

STEVE MARX

CLOSE
LIKE
THE PROS

REPLACE WORN-OUT TACTICS
WITH THE POWERFUL STRATEGY OF
INTERACTIVE SELLING

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CLOSE LIKE THE PROS

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SETTING EXPECTATIONS
WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW
BEFORE READING THIS BOOK

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

Millions of people, in the United States alone, are employed in sales. They range from retail sales clerks and telemarketing representatives to sales executives whose smallest order runs well over a million dollars. No one book is ideal for all of them. *Interactive selling* is the strategy used by the most accomplished professionals in sales organizations that:

1. Sell to *other businesses*.
2. Expect to maintain an *ongoing relationship* with and to make future sales to its clients.

3. Sell *tailored solutions* developed from the company's portfolio of products, services, capabilities, and resources.

If those three characteristics describe the kind of selling you do, you'll enjoy reading *Close Like the Pros* because it zeroes in on your world, addresses your challenges, and gives you the tools to be the highly ethical and outrageously successful salesperson you've always wanted to be.

If you're in sales management, you'll discover here a system that's easily integrated into your existing sales processes, without altering existing structures and systems. In these pages you'll find insights that elude most salespeople, practices rarely spoken of by sales trainers, and a strategy that integrates your firm's selling and your customers' buying to achieve the kind of enduring client partnerships that have been the exception and can now become common.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS *not*

Unlike most other books on the sales shelf, *Close Like the Pros* does *not* present a total sales solution. Here you *won't* find an answer to every question you've ever had. This book is *not* an A-to-Z comprehensive selling system with forms, checklists, and templates. You don't need to dump everything you're doing now in order to adopt the strategy of interactive selling—you can simply stir it into the successful systems and practices you're using today.

My company, The Center for Sales Strategy, has been perfecting, teaching, implementing, practicing, and consulting on sophisticated and comprehensive *customer-focused* and *needs-based* selling systems since 1983. But I've written this book for all of you who *already* understand why and how you should focus on customer needs and let those needs provide the focus, power, and direction for your sale...those of you who have mastered the basics, but still want to grow, those of you who see

the super-pros create powerfully strong client relationships and who want to deliver the kind of numbers they do. If that's not you, then put this book aside and first pick up any of the hundreds of books out there that delve deeply into assessing and responding to customer needs. *Close Like the Pros* moves beyond those basics, takes readers to the next level, and focuses only on how to make your sales process interactive.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

I've designed this book to be as interactive as you would like it to be. If you want to get the full benefit of reading *Close Like the Pros*, you're going to have to do some of the lifting yourself! Interactive selling is a different way of thinking, a different way of working, a different way of *talking*. It doesn't require special talent, but as with other skills you've learned, it requires a little effort. I'll keep showing you how and offering examples of how the pros do it, but then it's your turn. In fact, peppered throughout the book are personal workshop segments I've called "Your Turn." In each one, I'll ask you to grab a pen or pencil, engage your brain, think about your clients, recall what you've learned in the prior pages, and write down exactly what you will do to put the practices of interactive selling to work. Getting into this groove requires that you ponder, plan, and practice; if you put in the practice *while you're reading* the book, you'll learn more, and you'll be closing like the pros all the sooner.

This book is interactive in another way: I welcome your comments and observations. Please e-mail me at SteveMarx@InteractiveSelling.com. I read every piece of mail I receive, and you just might find a reply in your inbox! I'm also maintaining a blog at www.InteractiveSelling.com, where you can interact with me and other readers.

WHY YOU DON'T HAVE TO HIDE THIS BOOK FROM YOUR CLIENTS AND PROSPECTS

This is one of the few books ever published about selling that you could actually *share* with your clients and prospects! Yes, you could show it to them, proudly! The pros don't abuse their clients, so there's nothing abusive in *Close Like the Pros*. Nearly every other book on the shelf (and nearly every other sales training program or seminar) is one you dare not mention to customers. You would be embarrassed to have a prospect see the way customers are described, and how those selling systems encourage their disciples to trick or trap the prospect into the sale. Worse yet, if a prospect read about those tactics, he'd be in on the joke and easily able to neutralize every gambit, outwit every ploy. There's nothing between the covers here that any clients or prospects shouldn't see—you might even want to buy them a copy!

WELCOME TO INTERACTIVE SELLING

You're about to become more powerful—by giving up power. For many readers, interactive selling is the last piece of the puzzle, the only thing standing between you and *closing like the pros*!

