself, how much time was spent by your firm talking about your capabilities, vs. how much time spent by the client giving you answers to rich, open-ended questions?

Remember: you're in a samples business. Let your credentials get you in the door. Then help your clients by giving them a sample of how you work; do so by genuinely asking about and beginning to work on their own real issues. That's how trust gets created, and business won. Sell by Doing, don't Sell by Telling.



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