

NEVER BE CLOSING

How to Sell Better Without Screwing Your Clients, Your Colleagues, or Yourself

TIM HURSON and TIM DUNNE

TIM HURSON is the founder of ThinkX Intellectual Capital, his own strategic coaching and consultation firm. He served previously for fifteen years as president and creative director of Manifest Communications. Tim Hurson is also a founding director of several non-profits including Mindcamp, Facilitators Without Borders and Africa IQ. He is a TEDx presenter and experienced keynote speaker. He is the author of *Think Better*. He is a graduate of Oberlin College.

TIM DUNNE is a professional trainer and coach. He has more than twenty years experience in corporate selling, finance, training and leadership. He has consulted with corporations including Cartier, Deutsche Bank, Bic and the World Bank-CGAP. He is also the founder of Instant Brainstorm, a creativity facilitator, and a partner at New & Improved, LLC, a management consulting organization. He is a graduate of the University of Rochester.

The Web site for this book is at www.never-be-closing.com

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MAIN IDEA

Traditionally, the first rule of sales was "Always be closing" – that is, always be doing trial closes to take the prospect's temperature and figure out how close you are to getting them to sign on the dotted line. Salespeople used to memorize a vast array of canned dialogues to try and close the sale. You just kept going until you found one that works.



Today, a far more effective approach is "Never be closing." Instead of memorizing trial closes, you should instead aim to "Always be useful." If you spend more time trying to help people solve their problems and seize opportunities, you'll find the sales will naturally follow without having to use strong-arm tactics, power closes or other tricks.



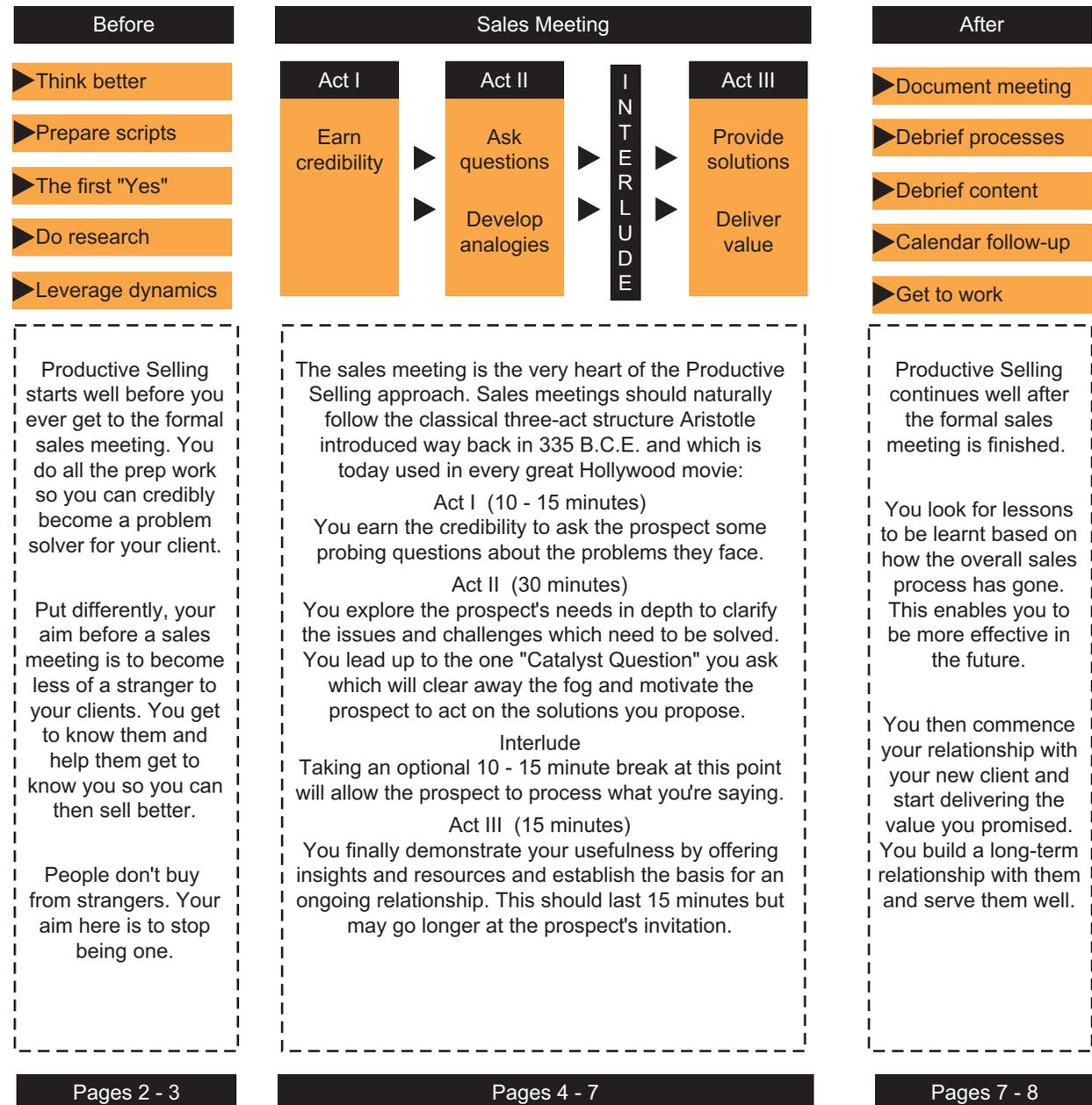
- ✓ Be credible
- ✓ Solve problems
- ✓ Identify opportunities
- ✓ Always be useful