CHAPTER ONE

BURNED AGAIN BY HANDOFF SELLING

GRAND SPRINGS HEALTH WAS THE PERFECT PROSPECT. And you've just delivered the perfect proposal. You showed its senior purchasing managers you were in their corner, even before they placed the first order with you. It was a tremendous performance, as you knew it would be.

After all, you had jumped on inside information and sprung into action just as Grand Springs Health had identified its supply problem, but long before it had issued a request for proposal (RFP) that would have invited all your competitors in too. What a golden opportunity! You asked all the right probing questions on your prior call. You logged the intense hours, did the research, and demonstrated some real sweat-equity in

this future relationship. It took some perseverance, but you found a wealth of data online about Grand Springs Health—number of locations, number of physicians, major specialty areas, patient counts, and on and on. Together with what you learned on your earlier call from the assistant director of purchasing, you were able to perform a detailed analysis of Grand Springs Health’s use of consumables and the four issues it seemed to have—quality, price, warehousing, and delivery. Everything fell together beautifully as you crafted a response that answered every one of the company’s concerns—the kind of turnkey plan that’s become your trademark. Your solution showed all the work you had put into the project, and your PowerPoint slides were not only on-target, they were handsome and polished.

On top of that, your presentation in their conference room could not have come off better, filled with just the right amount of intensity, confidence, friendliness, and persuasion. How could they not be impressed? They had to be, because you left no stone unturned. You could not have done more.

It was deflating and baffling when they didn’t buy your proposal. Worse, it wasn’t even a definitive no. Rather, it was a vague and almost patronizing “You did a nice job. We’ll certainly keep you in mind as we move through the process.” The marbles were on the table that day, but you didn’t win even one. You didn’t win, but neither is it clear whether or not you lost, or even whether a clear no would have been better than

*The longer
the limbo lasts,
the more likely
it’s a lose.*

this non-outcome. Yes, you’re in limbo—the oh-so-familiar limbo that follows more and more sales calls these days, the *what do I do now* limbo that follows most salespeople around throughout their career—and the longer the limbo lasts, the more you come to understand that the limbo is a lose.

Have you been in that movie?

PERHAPS YOU SHOULD DO LESS OF THE LIFTING

If you've been selling business-to-business services or solutions for more than five minutes, you've had that experience. We all have. It's not even the exception anymore. Some days, it seems to be the rule. It's frustrating, it's unnerving, and worst of all, it's puzzling. *What more could the prospect want? If it was my price, why didn't they at least say so? What am I missing? Why does this keep happening to me? I bust my butt to assemble an exceptional proposal, and I get a vague, lukewarm, nonresponse. It's not even a no. I could deal with it better if it was a no. Wait, what am I saying? I don't want to hear them say no. At least I'm still alive with this prospect, but what do I do now?*

Most salespeople are trying hard to do it right. They're painstakingly following the rules, the established protocol, and their specific company and industry "selling steps" to a tee. Yet day after day, month after month, proposal after proposal, they continue to hear the dreaded words: "Well, you've certainly given us a lot to think about. We'll be reviewing your proposal in the next quarter, and we'll get back to you." It's the equivalent of a 10th-grader being told, "You have a really great personality"—it means you're probably not going to the dance together. All the work, all the research, all the design, all the customization, all the competitive analysis you've done is down the drain.

It has never occurred to most salespeople that the key to success might be found in doing *less* of the lifting all by themselves. Instead, they keep on working in a vacuum, on a different track from the prospect, with disheartening results. The seller is on a selling track, the buyer is on a buying track, and they rarely intersect. It's true these are their respective job descriptions, but it's time to update those job descriptions. Selling

and buying both become more efficient, productive, and successful when they are merged into a single *interactive* process.

As long as you stick to your selling track, you and your prospect are like two freight trains passing in the night. And *trying harder* makes your problem worse! The more focused you are on selling, the bigger the disconnect you have with the buyer. That's why there's still no purchase order with your company's name on it sitting in the buyer's outbox.

*Trying
harder makes
your problem
worse.*

Selling isn't easy these days, if it ever was. *But neither is buying.* As business gets tougher and more competitive, as the choices on the market become more numerous and more complex, as the stakes are raised for everyone, buying decisions become more difficult. The more options there are, the more variables, the more vendors, the more channels, the more salespeople, the more hype...the more help buyers need. Every decision seems to be more complicated, with more moving parts and more people involved. These days, every purchase decision involves increased risk, and the bigger the price tag the greater the risk.

