

## Your Guide to Rainmaking Conversations

By Mike Schultz

It's funny. As buyers we all have strong opinions of what we want from people that sell to us: Listen to us. Understand our situations. Understand our needs. Help us buy the right thing. Give us confidence that what we buy is going to work well for us. Don't sell us something we don't need. Explain things to us when we aren't sure. Treat us fairly, and be honest with us. Pretty basic stuff, right? Yet, for some reason, so many sellers forget all of this once they start selling. But don't take my word for it.

We recently asked several hundred buyers at major companies, who together had \$1.6 billion in purchasing power, about their buying processes and preferences. During this research, we asked about the top problems they encounter when buying. Among the top problems were:

- Seller didn't listen to me.
- Seller didn't understand my needs.
- Seller didn't craft a compelling solution.
- Seller didn't convince me of the value of purchasing what they were selling.

Then we asked them, "If these particular problems were solved, what difference would it make in their willingness to purchase from these providers?" In each instance, the buyers indicated they'd be more than 90% "very much more likely" to buy if these problems went away. It's the perfect storm, too. The most frequent problems, if they went away, would create the most sales for the sellers.

We've asked these questions a number of times over the years, now, and we realized one thing: these were all problems of conversation and communication. So we tasked ourselves to do something about it—do something that would help sellers avoid the top problems and, at the same time, start doing all the *right* things by buyers.



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And thus RAIN Selling was born. RAIN Selling is an acronym for Rapport, Aspirations and Afflictions, Impact, and New Reality. These are the core concepts to leading a rainmaking conversation. The RAIN acronym is also a nod to the fact that this process is focused on rainmakers—a common name for people who bring the most new clients and revenue into an organization.

**R is Rapport**—the ability to build rapport in sales conversations is an old concept that is more relevant and more important than ever. Genuine rapport sets the foundation for the rest of the conversation, and creates the opportunity for trust and a strong relationship. A genuine connection with a potential client is so important in selling because, all things being equal, buyers tend to buy from—and allow themselves to be influenced by—people they like. And we all know that you’re much likely to build rapport if you listen.

**The “A” in RAIN Selling stands for Aspirations and Afflictions.** When customers buy, they are typically thinking as much about Aspirations (the future they are seeking) as they are about Afflictions (problems they’d like to fix). If you think about asking questions only in the negative, you will tend to probe for needs that way. You’ll tend to ask questions such as, “Where are you unhappy with performance?” and “What are your problems?”

Think of Aspirations as much as Afflictions, and you will remember to ask “future-seeking” as well as problem-solving questions—questions with themes like “Where do you want to go?” and “What are the possibilities?” If you ask questions that look to the future, you will find that you will be able to paint the most compelling, impactful, and comprehensive vision of a new and better reality for your clients. Do a good job with Aspirations and Afflictions, and you’ll succeed with understanding situation and need.

**I is Impact**—after you uncover a prospect’s aspirations and afflictions, the question then becomes, “So what?” If your afflictions don’t get solved, then so what? What won’t happen? Will they get worse? How will they affect the bottom line of your company, division, or department? How will they affect your life? If your aspirations don’t become reality, so what?”

In a business to-business scenario, the questions that follow might sound like, “Will your competition get ahead of you if you don’t innovate?” “Will you lose market share if you aren’t aggressive in your strategy?” “Will you never be able to grow your business to a point where you can sell it and reach your personal financial goals?” and “Will the promotion you so desire continue to elude you?”

Your ability to quantify and paint the “so what” picture is the foundation for how important it is for the decision maker to buy from you. This is of paramount importance to you, because lack of impact leads to lack of urgency to make a decision. This leads to delays. Time kills sales. Creating urgency for buying hinges on how well you help your client answer the “so what” questions, and how well you demonstrate the impact of buying from you. Do a good job with Impact, and you’ll be able to craft compelling solutions, and help them buy the right things.

**N is New Reality**—one of the greatest difficulties in sales is helping prospects to understand exactly what they get when they work with you. Clients need an argument to justify the benefit to themselves and to other people involved in the buying decision. At the end of a well-managed sales process, your job is to create a vision of a New Reality that will be the best for your client, given their specific Aspirations and Afflictions and the Impact of doing (or not doing) something about them. Do a good job with New Reality, and you’ll show that your compelling solution is also highly valuable, showing how you create the most positive impact for the client.

Many inexperienced salespeople believe their job is a game of show and tell. And tell. And tell. Incessant pitching and presenting feels to buyers like they’re being pushed. This can bore buyers, make them less likely to feel affection toward you, shut them down, and put them on the defensive. If you’re doing all the talking, they’ll feel

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like you are self-centered, don't care about them, and don't understand their situations and needs (even if you do). Worst of all, savvy buyers will peg you as an amateur and dismiss you.

Salespeople are often told, at some point in their careers, "The best salespeople always ask great questions." This is true to a point; asking incisive questions is critical to sales success, but some salespeople take the advice too literally. If they always ask questions, they don't share a point of view or an opinion, don't tell stories, and don't help set the agenda for success. Buyers get bored with this quickly as well, and feel like they're getting the third degree. Although questions can be quite valuable, buyers can feel they are missing out on the full value they should get from you if you just ask question after question. The key is to balance advocacy and inquiry and to learn when to use one or the other.

Influence should be applied throughout your sales conversations. Buyers buy the most when they yearn for something, when they're pining for it. As sellers, it's up to us to create their yearn and pine, and help buyers make a decision to satisfy their needs to have "it" (whatever it is), by, of course, buying from you. Accept your role as an influencer, bring buyers down a path of your choosing and help them make a decision in your favor. Take control of the buying process.

Take care, however, not to confuse control with coercion. In sales, your control should be subtle: Lead the conversation down the right path by asking questions, setting agendas by sharing ideas, summarizing and communicating the impact of taking a course of action, involving the prospect in creating solutions, and recommending action. If you try to control with an iron fist you will create more resistance than partnership.

Lastly, you'll see that Trust underpins the whole model. Influence, like any tool, can be used for good or evil. If you have the buyer's best interests at heart, and will only steer them in the right direction, then you'll be successful long-term, build a reputation as a straight shooter, and be able to help your clients the most.

Once you are comfortable with what happens at each stage, you will be ready to lead masterful rainmaking conversations. Like anything, the more you practice the better you'll become, you can apply this framework right away and have it make a difference.

#### About the Author

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