

Salespeople love what they sell. Whether it's a software package, an audit, a financial statement, the latest application, a training workshop, a gum ball machine – you name it – it's all a bunch of stuff. If you ask a salesperson why they love their stuff so much, they'll often tell you it's the best thing on the market, much superior to their competitor's stuff, and that their clients love their stuff, too.

While salespeople are busy selling stuff, most buyers are concerned with buying outcomes or solutions to their problems. Everything that leads up to a favorable solution means little to the buyer. He or she is ultimately looking for results or outcomes that are generated from products or services, not the products or services themselves.

Those enamored solely with services or products are salespeople. They use these as differentiators, as if a service or product would ever garner a single nickel from a buyer in and of itself. Why not sell, instead, what the product or service can do for the buyer, based on what the buyer deems to be most important?

By way of example, I once worked for a builder who had all of his salespeople trained to believe his home was built better than any of his competitors. As a result, he believed buyers would eat up the sturdy construction process, the green, sustainable practices that made his homes desirable, and the long-term warranty. As his homes began to sell in record numbers, he was convinced of his brilliance in predicting buyer need.

The truth of the matter is that buyers purchased his homes for a number of reasons, few of which related to a product or service. In other words, it wasn't sustainable building practices, long-term warranties, sturdy construction or even a well thought-out floor plan that meant one iota to the buyers. What mattered most was how the buyer would benefit from these products or services.

Green, sustainable building practices meant that the buyers could potentially save money on utility bills while feeling a sense of pride in protecting the environment. A home warranty brought peace of mind which couldn't be measured in a written 20-page document but could only be realized in quickly getting help from the builder when a problem arose, without having

to incur additional costs. Having a home that was well built meant that regardless of climatic conditions the buyer and his or her family would feel safe and protected for a long time. Even a home that had great “flow” only meant something if the buyer saw the advantage of navigating floor space efficiently.

If salespeople aren’t focused on selling outcomes or solutions, then they’re focused on selling stuff. Why? Because many in sales, particularly those working for smaller companies, like doing the work that goes into generating stuff. They’re comfortable creating documents, detailing specifications, building homes, analyzing data, drawing up pie charts, producing assessments, inventing gadgets, and getting paid to deliver tangible evidence that justifies to the buyer the money he or she is spending is really worth it.

In contrast, buyers often purchase your smarts. They want to learn from you. They look to you to help them solve their challenges. They need your advice, and they want someone they can trust who isn’t clueless. It doesn’t matter what you’re selling, what matters is that your buyers see value in you from his or her vantage point. In fact, buyers are often willing to pay more for the same stuff, because they believe they can count on one seller more than another to get them from here to there.

Think about the last automobile you bought and the number of reasons you purchased it, including how the vehicle could save you money on gas, provide protection for your family on long trips, or represent status to your colleagues. Whatever your reasons, one thing is certain: If that car remained in the garage, you never would have bought it, no matter how cool it was. You had a purpose behind your purchase. The purpose wasn’t to acquire a stack of metal. It was to have the car help you reach your goals. How often are you talking to your prospects and clients about their short and long-term goals?

One more thing: If you ever think you know the reasons why your buyer would purchase your product or service before you ever converse with your buyer, it’s time to slam on the brakes. Once we believe we have the solutions prior to discovering our buyers’ perspectives, we’re too enamored with our stuff.

Buyers’ needs vary widely for the same product or service. While one person may want life insurance for family protection, another may find insurance to be a good option for added income during retirement years. Until you understand the importance of what you’re selling to each specific buyer, you fall into the trap of selling stuff, because you now view your

buyer as a commodity, not as an individual. Once you're in the trap, the only thing that helps to get you out is someone with a solution to your problem. Find that person quickly. They're not selling stuff.

Kathy Maixner is Chief Outcome Strategist for The Maixner Group, helping companies to achieve dramatic top-line growth and bottom-line profitability. For more information on her collaborative dialogue programs and tips for revenue creation, she can be reached at (503) 722-8199 or www.themaixnergrou.com.