

Your Guide to Mastering Consultative Selling

A step by step guide for staffing industry sales professionals to master consultative selling

By Dan Fisher



Introduction

How do you sell? Whether you know it or not, you have a sales methodology of some kind. For most sellers, they have their own preferred way of selling and typically it centers around the activities they are most comfortable with, *not what is most effective*. But it doesn't matter if you're an entrepreneur, a sales rep on a sales team of one or, part of a large enterprise sales team, every seller and every sales team has their own way of selling. So, how do you sell?

Most sellers say they apply a consultative sales approach. But what does consultative selling really mean? Heck, the term consultative selling has become cliché, much like Kleenex. Why is consultative selling such a big deal?

With consultative selling the customer's needs are the focal point of the conversation, not the salesperson's personal goal or agenda or his or her service offerings or their candidate. With consultative selling the goal is to understand the customer's goals including the problems they're trying to solve and the goals they're trying to achieve and then co-creating a solution. Most importantly, consultative selling requires the salesperson to share ideas and insights that are relevant and of high value to the customer within the context of the discussion. This is what makes it "consultative." Applying a consultative sales approach requires the salesperson to constantly ask and check for customer feedback to ensure both parties are communicating and understanding each-other effectively so that the seller stays in alignment with the buyer.

Here is a simple analogy that encapsulates consultative selling. When you're sick and you go see your doctor, they don't just say "hello, sorry you're not feeling well, go home and take this medicine for the next seven days." Instead, the doctor asks you lots of questions to properly diagnose your symptoms. They ask you about external and/or environmental factors such as what you've been eating, whether or not you've been traveling, your medical history, your stress level, nutrition and exercise routines and so forth. *After* they ask you a series of questions to diagnose your illness, they educate you on what likely happened, why you're feeling the way you feel and whether or not you have the common cold, a virus or a bacterial infection. *After they educate you*, they prescribe a solution.

That in a nutshell, is consultative selling.

Understanding this, *believing* this and truly adopting a consultative sales approach can and does make all the difference in the world.

The History of Consultative Selling

When the word consultative selling was first applied back in the 1970's it was revolutionary. It marked a major transformation from the salesperson being perceived as a purveyor of information and the customer as the recipient, to a collaborative interaction — one in which the customer's needs, not the product — was the focal point of the discussion and the seller co-creating the solution with the buyer. This was unheard in those times. The transition from product-focused selling to a consultative selling approach was the direct result of changes in the marketplace. Increased competition, changes in buyer behavior and the customers' ability to access information shifted the focus of a sales conversation from the seller and what they had to offer to the buyer and the problems they were trying to solve and the goals they were



trying to achieve and the solutions they were already considering. This shift occurred because buyers became more educated and informed on their challenges and potential solutions, and most importantly more prepared to evaluate salespeople and their solutions. Average sellers who could previously win over customers with their charm, wit and rapport building have been pushed to the bottom while highly skilled, agile sellers are able to stay on top.

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Today's corporate buyers seek sales professionals who are authentic and whom they can trust. Corporate buyers and IT hiring managers expect their time spent with salespeople to be highly informative and engaging. By following a consultative sales approach sellers can differentiate themselves because needs of the customer are brought to the forefront of the conversation and are clear, enabling the sellers recommendations to be in alignment with the customer's objectives.

Consultative Sales Techniques & Skills to Engage the Modern Buyer

Below are a few of the core characteristics that mark a consultative salesperson:

- They ask more questions
- They ask thought provoking questions
- They provide personalized, tailored solutions vs. generic "cookie cutter" solutions
- Consultative selling is all about the quality of the dialogue between the salesperson and the customer. Product or service knowledge, or for us in the staffing industry, candidate knowledge, is transformed into a tailored solution when it's delivered and positioned within the context of the customer's needs, goals and objectives. The ability to effectively engage in a consultative dialogue is a skill that is easily taught and can easily be adopted with consistent practice.

Consultative Selling Creates an Engaging, Memorable Customer Experience

Applying a consultative sales approach creates a memorable customer experience. Adopting and applying a consultative sales approach is all about the experience the seller creates for the buyer. Why do so many people spend so much time in Whole Foods? Starbucks? Apple store? Why do so many people spend twice the amount of money in those stores and on those products vs. the alternative? Because of the customer experience.

Just like Apple, Whole Foods and Starbucks, staffing sales professionals can create an amazing customer experience by following a consultative sales approach. This is how top performers differentiate themselves from the rest of the pack. Sellers who take a consultative sales approach find ways to provide their prospects with value and make the discussion all about the customer and not about their candidates or their service offerings. Rather than just promoting an existing candidate or service offering, the salesperson focuses on the customer's goals and challenges and addresses each through consultative sales dialogue.