The Productive Selling approach is to do things before, during and after sales meetings which are aligned with these guiding principles.

"Our premise is that selling is not about the art of persuasion. Instead, the best kind of selling emerges naturally from your genuine interest in the person you're working with and your sincere desire to be of use. At its essence, Productive Selling is about helping people solve problems."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

The Productive Selling Approach





Productive Selling starts well before you ever get to the formal sales meeting. You do all the prep work so you can credibly become a problem solver for your client. Put differently, your aim before a sales meeting is to become less of a stranger to your clients. You get to know them and help them get to know you so you can then sell better. People don't buy from strangers. Your aim here is to stop being one.

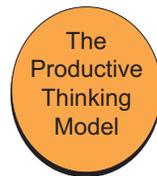
To help prospective clients get to know you before you try and sell them something, here's what you can and should be doing:

▶ Think better

One of the keys to selling more is to think better about the problems and challenges your prospect faces every day. A good thinking model is the Productive Thinking framework which has six process steps:

1. *Ask: What's going on?* – you rigorously explore the current situation rather than assuming you know what's going on before doing any analysis. The first step in coming up with viable ideas and solutions is to identify the specific problems and challenges the prospect needs resolved. You've got to be careful not to follow the same patterns as everyone else but to delve into and understand the specifics of the actual problems at work here.
2. *Define what success is* – identify clear and measurable criteria which can be used to quantify the effectiveness of your solution. The way you define success might be entirely different to the way your prospect will so it's important to clarify what metrics they will use to determine success or failure. Once you know what you're aiming for, you can then create a vision of where you want to head which will be powerful and motivational.

3. *Pinpoint the real problem* – you try and identify the one essential question which needs to get answered. There is usually one "catalyst question" which will start a chain reaction towards your ideal solution. You need to figure that out and articulate it.
4. *List all potential solutions* – you start with a laundry list of all potential solutions. The ideas you come up with at this stage may not be realistic but you think expansively and broadly about alternatives.
5. *Polish the best solution* – you identify and then refine the most robust and actionable solution you have available.
6. *Align your resources* – you then identify and start recruiting the resources which will be required to make that solution happen. This is a matter of creating and then executing your plan of action.



- 1 Ask: What's going on?
- 2 Define what success is
- 3 Pinpoint the real problem
- 4 List all potential solutions
- 5 Polish the best solution
- 6 Align your resources

The Productive Thinking model helps you sell better. It's a structured way of thinking creatively to solve problems. It's also a great way to come up with ideas which are genuinely innovative and promising. It's a great way for unexpected connections to be made and for problems to be seen in a new light.

"Our underlying premise is that to be an outstanding salesperson you have to be useful to your client. One of the most effective ways to be useful is to help solve problems. And the best way to do that is to apply Productive Thinking principles and tools to the selling process."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

▶ Prepare scripts

The first challenge in selling someone is to get them to agree to meet with you. The more common interests and connections you can identify, the less you will be a stranger to the prospect. An integral part of Productive Selling is to identify and build on the common connections you already have with the prospect.

"Productive Selling leverages the principle that the surest way to earn attention is to pay attention."
 – Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

A great way to build on your common interests is to develop a series of short scripts – concise elevator pitches which help you build on any common interests which may exist. Scripts build credibility because they help you point out useful things in a professional manner.