But the pattern continues. The prospect tells you she's busy and just needs your proposal or your bid, and you dutifully comply. She means no harm, and is probably as clueless as you are that her request to get your proposal ASAP is in neither her best interests nor yours. Because you're customer-needs-focused, and her professed need right now is for you to turn that bid around and submit it fast, you head back to the office fully focused on the task. Once in your cubicle, you set out to prove to the prospect how well you can perform without bugging her, how much you can know and do without consulting her, how much of the burden you're willing to lift from her shoulders and scratch from her to-do list.

THE PRESSURE COOKER WE LIVE IN

Among the reasons you're so willing to do so much for this prospect is that you empathize with her. Who knows more than you what it means to be crazy-busy? You live in a pressure cooker yourself. Let us count the ways:

You've got **competitive pressure**, as never before. Your toughest competitor used to be across the street; today it's across the globe. And the cross-town competitors haven't gone away either.

You've got **budget pressure**, each year steeper than the year before. You don't need to work for a large, publicly traded firm in order to feel the heat of constantly rising expectations and demands. Smaller companies are setting tougher goals too.

You've got **deadline pressure**. Your deadlines may be client-imposed, company-imposed, even self-imposed, and gone is the luxury of working on one deadline at a time.

You've got **corporate pressure** that goes well beyond hitting a budget number. The company just installed new software and expects you to master it. They sent you to a two-day training workshop last week and they expect to see evidence that you're applying what you learned.

You've got **boss pressure**. He's one pretty terrific guy, among the best you've ever worked for, and that's the problem. When he asks you to turn up the heat, to crank up the pace, to help the team power ahead, you just can't turn a deaf ear to that. Many a well-meaning boss (with his own pressures!) will urge you to turn the project around fast and get the proposal on the buyer's desk, clueless that there's no connection between a rapid turnaround and a big sale, or a good sale, or a profitable sale, or a sale that's likely to turn into many more sales.

In most industries, there's no connection between a rapid turnaround and a good sale.

If you've got family, you've got **family pressure**. When you spend so much time at work, you feel guilty about spending so little time with your family. And when you're with your family, you feel guilty about not being at work.

You've got **financial pressure**. Because you're in sales, tomorrow's paycheck is unpredictable, but tomorrow's expenses are not. There are some fabulous months, and the occasional really good year, but you're familiar with the lean times as well, and fear of another keeps the pressure on.

You've got **client pressure**. As you've built your book of business, your client list has grown and grown. Every one of those clients has ongoing expectations, and some have constant demands. Sometimes it means new or increased business, but often meeting client demands simply ensures that existing business will continue.

And you've got **prospect pressure**. That's where our list started. Right or wrong, she wants your proposal on her desk by Monday morning, unaware that she's asking for your weakest work.

So many of the pressures we feel manifest themselves as **time pressure**. Regardless of how much time we invest, it seems as if it's never enough. We say *invest*, but when it comes to our sales job, we don't treat our precious hours with the same *investment mindset* with which we treat our precious dollars. Investment implies the notion of return, but salespeople the world over don't pay nearly enough attention to the return they're (not) getting on their often elaborate investment of time. Instead, most of us respond to time pressure by squeezing in more prospects, talking faster, skipping lunch, staying late (and later!), and collecting speeding tickets. It's the real-life equivalent of the classic *I Love Lucy* episode in which Lucy and Ethel decide to supplement their respective household incomes by taking jobs on the

Most salespeople don't treat their precious hours with the same investment paradigm with which they treat their precious dollars.

assembly line in a candy factory. It's fine for the first few minutes, until the foreman starts to "speed things up a little." The faster the candy-ingredient belt moves, the bigger the mess. The scene ends in the typical *Lucy* slapstick farce, with supporting comedic performances by chocolate, nuts, and butter cream. There's not much slapstick in today's sales jobs, but there's too much farce as salespeople invest time without monitoring the return they're getting, indeed, without *modulating* their investment according to return.

Too much time working on the prospect, too little time working with the prospect.

