

*Have you provoked a client lately?*  
*By Philippe Lavie*

I am sure you have often heard lately that the world of selling has changed significantly over the past five years. Do you question this statement's relevancy and accuracy now that we are slowly coming out of a prolonged recession? Do you believe a sales person uses this to justify his lukewarm performance?

How do you feel these days as a Chief Sales Officer (EVP, VP, or Director with sales management responsibilities) when most of your top producers (and the rest of the selling team) no longer can access senior executives using traditional methods like phone calls, emails, text messaging, and all the other gimmicks we all have used in the past, resulting in longer prospecting cycles, longer sales engagements, and lower returns per reps? How frustrated are you with these situations where predictability in sales revenue has dropped by 25% or more for no apparent reasons? How frustrated does it make you feel when you hear over and over during sales meeting and weekly territory or activity reviews that your prospect has no budget for your solution, that it takes longer than projected to complete a specific selling stage, and that the level of competitiveness or control your sales team once had, no longer exists.

Take this quick test. Think over the past 12 to 18 months to a time when you took a salesman's call, answered an email from an unknown source, or accepted a conversation with a sales person without having initiated the call? Think back to you own behavior when you were resistant, unresponsive, short, and unwilling while someone was attempting to do their job of selling to you? So if you are displaying similar behaviors as many of the Chief Sales Officers I talk and work with, then you now can easily understand the challenges your sales force is facing.

Here are two of the most significant changes I have experienced with the prospects and clients we deal with:

- ✚ It is much harder to reach senior executives now than in the past
- ✚ Traditional selling approaches (product-based selling and solution-based selling) have become obsolete

Most of us have experienced difficulties in reaching a senior executive by phone. Or using any of the tricks of the trade we have been exposed to in the past like faxing, FedEx packages, gifts, postcards, personal hand-written letters, even LinkedIn mail service.

Today the game is around mastering social media tools and branding in order to get your name out there to gain recognition and credibility around your specialties (not products, but geography or expertise or reference-able success stories). This brand development (personal or organization focused) has to be accompanied by a very clear understanding of timing and by the person you want to reach (profile, needs,

wants, or challenges). Homework about the person you are attempting to reach, not just the company or the market, has become paramount to gaining any access. Cold calling in all its forms (letter, email, phone others) is still an activity that needs attention, but its effectiveness and return has been reduced dramatically as of late. Only the great messages, the outstanding and most creative approaches, are succeeding. And they require time and organizational resources to be developed. So is there an alternative to reaching the intended audience?

More than ever before, I believe that pro-active referrals from trusted sources are essential. The use of social media tools, developing your own (even locally for territory bound sales executives and teams) brand based on expertise and best selling behaviors are musts to prepare one's self. But that is not enough. Referral selling has become a science. Working with our clients to implement such an approach, we have seen an 80% success rate from introduction from a trusted source to first conversation using this process correctly.

Aside from the increased difficulties to reach intended senior executives using traditional methods, the second change I have noticed is how traditional selling approaches (*product-based selling* or even *solution-based selling*) have become obsolete.

Most of us know, at least intellectually, that *product-based selling* has not worked for years now. Having product specialists come in front of the new hire and present their products can only lead to selling failures. Guess what? Sales people are mimicking creatures. What they learn is what they will present their prospects. So they will describe their offering, demo (poorly in most cases) their products, discuss pricing and purchasing processes, and wonder why the client did not buy. Oh well. This is an old story no longer worth discussing.

Then there is the *solution-based selling* that many still talk about. The likes of Solution Selling®, Holden®, The Complex Sales®, Sandler® and many other still have some traction in the market place of selling. It is somewhat unfortunate that Chief Sales Officers still want to use 10, 15 or 25 year old selling techniques and technologies to address today's market needs and demands. But habits, and sometimes proven results through mastered processes, are hard to combat.