To decide what scripts you should prepare, consider two questions:

- "What would interest my prospective clients so much they would want to keep talking to me?"
- "What information snippets could I offer them which would signal talking with me would be worth their investment of time?"

The topics you can cover in short scripts is vast. You can talk about experiences which highlight your uniqueness, about current affairs, about trends which will unfold in the future, etc. Put together a collection of concise scripts about topics which will boost your credibility

To make your scripts most effective, you should

- *Focus* – make each script illustrate one key point.
- *Tell a quick story* – about people.
- *Be relevant* – you might even develop a custom script for a specific client.
- *Always finish with an open question* – so your script facilitates further discussion.
- *Be brief* – sixty seconds or less.

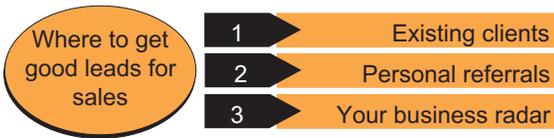
"The unexpected connection is more powerful than one that is obvious."

– Heraclitus, Greek philosopher

▶ The first "Yes"

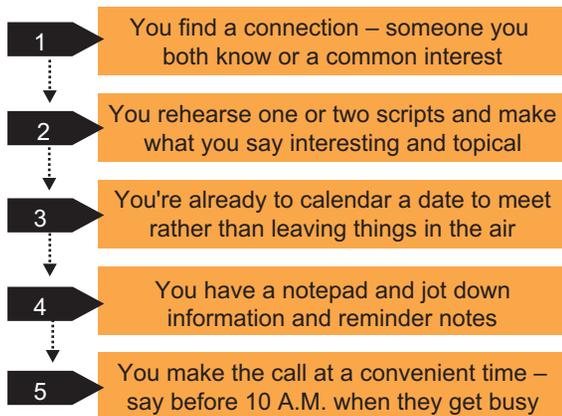
The underlying objective of everything you do before the sales meeting is to get prospects to agree to meet with you. You're trying to move from being perceived as a stranger to becoming more familiar to them. You're trying to get them to say "Yes" to meeting with you – without appearing pushy, insensitive or annoying.

Potential leads often come from at least three different sources:



- Getting satisfied clients to provide introductions to others who may benefit from what you offer is the most productive way to find new prospects. This provides instant credibility.
- The next best source of leads will be those you generate personally by tapping into your network, by exploiting connections you have in other areas, etc.
- You can also source leads by keeping your eyes and ears open for unexpected connections as you do other things.

When you follow up with leads and ask them to meet with you, make certain you have something useful to say. Requesting a meeting is a five-step process:



▶ Do research

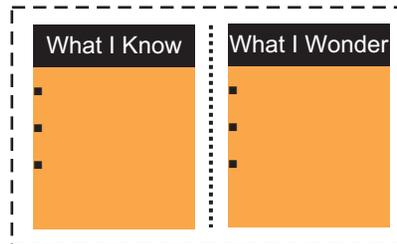
Once somebody agrees to meet with you, it's then time for you to do some intensive research about how to make that first meeting productive for the prospect. The goal here is to find out as much as possible about your prospect before you meet them so you can be credible and helpful in person.

Start by looking at what's available online:

- Google their name and their company.
- Check out what they've posted on Facebook.
- Look for them on LinkedIn.
- Visit their website and read any material they have.
- See if they have a blog you can catch up on.
- Buy a few shares in their company if they are public.
- Talk to your friends and acquaintances.
- Use your networks to gather info.

The basic idea is you want to put together a brief profile about them, their company and their industry. Once you've done that, you will have a better idea of what you need to know in order to have a productive conversation with them.

To organized your research, take a piece of paper and divide it into two columns like this:



In the left-hand column, you list all the facts you find out about the prospect, their company and their industry. In the right-hand column, you make notes about the points that would be helpful to find out in speaking with them. This exercise will give you some good ideas of interesting things to talk about when you meet with them.

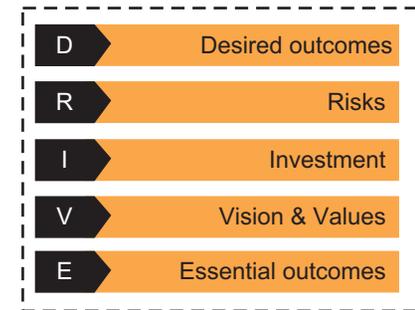
"Every organization, and every person in it, has a story. In those stories are the keys to connecting with them. Your research is the fuel, your curiosity the match. Together they ignite your enthusiasm."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

▶ Leverage dynamics

The final thing you need to do before meeting with a prospect is to carry out a BAR – a "Before Action Review". The objective of a good BAR is to specify the success criteria – what you want to achieve by meeting with your prospect.