Too often, sellers mistakenly respond to the myriad pressures and time challenges confronting them—and confronting their buyers—by spending more time alone, holed up in the office, working *on* the prospect instead of working *with* the prospect. It's the most fundamental mistake made by salespeople today. Salespeople get way out in front of their prospect, without ever checking the rear-view mirror to see if the prospect is still following and just how closely. They over-prepare, believing all that prep to be an advantage (*sometimes* it is) and oblivious to the ways in which it hobbles their efforts, with both the prospect for whom they're over-preparing and all the other prospects for whom they are inevitably under-preparing. But this investment-without-return scenario continues, because it's what we've all been taught to do, trained to do, and told to do. We sit at our desks, put our heads down, and prepare like mad, because we have a lot to say, a lot to offer, a lot of capabilities that might bear on the prospect's circumstances, and a lot of fear that the next call will be an all-or-nothing event, our last shot. It amounts to what many a pundit has called *premature elaboration*, a condition as undesirable and ineffective as its namesake.

As a result, too often our hard work just goes to waste. Way too many deals simply don't happen. I've lost count of how many times a salesperson has told me, "If only I'd known the deal was headed nowhere, I would have cut my losses and

moved on. I can't believe how much time and momentum I lost on that one piece of non-business." Whenever I hear stories similar to that, I flash back to my mom and the old expression she liked to repeat: *The hurrier I go, the behinder I get.* (And that was when I was just a kid! Hey, Mom, if you're listening up there, it's way worse today, worse by several orders of magnitude.) For most salespeople, interactive selling is a new way of working. You'll no longer feel as though you're on a fast track to nowhere. When you sell interactively, some of your prospects get stronger and healthier than would have been possible otherwise, and the rest show their weakness early on, so you can move on.

THE ILLUSION OF THE TWO-CALL CLOSE

No one in professional selling talks much about the *one-call close* anymore. That was the idea that really good salespeople could walk out with an order from their first-ever encounter with a prospect. Perhaps it was true in the quaint days of residential door-to-door selling, but it was rarely ever the case for those of us selling business services and solutions. What we hear instead, from a great many sales managers, is the *two-call close*. It too is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that. In fact, calling it the *two-call non-close* would bring us closer to reality about 97 percent of the time. I'll prove it to you.

Think about your own selling experiences. You assess needs on your first call, and you deliver a very workable, perhaps even highly attractive, solution on your second call. All is according to plan. You ask the prospect what he would like to do next and what do you hear most often? "Yes, I'll take it"? Probably not. What you hear sounds closer to, "You've given me a lot to think about here. Give me some time...". And how could they respond any other way? Most people need time to think about things they are seeing for the first time.

Being the diligent salesperson you are, you ask the prospect when you should get back to him. “Next Tuesday.” You call faithfully next Tuesday, and if you get through, you’ll hear, “I gotta tell ya, since we talked last week, I’ve just been jammed. Haven’t even had a chance to study that proposal,” or, “You know, I sent it up to my boss, and he hasn’t gotten back to me yet. As soon as I know something, I’ll give you a call.”

I know what happens next. You ask when you should get back to the prospect (inherently not relying on the prospect to call you). The prospect hesitates a bit, and asks for another 10 days “or so.” That’s twice as long as he asked for the first time, following your delivery of the proposal.

Dutifully, and again proving your reliability and punctuality, you call back on the 10th day. If he takes your call, what do you hear? If he really likes you, he apologizes; otherwise, he just moves directly into a request for more time and more patience. You might hear, “back burner,” “other options,” or “next quarter.” Again, you inquire as to a good day or week to get back in touch, and you get a vague answer. You decide on your own to mark your calendar for three weeks hence.

You call back on the very day you wrote in your calendar and leave a voicemail in a half-hearted attempt to salvage your work and your investment. You’ve made five calls by this point, not two, and the last three have been lousy, empty, awkward calls that didn’t have the positive, creative, forward-focused feel of those first two calls, the calls that came before you handed off the proposal.

The calls you make after handing off the proposal don't have the same value—for anyone—as the calls you make before.

It’s not always this bad, of course. Sometimes you get the business! But it still takes five calls, or 12 calls, or whatever. Once the prospect studies your proposal, she’s bound to have questions. “Thanks for calling. I had a question. I didn’t understand the pricing method at all. Never seen that approach

before.” You take the opportunity to explain your novel pricing concept, and ask when you should call next. On the following call, you hear, “Yeah, my boss had a question. Rather than my trying to explain his question and then going back to him to explain your answer, I should just put you guys together. His number is 555-2368.” Now you’re playing telephone tag with the boss. You’ll probably eventually hook up, and you may actually do business with them, but *two calls*? You know better! And your boss who talks up the two-call close? He’s dreaming...been off the street too long.

