

A Question Of Focus: Less But Better

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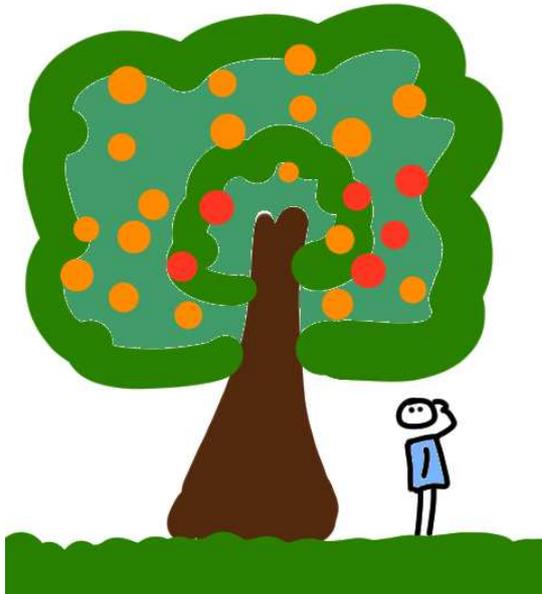
ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges facing sales and marketing professionals in choosing the kinds of opportunities they should bid for and put forwards a model to help increase their chances of a successful bid.

1. Introduction

All of us need to sell. Selling is how we do business with others, whether we're selling ourselves to get a job or selling what the business we work for can do for a customer. We might not like the idea that we're selling but it's an unavoidable part of what we do and so it makes sense to try and be better at it.

To get better at selling, however, we need to understand the process we follow now and what we need to do differently to improve it. There are always so many options, so many choices that it's hard to know where to start. Imagine standing there looking at a tree full of fruit.



Where do you start picking — do you shake the tree and try and catch the fruit as they fall or do you get a ladder, climb up and feel for the ones

that are ripe and pluck just those, leaving the rest for someone else?

The tenets of modern marketing are seductively simple. Look at everything as a numbers game and if you contact enough people and push them hard enough a few will buy from you. That is, in my view, far too hard an existence to want to carry out for too long. This paper set out a different approach that is both more appealing and more sustainable for the long term.

2. A conceptual model for a sales process

Figure 1 shows an 8-step conceptual model that will help you decide the kind of business it makes sense for you to go after.

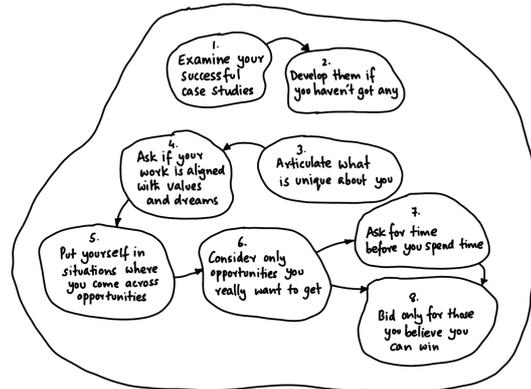


Figure 1: Conceptual model

The argument in this paper is that you should focus on the right kind of business and doing that well requires taking a structured approach as described in the steps below.

Step 1: Examine your successful case studies

Unless you are at the very start of your career you will have done previous work and successfully delivered packages of work. These are your case studies and it's crucial that you start there. That is because no customer wants to be your guinea pig. No one wants pay money so you can try and learn how to do your business. What they want from you is certainty. They want evidence that you know what you are doing and will deliver. They want reassurance that you are confident, competent and capable and all that comes from examples of the work you have already done.

It can seem hard to think of case studies you can use. A simple formula can help.

- Select cases where you have delivered financial results to your client.
- Describe the situation they were in before you got involved.
- Describe the problems they faced.
- Examine the implications, especially the financial losses.
- Describe your solution

If you have examples of clients for whom you have delivered results and can back this up with case studies you're in a strong position. After all, the easiest clients to talk to are ones that are similar to the ones you have already worked with. You know their business and know you can help.

Step 2: Develop case studies for free if you don't have anything

If you're in a position where you don't have any examples of work you can show then you need a portfolio. That's a question of working for free or for very cheap on the kinds of jobs that will help you showcase your skills. The sections later in this paper will help you select which opportunities are better than others, but you need to do some work first before you can come back and take another look at the first few steps in this model.

Step 3: Articulate what is unique about you

One of the things you will probably find is that you've done many things as your career has developed. Typically, the things you've done earlier will either be routine or technical. People tend to hire junior roles because they need a helping hand with administration or have a need for

people with expertise that can help on specific projects — ranging from programming to legal research.

As you get older you may find that you do less doing and more managing. That transition may mean that the value you bring stops being about deliverables that you personally work on and more about your ability to plan and manage a programme of work.

The question you must answer, however, is what is unique about you. It's easier to start there rather than with an organisation because it's so easy to come up with quick responses that are meaningless. For example, you could say that what's unique about you are your people and how helpful they are. How many organisations, however, go out of their way to hire unhelpful people? It's more helpful to look for things you do that are hard for others to do. If you have a capability that is hard to copy you have an advantage.

To take a personal example I have spent most of my career programming and using spreadsheets to improve business processes. That activity, however specialist, is not unique. Lots of people can create spreadsheets and some will do it better than me and others will do it less well. What you see on my website, however, is a combination of hand-drawn management models, blog posts and papers like the one you are reading right now — longer form discussions of an area of interest. This content is harder for someone to copy than a spreadsheet. It is protected by both intellectual property restrictions and the technical challenges of producing the material. It makes more sense for me personally, in this instance, to focus on management consultancy based around drawing and writing skills than programming skills, although those can be still very useful in the delivery of projects.

The point is that you should choose something that is actually unique, not just words that sound good. A useful checklist to go through is to ask the following questions of anything you want to claim as unique:

- Does it create value?
- Is it rare?
- Is it hard to copy?
- Can you deliver it?

If you can confidently answer "Yes!" to these questions then you have something unique.

spent not working on delivering a better service to an existing client or doing things that you want to do, like spending time with your family. Bidding is not costless — not for you anyway and so you shouldn't bid on anything you don't have a good chance of winning. As Neil Rackham advises you're better off bidding on 10 projects with a 70% chance of winning than 100 projects where you have a 3% chance of winning. This single tactic is going to save you a huge amount of time and let you focus your efforts where you can have the biggest result.

3. Conclusion

This paper suggests that we should spend our time pursuing opportunities that we really want and that we have a good chance of winning. Too many of us chase everything we see, partly out of desperation and partly because we're worried that nothing better will come along. When you're rushing around, however, it's hard to see what's going on. Taking the time to slow down, maybe even stop, and look around more carefully could be the most useful thing you can do. When you do that you can take a hard look at where you've been, take the time to make clear where you want to go and then focus your time and effort on the activities that will get you there.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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