To organize your thinking, take a piece of paper and write down DRIVE. This is an acronym of what you need to cover in a robust Before Action Review:



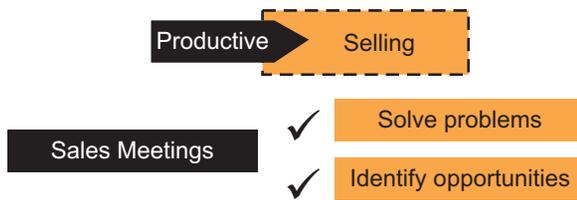
- D *Desired outcomes* – what do you want the meeting to achieve for you and for the prospective client?
- R *Risks* – what potential outcomes of the meeting do you particularly want to avoid?
- I *Investment* – what resources are you prepared to invest in the sales effort before it becomes uneconomical?
- V *Vision and Values* – how exactly will you convey your vision and your values to the prospect?
- E *Essential outcomes* – what key, measurable results are you hoping to generate?

"DRIVE is an easy-to-remember and easy-to-use tool that can quickly give you a solid sense of what a successful endeavor will look like and feel like. DRIVE is a powerful tool that allows you to establish success criteria for almost any activity, and it can be particularly useful for a Before Action Review for a sales meeting."

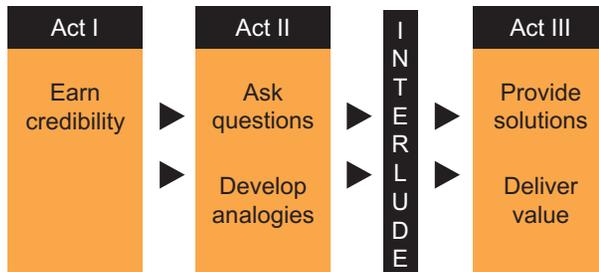
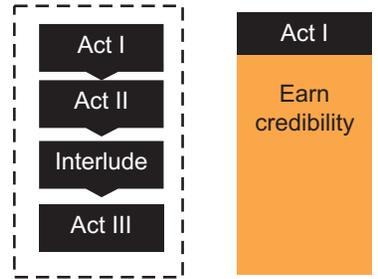
– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

"How will you know you've reached your goal if you don't know what it looks like?"

– Virgil



The sales meeting is the very heart of the Productive Selling approach. Sales meetings should naturally follow the classical three-act structure Aristotle introduced way back in 335 B.C.E. and which is today used in every great Hollywood movie:



Act I (10 - 15 minutes)
 You earn the credibility to ask the prospect some probing questions about the problems they face.

Act II (30 minutes)
 You explore the prospect's needs in depth to clarify the issues and challenges which need to be solved. You lead up to the one "Catalyst Question" you ask which will clear away the fog and motivate the prospect to act on the solutions you propose.

Interlude
 Taking an optional 10 - 15 minute break at this point will allow the prospect to process what you're saying.

Act III (15 minutes)
 You finally demonstrate your usefulness by offering insights and resources and establish the basis for an ongoing relationship. This should last 15 minutes but may go longer at the prospect's invitation.

The most useful structure for facilitating commercial transactions is that which was championed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In 335 B.C.E., he came up with this three-act structure which today gets used for just about any Hollywood blockbuster you might care to mention:

- Act I – you introduce the main characters, talk about their circumstances and introduce a turning point. (This normally takes 20 - 30 percent of the total time.)
- Act II – the characters face a real make-or-break crisis which is the second major plot point. (Normally around 50 percent of the time is spent on this.)
- Act III – the crisis is resolved and everyone lives happily ever after of life is changed permanently. (The final 20 - 30 percent of the time).

As an option, you can also add in an Interlude between Act II and Act III to let everyone catch their breath and think about what's happening.

"I took a master class with Bill Wilder once and he said that the first act of a story you put your character up in a tree and in the second act you set the tree on fire and then in the third act you get him down."
 – Gary Kurtz, producer, *Star Wars*

It turns out this is the perfect way to structure a sales conversation as well:

- Act I – you earn the right to ask some probing questions by crossing the credibility threshold.
- Act II – you explore the prospect's true needs by asking questions which help you and them understand things with more clarity.
- Act III – you demonstrate your usefulness by articulating helpful insights and providing resources.