INTERACTIVE SELLING HARBORS NO ILLUSIONS

Interactive selling is founded on the notion that the two-call close is the great exception, not the typical case. Selling interactively means you assume there will be lots of back and forth, lots of give and take, lots of questions and answers, lots of modifying and tweaking—and you’ve designed your sales approach around the natural way real people actually work. Interactive selling simply *relocates* the delivery of the formal

Interactive selling relocates the delivery of the formal proposal.

proposal to the end of the process, and that suddenly, almost miraculously, *lights up* all those calls beyond the second call, converting them from the empty, awkward, “So, any news yet on my proposal?” to active, problem-solving, partnership-molding calls. These are calls the prospect takes every time because it’s a worthwhile and helpful call, because she’s making an important contribution to the project, and because the proposal isn’t complete yet!

Here’s how it works in practice: Instead of going off into your isolation chamber to work on a solution by yourself, you know the prospect is as close as your phone and your e-mail, and quite possibly another in-person visit or two. As you look through your notes from that first call, you realize you’re not

entirely sure you fully understood the differences between the work flow procedures for their office staff and for their telecommuting staff. You're also thinking about a few other questions you wish you'd have thought to ask. So you pick up the phone. The prospect appreciates your interest and your diligence, and is delighted to provide more information if it will improve the proposal she's seeking. Based on the nature of this call, she's more likely to take your next call. You let her know you'll be getting back to her soon to run several possible approaches by her. Before that day even arrives, you've had two other brief e-mail exchanges with her.

A week later, you're face-to-face in her office again, sharing several concepts and approaches, and seeking her input on each. She shoots one down, has a tepid reaction to another, but is smiling and highly engaged when speaking about the third possibility. You ask more questions about all three, even the dead-on-arrival idea, because every answer gives you more information about her needs and her decision-making criteria, information that will sharpen your proposal and put your competitors at a severe disadvantage. (You're thanking yourself for having brought these possibilities to her in raw form, because otherwise you were likely to have built out your first concept, the one she couldn't possibly have bought for reasons you could not have known.) Now you've got the prospect leaning forward, actively participating, and suggesting how your third concept would need to be adapted in order to work for her company. *It's as if she's helping you write your proposal!* You're taking notes and doing a little brainstorming on the spot. You set a day and time to get back to her with something on paper.

Back at the office, you're investing more time, confident that you see a likelihood of substantial return. Another phone call and three more e-mail exchanges ensue before you're finally ready to reveal your recommendations in the form of a proposal.

By the time you're in front of her again, it's your fourth face-to-face meeting and your 10th interaction, counting phone calls and e-mails. The big difference is that you focused not only on your selling, but equally on her buying. You were determined not to offer a plan this prospect couldn't or wouldn't buy, and not to leave all the trouble-shooting and repairing

Focus not only on your selling, but equally on their buying.

until after you had delivered the formal proposal, understanding that there would be no assurance you'd ever get back in to trouble-shoot and repair. In other words, you were selling *interactively*. And the prospect responded accordingly. She was buying, one step at a time, while you were selling. She was investing time and energy in proportion to yours. She knew what was in your proposal before you delivered it, and she was eager to buy your proposal before she could even hold it in her hands. It was as if she coauthored the proposal, and in many ways, she had. So it was no surprise she said yes that very day, or soon thereafter. You were closing like a pro!

THE HANDOFF SELLING MODEL DOESN'T WORK

Your earlier *two-call-close* attempt did put a proposal in the prospect's hands in one week flat, but the process still consumed five calls over six weeks before fading into oblivion, before you quietly deleted it from your list of pending business. Contrast that with your *interactive* approach: It consumed 10 calls and exchanges over just three weeks, synchronized the buying process with the selling process, and resulted in a proposal that was buyable the very day it was delivered. *You got a faster—and better—answer with a slower proposal.*

Interactive selling doesn't guarantee every sale will be made; that kind of outcome is reserved for magic shows. But every interactive seller out there will attest that the process

puts the wind at his back instead of in his face, because *interactive selling improves both the proposal and the prospect*. Interactive selling makes the prospect an active participant in the selling phase and the salesperson an active participant in the buying phase. Indeed, when an interactive seller is on the scene, no observer could identify what parts of the dialogue are selling and what parts are buying; sometimes, it's even tough for a fly on the wall to tell who's the seller and who's the buyer!