To Master Consultative Selling, Begin by Building Buyers Persona's

Buyer personas reveal key insights about your ideal buyers including how they think, the challenges they face, their barriers to doing business with you, their perceived risks to working with an IT staffing firm and hiring IT consultants and so much more. If a complete stranger comes to you crying and seeking out your help and guidance on how to improve some aspect of their life that you know nothing about, how can you expect to help them? You can't. Salespeople who know nothing about their buyers are no different.

What are some words that come to mind when you hear the word "consultative selling" and "consultative salesperson?" For most, they think of:

- Educate (the buyer)
- Experienced
- Insightful
- Engaging
- Ask questions (inquisitive)
- Teach

A buyer persona tells salespeople what prospective customers are thinking and doing as they weigh their options to address a problem or achieve a goal they can solve. Actionable buyer personas reveal insights about buyers' attitudes, concerns and criteria that drive prospective customers to choose one salesperson and vendor over another or, stick with the status quo. When salespeople have insights into what their buyers think about doing business with them, they have the knowledge needed to personalize and tailor their messaging with the needs and values of the buyer.

Without this knowledge it will be nearly impossible to engage a buyer a consultative sales conversation.

Consider the following steps for building your buyer personas.

- Look through your contacts database to uncover trends about how certain leads or customers find and consume your content. How did the progress from lead to prospect to customer?



- When creating forms to use on your website, use form fields that capture important persona information. For example, if all of your personas vary based on company size, ask each lead for information about company size on your forms. You may also want to use 'job title' or 'team size' as fields to capture persona information.
- Interview customers and prospects, either in person or over the phone, to discover what they like about your product or service. Find out what it is like to "live a day in the life in their job." Find out what their day to day challenges are, how they're measured, how they earn a bonus, where do they go for information, how do they make buying decisions, evaluate staffing firms, etc.

The greater your understanding of your ideal buyers, the deeper, richer and more consultative your sales conversations will be.

Example of Consultative Selling, Creating Engaging Customer Experience

Below are some examples of consultative selling and how it differs from a legacy, transactional sales approach. A consultative sales conversation with a prospect may start like this:

"Hi Jim, I have been doing some research on you and your organization and I understand one of the goals you're trying to achieve is to accelerate time to market with your new mobile application, is that correct? (sales rep is checking for understanding). In addition to our lessons learned from helping ABC Software company reduce their time to market with their mobile application by 18%, I have gathered some data and best practices from Gartner Research that I thought you might find useful. What do you say we grab a coffee and I share with you the report and the key takeaways? I can also share with you the details of how ABC software shaved 18% off their product development time, ideas that could help you accelerate your time to market. With that information, we can work together to see how our organization could make an impact on your product development efforts."



Notice that the focal point of the conversation is on the customer, including their goals and what they find of high value, not on what the sales person wants. Notice the objective of the conversation is not for the salesperson to learn about the customers business, culture, technical environment or staffing needs, but instead focuses on how the seller's ideas and research might impact the customers goal.

A legacy, transactional salesperson leads a customer conversation by asking questions like you see here:

- "I saw your job posting on your website"
- "What is your technology stack?"

- "What types of contractors do you to hire?"
- "What is important to you in an IT staffing vendor?"
- "How can I earn your business?"
- "I'm calling to check in, do you have any needs today?"
- "I'm going to be in your neighborhood next week and wanted to pop in"

See the difference?

Six Step Consultative Selling Framework

These six steps provide a basic framework for applying consultative selling.

Planning & Research: One goal for all salespeople and of consultative selling is for the salesperson to always be coming from a place in which they're perceived as an authoritative thought leader and equal partner. If you attend your sales meetings with little or no preparation, then you will likely continue to ask silly questions and be perceived and treated as a transactional commodity supplier. Meeting preparation is critically important because it is what provides the context for the meeting and how you will frame the consultative sales conversation.

Lead the Consultative Conversation with Questions: Salespeople should always assume that when engaging a new prospect, they will NOT have a predefined, budget approved job order to share. The responsibility of the seller is to *create* an opportunity. To create an opportunity, sellers must lead the consultative conversation by asking well prepared probing questions based on planning and research to uncover and understand the prospect's current state of their team, department and/or project and their level of satisfaction as well as their desired future state and the challenges preventing them from arriving at their desired future state. Leading with well prepared, open-ended questions is a key component to consultative selling

Active Listening: It may sound cliché, but active listening is key to engaging in meaningful, consultative dialogue. This requires the salesperson to listen with mind, body and spirit, maintain eye contact and take detailed notes. It also requires the salesperson to ask insightful follow up questions to the customers response to the salesperson's original question or questions. Follow up questions to customer responses is a key element of active listening.

Educate Your Customer with Insight Selling: To be truly "consultative," sellers need to focus on educating their prospects and customers with fresh ideas, insights, and data points that are of high value and relevance. As you're actively listening and responding with follow up clarifying questions to your customer's responses you should also be incorporating ideas, data points and insights into the conversation. Your focus should be on educating your prospect, not pitching your candidate or services.