Often when you turn up for a sales meeting, you will have to spend some time in the reception room waiting for your meeting to start. Ordinary salespeople view this as downtime but in the Productive Selling approach, you should use this time to start gathering clues about the company you are visiting and the person you will be meeting. Put another way, you want to become a "Waiting Room Jedi."

Take full advantage of your introduction to the receptionist by initiating some small talk. Exercise your curiosity and get them to give you some useful information. Tune in to what they have on display and see what shared connections you can identify. If you can find an interest you share, people you both know or even places you've been, you've got something to work with once the meeting proper starts.

A key part of the early interaction is to figure out what kinds of people you will be encountering in your sales meeting. There are really just six types:

1. *People who are energized by context* – who want to fully understand a situation before they jump in. They will want to move slowly.
2. *People who are energized by results* – they will focus on facts and figures and will value directness and efficiency.
3. *People who are energized by ideas* – they will love abstract thinking and the buzz that comes with new ideas and possibilities.
4. *People who are energized by processes* – they will want to understand how proposed solutions work and integrate with what they already have in place.
5. *People who are energized by action* – who want to see things happen immediately.
6. *People who are energized by people* – who will want to know how others will be affected.

If you can identify which of these six thinking styles the person you're meeting with favors early on, you are then in a position to emphasize the aspects of your presentation which will appeal to them the most.

"Until you establish sufficient credibility, your client won't be comfortable answering the questions you'll ask in Act II. The key is figuring out when you have it so you can move to the next stage."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

Remember, Act I is all about crossing the credibility threshold and earning the right to ask some probing questions. The prospect, by contrast, is trying to disqualify you as someone they don't need to talk to. They want to weed out unproductive uses of their time.

There are at least eight ways you can earn that level of credibility:

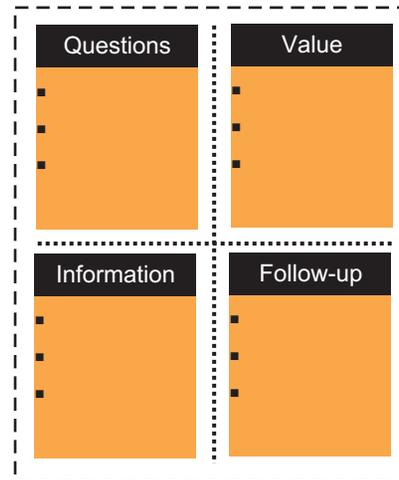


1. You can have the endorsement of an existing client who strongly recommends you.
2. You can have some sort of personal connection which means they become willing to answer your questions.
3. You can know the thought leaders in your industry or have worked with them on some project. Associating with high performers gives credibility.
4. Using your scripts, you can summarize who you are, what your company does and why you're there.
5. You can make it clear you have a plan and an opportunity to deliver value to them and ask their permission to go down that path.
6. If you have insights on current industry trends, you will have credibility. Industry know-how can be a powerful differentiator.
7. Your reputation for helping people might precede you and give you credibility to move forward.
8. By asking the right kinds of questions and then moving forward with confidence, you might be able to generate credibility. By acting boldly and confidently, you might even be able to move right into Act II with little or no preamble.

However you go about earning credibility, it's important to keep notes. Writing things down as you go along not only forces you to notice things but it also helps you track what you're doing right or wrong later on.

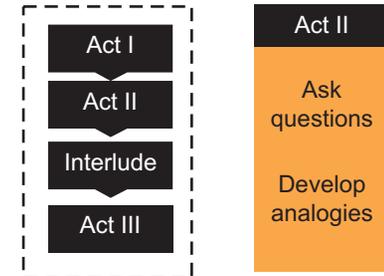
"The weakest ink is better than the strongest memory."
 – Chinese proverb

A good way to keep notes is to use "the Q-notes approach". Divide your page into four quadrants:



- The top-left quadrant is where you write down the questions you want to ask. This forms the basis of your agenda for the sales meeting.
- The top-right quadrant is where you write down the ideas on ways you can deliver value to the client. This is what you use at the end of the meeting to form an agenda for moving forward.
- The bottom-left quadrant is where you write down your observations about the prospect's interests, issues and needs.
- The bottom-right quadrant is where you compile a checklist of opportunities for following up with the client after the meeting.

By organizing your notes using the Q-notes approach, you can record maximum information with minimal writing. Your notes will be organized in a way which facilitates rapid extraction of information in the future.