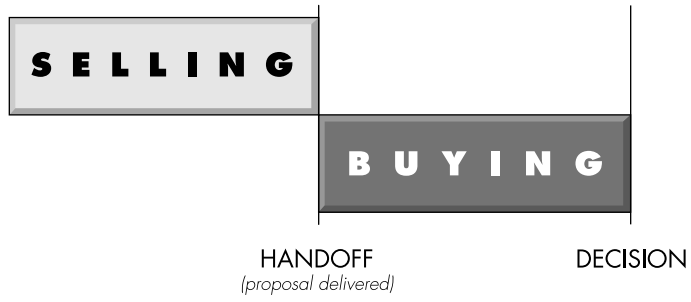
The rapidly delivered proposal is based on a concept I call *handoff selling*, an approach that's almost ubiquitous today, at company after company, in industry after industry. The monkey is on the salesperson's back right up until the handoff. Then the baton—the proposal—is handed off, as if this were a high school relay race, and the sales rep falls away and trots off the track. The seller who works this way has finished her work when she delivers the proposal. At that moment, the monkey jumps onto the prospect's back because the selling process is over and the buying process is about to begin. The salesperson has nothing more to say, no role left to play, no right to expect even that her phone calls will be returned unless the buyer happens to have a question.

This kind of handoff selling benefits neither seller nor client. The buyer is remarkably uninvolved in the selling phase, except to answer a few perfunctory questions. And worse, the seller is not involved in the buying process—not there to help, not there to problem-solve, not there to steer the outcome toward a win-win. Half the transaction, of course, is *buying*, and the seller is not even in the room!

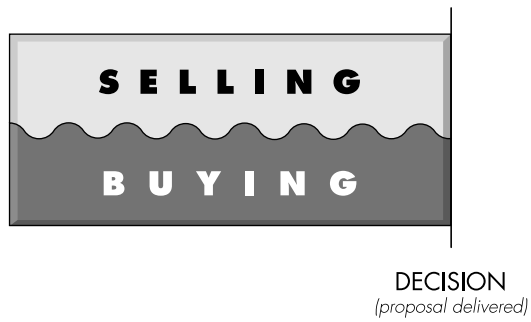
There's no handoff in interactive selling. To maintain the metaphor, we could say that both salesperson and prospect have one hand on the baton from the moment the starting gun is heard and all the way to the tape at the finish line (and beyond).

Delivering the final proposal is like passing the baton in a relay race—your role is over.

Handoff Selling



Interactive Selling



The interactive seller understands the importance of both halves of the transaction, takes it upon herself to synchronize them into a single process, and gets her prospect to be her partner from the very outset. The interactive salesperson recognizes that the big decision at the end of the process—the one the seller sweats and the buyer dreads—can be broken down into a *series* of decisions, of narrowing the options, of rejecting some possibilities and embracing others...a series of logical, sequential, incremental, progressive, mini-decisions taken together by the buyer and the seller. In doing so, the interactive seller has reached the zenith of her profession: She has *gotten the prospect involved to improve the selling process* and she has *gotten herself involved to improve the buying process*. The outcome is almost invariably better for both parties.

Every big decision is really the result of a series of logical, sequential, incremental, mini-decisions.

THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR INTERACTIVE SELLING

There are some significant trends in society and in business that make interactive selling especially urgent right now for nearly every professional selling organization:

Mass customization alters buyer expectations. Instead of buying a computer off the shelf, many consumers opt to visit Websites where they configure their machine with precisely the features and capabilities that best serve their needs. This desire for individualized products and solutions is not limited to high-tech, high-ticket items: Consumers are now able to configure their own jeans, and the factory makes them and ships them. Today, we expect to find *exactly* what we're looking for, even if that means it must be built from scratch. We expect to have at least some influence over the design of the products and services we buy. As buyers, we expect more than choice—we expect to be catered to.

It's ironic that millions of salespeople today, sitting face-to-face with their prospect, are less solicitous of and less receptive to input than are many Websites! Interactive selling is built on the premise that the prospect wants to and should play a significant role in developing the proposal or plan he is offered.