Qualifying: Unlike transactional selling, in consultative selling the seller is creating the opportunity. As the seller creates the opportunity and co-creates the solution with the buyer, the seller also needs to be asking qualifying questions to determine if the buyer is committed to solving the problem, implementing the solution and has the



means to do so.

Closing: For sellers who follow a consultative sales approach, closing is relatively easy. Consultative sales professionals apply the consultative selling skill of checking. By checking with their customer throughout the sales process for agreement and understanding they are able to collaborate and overcome concerns early in the sales process, and not rely on last minute negotiations.

Master These Consultative Selling Skills and You'll Master Consultative Selling

Active Listening: I know, active listening is not a sexy skill and can even seem cliché. But there is a reason why every single article you read regarding sales skills puts listening skills at the top. To be clear, I'm referring to the salesperson listening with their mind and body and hearing the story in its entirety. Salespeople won't admit this, but most of them know how to look good, like they're paying attention in a conversation even though they're thinking about several things at once. This is NOT active listening.

Active listening means the salespeople is taking detailed notes and *asking follow up questions for clarity*. A great way to demonstrate you're actively listening is to listen for specific words your customer says then incorporate those keywords into your response and follow up questions. This is a great way to demonstrate you are actively listening as well as build rapport with them.

Checking: Checking is a sales (and recruiter) listening skill to ensure the parties in communication are understanding each other clearly. After all, a conversation is a two-way flow of information sharing. You don't want your conversations to be one-sided where you do all the talking or explaining. And you certainly don't want it to turn into a situation where the customer feels like they're being interrogated. Checking is the process of the salesperson asking the customer for feedback on something they have said or something the customer has. It is how salespeople ensure that they understand what it is the customer has said and the meaning behind it. Checking is also how salespeople confirm that the customer understands what they, the salesperson has just said or suggested.

Applying the skill of checking allows salespeople to test for understanding and agreement of that understanding. Checking keeps the customer involved and engaged in the conversation and is a key skill when engaged in a consultative sales conversation. Salespeople should practice adopting the skill of checking as it will help ensure they stay in alignment with their customers through the entire sales process.

Empathy: According to Wikipedia, Empathy is the capacity to recognize emotions that are being experienced by another. Having empathy means that you are able to put yourself in the shoes of another person and see the world through their eyes. Empathy is important not just because it shows that you understand the customer but more importantly *because of the way it makes the customer feel*.

Salespeople who demonstrate empathy make the customer feel understood and that is how salespeople can build trust. Being consultative means understanding and having good "bedside manner." Empathy might be the most *underrated* sales skill.

Understanding Buyer Personas: I think it is so important that salespeople understand their buyers that I mention it twice in this eBook. As mentioned previously, buyer personas reveal key insights about your ideal buyers including how they think, the challenges they face, their barriers to doing business with you, their

perceived risks to working with an IT staffing firm and hiring IT consultants and so much more.

To engage in consultative selling sellers must understand what it is like to live a day in the life of their buyer's shoes. Building buyer personas is actually pretty simple. Identify your ideal customers and go interview them. That's it! Ask them questions about their job, how they're managed, how they're evaluated, what type of information and resources they're interested in to do their job more effectively. Once you start learning about your ideal buyers and what is important to them you will know what information, research, benchmarking studies and analyst reports to share with them that will be of high value and relevance.

Develop Business Acumen: Business acumen is about understanding how all of the different teams and departments in a company rely on one another in order to produce their product or service. Business acumen is the understanding of how these different teams and departments are interconnected and reliant on each other. It's about understanding the cause and effect between each.

Think of a business like an orchestra. If the trombone player is off key even though the other 120 musicians are in key, the audience is going to notice. That one trombone player makes a difference. Same thing in football, you can have the best quarterback and the best receiver to make the catch but if the guards and tackles don't block, the play will break down. As in football or with an orchestra, there is a cause and effect relationship in the business world.

Business acumen refers to your ability to recognize the cause and effect relationships between teams and departments within a business. For example, what happens if an online retailer's website goes down and consumers can't purchase products? Their IT department hears about it, but who else? The customer service team gets flooded with upset customers. Perhaps marketing gets upset because they invested in a marketing campaign to drive visitors to their web site? You get the idea.

Developing your business acumen can easily be turned into an academic exercise if you let it. Focus, and I mean really focus on speaking with and listening to your customers. If for example your customer says, "we're really struggling with customer retention." Ask a simple question such as "what do you think is causing the problem?" By asking this question you learn how the customer thinks but you also learn the cause of the problem and can begin to engage in more meaningful dialog and ultimately develop your business acumen. Do this with all of your customers across all departments and you will really start to understand the realities of how a business operates. This is key to engaging in consultative sales conversations.