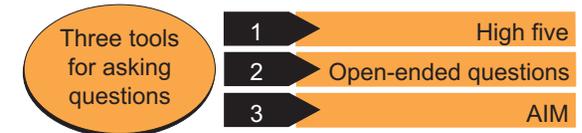


Once you've spent the first 10 to 15 minutes of your sales meeting establishing your credibility (Act I), you then start asking questions rather than merely presenting the solutions you offer. This enables you to be strategic rather than pushy.

"Practice using the stay-in-the-question strategy. Suppress your instinct to blurt out 'good' ideas as soon as you get them. Instead, listen to the problem, use your curiosity to help understand it from the client's perspective, capture your ideas in your Q-notes, and move on to the next problem."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

Three good tools to use in Act II are:



1. *High five* – Visualize your left hand. Think of your fingers as four I's and the shape made by your thumb and index finger as a V. This is a good template for asking questions to help you understand better and a reminder to ask questions like these:
 - Itch – What bugs you and creates problems?
 - Impact – Why is that a problem?
 - Information – What is the root cause?
 - Involved – Who else would benefit from a solution?
 - Values – How does this link to your values?
2. *Open-ended questions* – avoid making definitive statements and instead ask open-ended questions. These are questions which cannot be answered with a yes or no. "How might we..." style questions.

3. *AIM* – This is an acronym for Advantages, Impediments and Maybes. For each itch you uncover, you then ask three simple questions:
- What are the advantages of resolving this issue?
 - What would be the impediments to doing that?
 - What else might happen if this is resolved?

What you're trying to achieve with all three questioning tools is you're attempting to zero in on the main "catalytic questions" which will make a big difference for your prospect. A catalytic question gets right to the heart of the problem, clears away peripheral issues and opens the door to interesting solutions. The right catalytic question will also motivate their desire to act decisively.



"A problem well stated is a problem half-solved."
 – Charles Kettering, head of research,
 General Motors

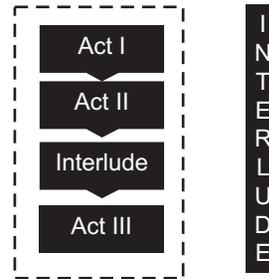
To get to the one or two catalytic questions which encapsulate the prospect's core problems, it's often helpful to use analogies. Analogies are a very efficient way to express complex ideas vividly and quickly. People think in analogies and therefore relate to them extremely well.

Analogies can come from a variety of sources including your personal experiences or those of your prospect's:

- "You know, your company is like a family."
- "This is similar to what happens in the tech industry."
- "I'm reminded of what it takes to sail a boat."

Act II is all about asking questions without prematurely offering your ideas or trying to sell them something. You ask questions until you get to the heart of the matter. You identify the catalytic questions which, if answered, will set off a chain reaction of benefits. You get them to help you find the most useful problems to solve and then to see the issue with new eyes by introducing a helpful analogy.

"Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Everything connects to everything else."
 – Leonardo da Vinci



As counterintuitive as it may sound, it's often helpful to take a brief break between Act II and Act III of your sales meeting. Doing this allows ideas to incubate and for your prospect to reflect a little bit before you move into Act III of your sales meeting.

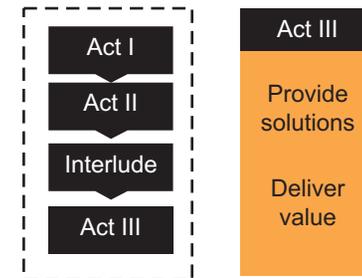
There are several ways to ask for a short break during your meeting:

- Ask whether you can have a quick tour of your prospect's workspace or facility. In addition to understanding them better, you might just luck out and meet others in the company who will be in favor of working with you.
- You can ask to use the facilities for a bathroom break.
- You can talk about a personal analogy which is completely unrelated to business and which gets everyone into a different headspace. A complete change in tone and intensity of the conversation can mean you then move into Act III with freshness.

The whole point of a break is you create an environment for some creative ideas to incubate and take shape. Just the act of getting everyone up and walking around for a few minutes can do the trick. Not only can a quick break help everyone get fresh ideas, it also opens the door for a little bit of small talk and getting to know the other person. That can be helpful further down the track.