Individuals are empowered as never before. *TIME Magazine* writer Lev Grossman put it simply and powerfully (March 12, 2006): "The authorship of innovation is shifting from the Few to the Many." Increasingly, people are expecting to be involved in creating, collaborating on, customizing, or configuring the solutions and systems they use. If there is a developmental process going on behind that door, they expect the door to be opened to them, so they can at least watch, if not tweak, twist, or even tear apart. More and more, each of us is a *participant*, not a *spectator*, in the tailoring of our world, including our world at work.

The salespeople who are winning biggest now are those who understand that they gain power when they empower others. The salespeople who rise to the top will be those who recognize that their prospects now have the power not just to choose which product, service, or solution they'll buy, but to help craft it as well. They'll use interactive selling to share power, control, and decision-making...in both directions.

You gain power when you empower others.

Collaboration is no longer novel; it's the norm. Formalized joint ventures between organizations are nothing new. What is new, compelling, and dramatically different is how commonplace collaboration has become in today's flat, informal, and nonhierarchical business organizations. In his best-selling book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman writes, "...it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of works from more different corners of the planet on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history

of the world..." New expectations and new technology are making peers of nearly everyone: individuals as well as their companies, intra-company collaborators and inter-company collaborators, brief collaborators and durable collaborators, full collaborators and partial collaborators, even competitor-collaborators who never before thought they'd even say hello if they ran into each other on the street. Friedman calls this the evolution from "command and control" to "collaborate and connect."

The now common expectation of close collaboration, and the high degree of interactivity required for it, is causing companies to shorten their list of vendors and suppliers, and to deepen and strengthen their ties with those that remain. Too many salespeople still look and act as though they're stuck in the command-and-control world of the past. Salespeople who are not connecting and collaborating with their clients—to whatever extent may be appropriate given their product or service—will be passed by in favor of those who are.

Wiki wiki: Technology makes it easy and fast. Collaborative software and work flow applications are changing our work just as much as word-processing software did in the last century. These are the engines without which the drive for intense collaboration and individual empowerment would be difficult to fulfill. At the forefront of collaborative technology are Web-based *wikis* ("wickies"), group-editable Web pages that are typical of the movement toward royalty-free, nearly cost-free, open-source software.

Online collaboration can be expected to infiltrate nearly every process in business (and beyond), including your sales interactions and your client-solution development projects. These 21st century ways of doing business require interactive selling. *Wiki* is Hawaiian for "quick" or "fast." *Wiki wiki* is faster still. Collaboration need neither be complex nor time consuming; indeed, it's used today to speed products to market,

not to delay them. Interactive salespeople who slow down and take the time to collaborate will get the order *wiki wiki!*

Openness and transparency are no longer optional. Business is no longer a black-box operation. Transparency is replacing what once happened behind closed doors. It's not only government agencies conforming to the Freedom of Information Act, nor public companies falling in line with the requirements of Sarbanes-Oxley. It's a general push away from anything about which the customer might be suspicious merely because it's out of sight.

Today we expect everything to be above-board, full-disclosure, out-on-the-table. We want the straight poop when we read the ingredients on a food-product label, when we use our favorite search engine online, and when there's a salesman sitting across the table from us. Interactive selling is for salespeople with nothing to hide. Rather than concealing the process, it opens it up.

Hype and spin don't work the way they used to. People younger than 35, and a great many who are older, seem to have been born with a BS-meter that detects hype, and a BS-buzzer that goes off every time they see or hear it. The most effective TV commercials once were those that shouted the most outrageous claims; today it's the ones whispering simple truths. Consumers are more likely now to trust a plain-text, six-word ad sitting adjacent to search-engine results than an overproduced ad campaign. And they'll trust user reviews and unbiased comparisons more than what they hear from the typical salesperson. The steak is emerging from behind the sizzle.

Interactive selling puts the quiet power of underselling to work.

The era of slickness and hype, of clever spinmeistering, of the fancy two-step and the smooth gloss-over is largely behind us. With interactive selling, you put the quiet power of underselling to work, and there are no questions of trust. The whole process is *real*, and everyone reaps the rewards.

More decision-influencers have a say. Empowerment, collaboration, complexity, risk—they have all played a part in producing an ever-increasing number of decision-influencers, people who are listened to, and often heeded, before the decision is made. Few substantial decisions are made these days before getting the stamp of approval from one or more committee, task force, ad hoc group, or self-directed team. The *interactive seller* uses specific tools to keep every stakeholder engaged.

