

Championship selling

At the heart of successful selling is the ability to forge meaningful relationships with customers, home in on their needs and deliver accordingly

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Special to The Sun

Show me the money! This classic Hollywood line is perhaps the perfect metaphor for the goal of today's sales executive — not because it reflects the salesperson's desires, but rather those of the client. The football agent fighting for his professional life in the film *Jerry Maguire* comes out on top because he takes this message to heart, and delivers on his client's needs. Once he stops viewing his clients as meal tickets and starts connecting to them as people, he discovers the secret to effective selling, and is able to resurrect his career.

The lesson is a valuable one for today's sales associate: at the heart of successful selling is the ability to forge meaningful relationships with customers, home in on their needs and deliver accordingly.

"The top sales professionals in Canada and the U.S. all say that when you strip down everything about selling, it's all about making a difference in the customer's life," says Tom Blake, a leading corporate consultant and co-author of *Championship Selling: A Blueprint For Winning With Today's Customer* (Wiley, September 2005,



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\$26.95). "These people have figured out how to put their customers' agendas ahead of theirs."

It sounds like common sense, but according to Blake, it's anything but common. While most salespeople un-

derstand the customer satisfaction principle at a theoretical level, many don't put that knowledge into practice.

Developing and embracing a customer-centric business approach is at the crux of *Championship Selling*, a

guide for both individuals and organizations. A key point the book makes is the necessity to shift from transactional sales — where the focus is on closing the deal and moving on — to championship selling, which in-

volves building and maintaining long-term relationships with clients by truly serving their needs.

"The mistake people make is that they get the sale and think the business is over — you need to continue to work

the customer's agenda," Blake says.

Progressive organizations invest serious resources into figuring out what customers really want and need by conducting extensive market research. At the individual level, listening to customers is key — putting aside your own interests, asking good questions and wholeheartedly listening to the answers. See the sidebar on page 2 for a list of sample questions that elicit valuable information from customers.

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Much of a salesperson's success lies in his or her perspective about himself, his company, customers and the selling process. Those with defeatist attitudes tend to manifest what they believe. Effective salespeople, Blake says, view challenges as opportunities — they visualize success, seek advice from colleagues, monitor how their emotions may affect their sales techniques, and challenge their own belief systems and the beliefs of others.

Developing and refining your sales skills is an ongoing process, Blake says, and one that can benefit greatly from the advice and support of a coach — your manager, a certified professional, or someone in your industry in a position to which you aspire.

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The most successful salespeople also benefit from the support of their companies, Blake says. The more organizations create a positive sales environment, take an interest in both the personal and professional success of their front-line sellers, and invest in training related to customer business development, the better their sales associates will perform.

"They'll also be more passionate about their job and care more about their customers," Blake says. "If you want to make a difference in sales, you need to be passionate."

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ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Engaging in active listening and asking the right questions are key to discovering what your customers really want and need — and to meeting their expectations. The following list of open-ended questions in *Championship Selling* can help you get that valuable information:

- What are the key elements of your business plan this year?
- What are the operating strategies that will drive your day-to-day business?
- What are your key deliverables/priorities?
- What are the biggest issues you are facing/hurdles you anticipate having to overcome?
- What measurement criteria are you using to make decisions about your business operations?
- Who else in your company should we be talking to regarding potential synergies?
- How can we help you better add value?
- As a supplier/potential supplier, what changes within your systems, processes or overall structure should we be aware of?
- How might we adjust our business model for a competitive advantage with you?
- How can we better capitalize on opportunities with your company?