Learn to Speak, Position Yourself as a Thought Leader: Imagine for a second that you blow out your ACL on a ski trip and as a result you need to have surgery. First, you need to identify a surgeon who will perform the surgery. Do you want a surgeon who does a half-dozen ACL surgeries each month in addition to them performing knee, and ankle surgeries or, do you want the surgeon who does a half-dozen ACL surgeries every day?

Most people want the specialist, and in this day and age, people expect to work with experts. Your customers are no different. When your customers seek out a vendor to perform a service, they want to hire the authoritative expert because it gives them peace of mind. Perhaps you've heard the saying that dates back to the 1970's and 1980's, "nobody gets fired for buying IBM." The reason for this was back then, IBM and their products including their salesforce were light years ahead of everyone else. *In the minds of the buyers*, there was little to no risk in buying IBM because they were positioned and perceived as the authoritative expert. The point is that salespeople who speak like an authoritative thought leader and position themselves as an expert quickly build trust with customers and give their customers peace of mind that working with them is the smartest and safest move for them.

Statements that salespeople can make to position themselves as a thought leader include “one of the trends in the industry we are seeing is....” Or, “what we have found from our experience is...” Or, our customers are sharing with us...? Think of speaking like and positioning yourself as an authoritative thought leader like this; the conversations you have with your prospects and customers should be so impactful and valuable that the customer would be willing to *pay for the time they spend with you*. As you develop your business acumen your confidence and comfort level in making these types statement will grow.

Sales Probing Skills, Leading Dialogue with Questions: One of the key steps of the consultative selling framework is to diagnose before prescribing a solution. The key to properly diagnosing a customer’s need, goal or business challenge resides in the seller’s ability to ask thought provoking sales probing questions. Success in sales can easily be tied directly back to the frequency and quality of the probing questions being asked by the salesperson. Asking well designed, thought provoking sales questions gives the sales person another opportunity to demonstrate their expertise and optimize their credibility. The best questions that salespeople can ask are those that are thought provoking, those that really require the customer to pause and think before they can respond with an answer.

To sharpen your sales probing skills and the quality of questions you ask, you should study your buyer personas and ensure you really understand the common challenges and concerns your customers face. It is this understanding that will drive the context and quality of your sales probing questions. It is also important for salespeople to understand that customers are almost always operating under or within an imperfect system. For instance, most customers:

- “ Are not 100% fully confident in all members of their team
- Recognize their existing applications don’t work perfectly 100% of the time
- Understand their customers are not 100% satisfied all of the time
- Realize business processes are not always 100% optimized and can be improved

By properly preparing and asking thought provoking sales probing questions, salespeople can challenge their customers thinking and way of doing things or their status quo which can compel them to consider new ways of doing things. For example, most customers will not know how much money it would save them if they hired an IT consultant to fix “business problem X.” But asking them the right questions about *how the failure of “business problem X”* is impacting their business can get them to think and consider why change is needed. This is thought provoking. Asking these types of questions changes the buyer experience and creates opportunities for the seller.

Benefits of Consultative Selling

Perhaps the biggest benefit of following and applying a consultative sales approach is that it benefits both the customer and the seller. In the consultative selling example provided earlier, the seller provides the client with an opportunity to learn from best practices and how another like-minded customer achieved the same goal. The seller provided a second opportunity for the customer to learn by sharing relevant data from an analyst report (Gartner Research). As a result of the seller applying a consultative sales approach, the customer is experiencing a more engaging buying experience and receiving value from the seller. If you review the example of the legacy, transactional seller or the “order taker” you must ask yourself, how is this approach providing customer value? It’s not and that of course is the point.

Sales professionals who have successfully made the transition to adopt a consultative sales methodology have reaped huge benefits including higher-value sales (larger deal values and bigger profit margins), quota attainment and bigger commission checks, improved customer satisfaction and retention, increase in customer referrals and overall improved customer loyalty not to mention differentiation in the marketplace.

Next Steps

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About the Author

Over nearly a quarter-century, Dan Fisher has accumulated a successful track record in consistently driving revenue growth for staffing and recruiting firms as an individual contributor and sales leader. Since founding Menemsha Group in 2008, Dan has designed and deployed sales and recruiter onboarding, training, and enablement programs for hundreds of staffing firms. He has also coached thousands of recruiting industry professionals.

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- Content services
- Training services
- Coaching Services
- A SaaS-based, AI-powered recruiter enablement platform

Menemsha Group is also a Bullhorn marketplace partner. We help Bullhorn customers design and implement scalable and repeatable sales processes to drive Bullhorn adoption. We lead the refinement and validation of sales stage definition, alignment with the buyer's journey, exit criteria including verifiable outcomes, CRM workflow configuration, linkage to messaging, sales methodology, sales metrics, and sales forecasting.