The cost of an in-person sales call continues to zoom. Many organizations today calculate the cost of the average face-to-face sales call in the hundreds of dollars, and when that call involves travel, sometimes the thousands of dollars. If a call leads to good business, it's a good investment. But if it leads to a dead end, it is a very expensive loss. Smart sales organizations qualify prospects in advance to limit the number of calls made on prospects who are unlikely to buy, but that's no longer enough. Interactive selling provides *continuous qualification* of the prospect, so the salesperson can modulate his investment of time and resources, focusing only where he's most likely to see a return.

The digitizing of communication adds new risks. Gone are the days when most client contact was face-to-face. Now, clients expect to interact with us through e-mail, instant messaging, conference calls, groupware, and Web conferencing, not to mention phone, fax, and voice mail. Although these tools enhance communication in valuable ways, they also increase the risk of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and missteps. When we meet in person, we have three channels of communication operating: the verbal (our words), the visual (our facial animations and body language), and the vocal (our tone and inflection). When our communication goes

Digital adds danger: Three channels of communication are reduced to two, and often just one.

digital, three channels are reduced to two, and often just one. Interactive selling helps you manage expectations—whatever the medium, whatever the channel—more closely and carefully, to avoid running projects off the path and into the ditch.

WELCOME TO INTERACTIVE SELLING

If you believe your only big selling problem is closing, that everything sails along smoothly for you until it's time for The Close, you're probably using the wrong definition of closing. You've probably tried all those worn-out closing tactics—the Ben Franklin Close, the Puppy Dog Close, and the Think It Over Close; the Porcupine Close and the Hot Potato Close; and let us not forget the First-One-to-Talk-Loses Close and of course, the *Reductio Ad Absurdum* Close. Those tried-and-false closes reveal the truth: Your problem is not in front of you; *it's behind you*.

By the time you're ready to confirm the order, to get that signature, The Close should not be your last big step. If you want to close like the pros, you'll have accomplished most—nearly all—of the closing process *before* the day the prospect actually signs the deal. That's what interactive selling does for you. Just as the smart way to eat an elephant is "one bite at a time," so too the smart way to close business is *one increment at a time*. If you know that the old definition of closing is stale, if you understand that the old tricks of closing are dead, then you're ready to transition your sales approach to interactive selling. Closing is important, but the way the *pros* close is the very antithesis of the sleazy closing tactics that have given most salespeople a shaky reputation.

Now that you've seen the difference between an interactive selling pro and a sleazy salesman, you're ready to discover a whole new way of thinking about your job. I'll explain the two fundamental practices that form the foundation of interactive selling:

- 🕒 Contracting—The management of expectations.
- 🕒 Partnering—The sharing of control, decision-making, and accountability.

I'll introduce you to a new language to describe your new way of thinking about your job:

- 🕒 Ground rules.
- 🕒 Clear paths and genuine agendas.
- 🕒 Mini-closes.
- 🕒 Molehill decisions.
- 🕒 Homework assignments.
- 🕒 Half-baked ideas.
- 🕒 Trial balloons.
- 🕒 Progress reports.
- 🕒 No-surprise proposal.
- 🕒 Critical path.
- 🕒 Post-sale partner.

Welcome to interactive selling, *where you and the prospect, working together, create a better proposal—and where you and the proposal, working together, create a better prospect.*

CLOSING THE CHAPTER

I believe these are some of the key takeaways from this chapter:

- 🕒 Selling is tough, but so is buying. Both become more effective and productive when they're merged into a single interactive process.
 - 🕒 Most salespeople spend too much time working *on* the prospect, and too little time working *with* the prospect.
 - 🕒 Over and over, salespeople invest too much time in prospects who are unlikely to buy, and too little time in those who will.
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- ❶ The two-call close is an illusion, spoken of seriously only by idealistic sales trainers and pressured sales managers.
- ❷ *Handoff selling* guarantees only that you won't be around while your prospect investigates the issues, deals with the details, and crunches the numbers.
- ❸ The time is right for *interactive selling*.
- ❹ The prospect can help you improve the proposal, and the proposal can help you improve the prospect.

What were the most important points to remember—from your perspective? What passages did you underline or highlight? I'd love to know. E-mail me at SteveMarx@InteractiveSelling.com and include "Chapter 1" in your subject line.