That said buyers' behaviors have changed quite radically over the past 24 months. They source their information without ever talking to a sales person. They are developing their requirements, needs, and wants on their own, while surfing the web, reading white papers, talking to colleagues and other members of their professional and personal communities. They turn to trusted advisors, lawyers, accountants, existing consultants they use and like, bankers at times, and other third party sources to determine what solutions they should consider, whom they should talk with, and at times ask for introduction. So what are the sales executives, his (her) manager, and the Chief Sales Officer to do?

One possible option was described in a November 2009 article of the HBR and authored by *Lay, Hewlin, and Moore*, "In a Downturn, Provoke your Customers". As much as I enjoyed this article and the author's position, I have two rather important exceptions.

First what does this article suggest? It brings forth a new definition in selling approaches: *provocation-based selling*. "*Provocation-based selling helps customers see their competitive challenges in a new light that makes addressing specific painful problems unmistakably urgent. The vendor identifies a process that was critical for customers in the current business environment, develops a compelling point of view on how it is broken and what that means in terms of cost, and then connects the problem to a solution that the vendor is offering. The delivery is by telling the customers what SHOULD keep them awake at night based on across industry discoveries of existing unmitigated risks in a comprehensive and integrated way. Underlying provocation-based selling is the idea that the vendor should help the customer find investment funds even when discretionary spending appears to have (at least temporarily) dried up.*"

My first exception deals with their statement that *provocation-based selling* is applicable only in a downturn. I believe that is no longer the case. *Provocation-based selling* is applicable any time and under any circumstances, depending on the context of the engagement, the receptiveness of the target, and the maturity of the sales executive (senior or not) using this technique.

My second exception has to do with timing and organizational context. Before you can develop an organizational *provocation-based selling* approach to deal with acquiring new customers, your entire sales organization must have moved on and away from product-based and solution-based selling. It must have embraced in its core, in its system and behaviors, a true and rigorous *customer-focused selling* mentality and approach. It has to have understood that it is not selling products or services, and that attempting to impose solutions is in general misguided sales behaviors. It has to have realized and embraced that what it is selling is its members, the sales people, to a myriad of buyers, decision makers, and reviewers who have names and job titles with very specific critical goals to achieve, problems to solve, or needs to fulfill. Sales people have become, or must become, a trusted resource for the economic and business buyers. They need to help them navigate their buying cycle from confirming their requirements to proving that the solution they are considering can help them solve their challenges, meet their needs, or achieve their goals.

*Provocation-based selling* can only work after an organization and its sales people have completely and totally embrace and implemented a *customer-focused selling* approach with all its processes, behaviors, tools, and management framework.

Bringing this back to the original title, "Eat or Be Eaten – The Selling World has Changed", the two major challenges I see in today's selling world are an increased

difficulty in reaching senior executives and using traditional methods and traditional selling approaches that are no longer valid. Two possible avenues to address these are pro-active, disciplined, and embraced *referral-focused selling*, and bringing one's sales organization into the world of *customer-focused selling* prior to using *provocation-based selling* as one of its new tools.

**Philippe Lavie** is the president of KeyRoad Enterprises LLC, dedicated to helping companies sustain and accelerate their revenue growth. Company web site is:

[www.keyroad.com](http://www.keyroad.com).

Copyright © 2011

Reference: In a Downturn, Provoke your Customers – HBR, November 2009, by Philip Lay, Todd Hewlin, and Geoffrey Moore

How To process in identifying *provocation-based selling*:

- ✚ Identify a critical issue your customer is facing. Industry-wide, market-specific, or internal process-focused.
  - Does the CEO stay up at night because of it?
  - Is it being ignored, neglected, or ineffectively addressed within the organization?
  - Are you a credible source of advice on this issue?
- ✚ Develop a compelling and original justified point of view about the critical issue
- ✚ Lodge your provocation at the right time, with the right executive, within the right conversation
- ✚ Prove your point – at a cost to the customer
- ✚ Communicate at all the right level your progress