"Whether in stories or sales, every character has unique interests, traits, hopes, and fears. They take in information in different ways and express themselves in different ways. The better you understand the characters in a story, the more you can appreciate the story itself. Similarly, the better you understand the people in your sales meeting, the more productive you can be."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne



In Act II, you're largely in question-asking mode. Act II is where you now step into the role of an adviser and offer specific ideas and suggestions. Act III is where you show them how you can help solve their problems and move them forward in a way which adds value. The key here is to be useful.

"Delivering value is more powerful at the end of your meeting than at the beginning. If you've done your work well, by the time you make the transition to Act III, you are truly ready to deliver value. At the end of the meeting, you have a wealth of data to connect your knowledge, your products, and your network to your client's situation and issues. It's then that you can be the most useful."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

In practical terms, you deliver value to your prospect by offering USE and then by making promises. USE is an acronym:



U *Understanding* – you restate the catalytic questions which you discovered during the sales meeting. You demonstrate that you genuinely understand the key issue or issues.

S *Sourcing* – you put on the table third-party goods or services which will help them move forward. You offer to connect them to every resource which is available in your network

E *Exchanging* – You also detail how your own products, services or ideas can help them resolve their needs. This is where you generate revenue and capture part of the added value for your own company. You explain how your products or services will:

- Mitigate their annoyances or problems.
- Deliver an economic advantage.
- Lower their costs or increase their revenues.
- Address their concerns.
- Align them with industry trends.

Note that Act III is not a typical "handle objections" exercise. If the prospect shows no interest in your ideas, you move to the next item. You're trying to give them options to consider rather than selling them on one specific item or another. Your goal here is to be useful.

"Delivering value is how you get remembered."
 – Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

You end Act III and your entire sales meeting by making some promises about what you will do to follow-up on what you've discussed. Promises propel your relationship into the future and will explain how you plan on delivering value to your prospect should they decide to move forward.

The promises you make will be specific to each customer but may be along these lines:

- As soon as I get back to the office, I will send you an e-mail with the contact details for Greg who will be able to help you with this.
- I'll send you the link to the website we talked about.
- Here are the five things I will do in the next two weeks.
- I'll customize these agreements and get them to you in the morning.
- Let's check we're on the same page. You're going to We're going to..... Right?

"Promises don't always happen in a single meeting. Relationships are built on a foundation of promises that are made and kept. Our philosophy on promises is simple: You don't give your word. You are your word. Once your clients know that, they know they can rely on you."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

Note that Act III does not involve the use of power closing techniques or multiple scripts.

"Closing techniques, especially those designed to manipulate clients into saying yes when they're not yet persuaded or ready, are diametrically opposed to the Productive Selling philosophy. We don't think it's ethical to pressure clients into buying. Even if it were, we seriously doubt that closing techniques would be very effective – certainly not in the long run."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

If you really want to become a good closer, focus on being an inquisitive questioner, a creative problem solver and someone who follows through on their promises with professionalism. If you've done a good job, your prospect will ask to buy.

Be totally transparent at the end of your sales meeting. The most likely closes you will use will be:

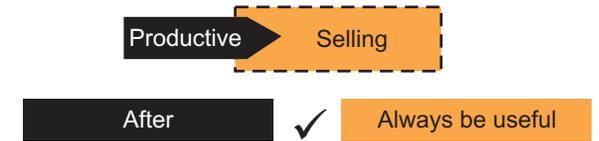
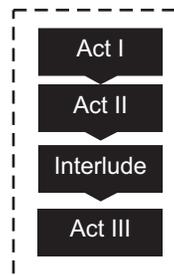
- Do you want to move to the next step?
- Should I draft a contract?
- What additional information do you need before you decide to give this the green light?
- Should we get started on helping you solve these problems?

"Our experience suggests that once you engage your client in his vision and restate how you might help him achieve it, the sale virtually makes itself. At the very least, you'll have won the privilege of being welcomed the next time you call."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

"The strategic objective of your sales conversation is to demonstrate value to your clients, to show them you can help solve their problems or move them forward in some way. When you choose to deliver value is nearly as important as what you deliver. So wait. Wait until Act III."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne



Productive Selling continues well after the formal sales meeting is finished. You look for lessons to be learnt based on how the overall sales process has gone. This enables you to be more effective in the future.

You then commence your relationship with your new client and start delivering the value you promised. You build a long-term relationship with them and serve them well.

▶ Document meeting

Your sales meeting isn't really over until you write up your meeting notes in a legible format. During the sales meeting, you've used your Q-notes to organize your thinking and remind you of key points. You now need to transcribe those bullet points into more detailed meeting notes. This is an integral part of each sales meeting.

Get everything down in writing while it's still fresh in your mind:

- The challenges your client faces in their business.
- The catalytic questions you came up with.
- The analogies you used.
- The promises you made.
- The third-party products or services you think will be helpful for them.
- The people in your network you think would be useful to them.
- The follow-up which will be required.

You can't rely solely on the Q-notes you made during the meeting because with the passage of time, they will seem like gibberish. You have to transcribe everything into legible sentences and document what was discussed. The benefit though is as you do this, additional thoughts and ideas will come to you. With a bit of luck, making meeting notes may open up some entirely new ideas for delivering more value.

▶ Debrief processes

Once you've written up your notes, it's then time to debrief the sales process – how you managed the sales conversation. You're trying to identify what worked well, what could be improved and what you should be integrating into your procedures in the future.

Keep your process debrief simple by pondering:

- *What happened here?*
It might help if you map out the sales process and identify all the various elements that contributed.
- *So what will it all mean?*
Specifically, you need to highlight and extract:
 - All the positives of your sales meeting.
 - Any objections or problems which arose.
 - Enhancements you might want to add.
 - Remedies to the obvious problems.
 - What else you should mention?
- *Now what should we do better in the future?*
You should also be figuring out:
 - What do we need to stop doing?
 - What would be helpful if we start doing it?
 - Where do we need to improve?

The whole point of doing a debrief of your processes is to set in motion a learning cycle. It takes time to do the debriefs but over the long run, you will get better and better at selling thanks to these debriefs.

If you get good at doing debriefs to lock in what you need to learn, you'll also find you can extract helpful ideas from other people's sales experiences as well. Whenever and wherever someone tells you an interesting sales story, run it through your debrief analysis and see what nuggets and insights you can extract.

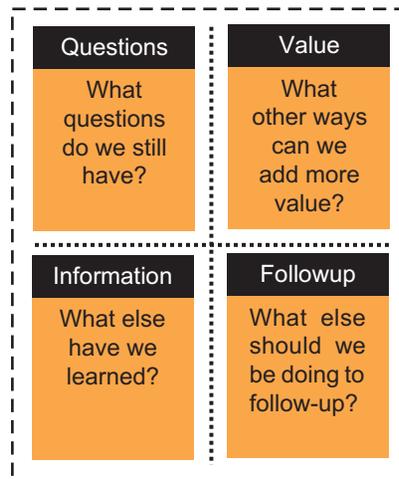
"The real reason success won't fall into your lap is because you can't get it sitting down."
 – Virgil

▶ Debrief content

In parallel with your processes debrief, you also should debrief the content of your sales meetings as well. What you're looking for here are nuggets that you can repackage and use advantageously in the future. You want to notice what you have so you can reuse it.

An effective content debrief needs to be simple:

- Put aside an hour or so and invite everyone who has invested in your success to come and participate.
- Have a whiteboard and ask everyone to write down on a Post-it note their observations and ideas. You then go around the room and ask everyone to explain their observation and stick it on the whiteboard.
- As you get more and more ideas, you can start clustering them by topic. At this point, it might be helpful to put your Q-notes outline on the whiteboard and cluster the ideas in the four quadrants.



Make certain you design a plan of action to follow-up on these ideas with your client in the future.

▶ Calendar follow-up

You should always view the end result of your sales process as being not just making a sale but more the beginning of a relationship. To achieve that, you need to schedule how you will keep following up with them and engaging with them.

This doesn't need to be complicated. All you really need to do is schedule when and how you will create some touch points. For example, your planning calendar might look like this:

- Today – send them a thank you email which includes a curiosity inquiry: "In our meeting, you mentioned _____. I'm curious to know what's behind your concern."
- Next week – follow up on who are their suppliers and look for any possible connections.
- Monthly – do a quick check-in to see how things are going. Invite them to visit you in person whenever they are in town.
- Twice a year – send them a gift aligned with their passions along with a note "Thinking of you."
- Once a year – let them know you're going to be in their town on business and would like to meet for lunch.

By creating those varied touch points, you stay front-of-mind. You also keep learning more and more about your client's interests. As long as you're genuine about doing this, your clients will love the attention.

"By developing a Productive Selling attitude and practicing the skills, you can become the kind of person others think about and recommend. The better you get at Productive Selling, the less time you'll spend selling, and the more time you'll devote to doing what we all naturally want to do – help people solve problems and seize opportunities. We wish you the best success."

– Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne