

**Selling Professional Services Intangibles:  
Four Steps That Work!**  
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The ability to effectively sell professional services and solutions — intangibles — is critical to the long-term success of any products and services sales force. We all know selling services, training, business continuity, data and systems migration, desk top management, consulting, managed services and so on, challenges the sales team.

From a buyer's perspective, professional services are perceived as: addressing more complex issues; more important than buying products (hence, the organization invests more in the buying decision); having higher risk; bought at higher levels (usually at the executive level of relationship); and requiring a custom response because customers see their problems as unique.

From the sellers' perspective, reaching sales goals is difficult, unless sellers create different levels of skills and knowledge and shift their mindset.

**Table 1: Services seller implications, skills knowledge and mindset requirements**

Knowledge	Skills	Mindsets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Service/solutions offerings</li> <li>- Pre-sales services resources</li> <li>- Partner capabilities</li> <li>- Functional expertise</li> <li>- C-level buying habits</li> <li>- Business acumen</li> <li>- Systems thinking</li> <li>- Change management</li> <li>- Competitor knowledge</li> <li>- Services best practices</li> <li>- ROI benefits &amp; economics</li> <li>- Account history</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active listening/communications</li> <li>- Critical questioning</li> <li>- Negotiation</li> <li>- Mediation</li> <li>- Selling team coordination</li> <li>- Storytelling &amp; creativity</li> <li>- Problem analysis</li> <li>- Psychological contracting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trusted advisor</li> <li>- Business consultant</li> </ul>

**Selling intangibles**

One of the biggest problems most product sellers face is the ability to sell intangibles. For most sales professionals, the intangibles concept has proven challenging. Why?

Selling a tangible is a visible experience. You can put it on the table in front of a prospect, flip on the switch, conduct a demo, follow the instructions, test it for a while and determine if the specifications meet particular needs, wants and expectations. Features and benefits are easier to demonstrate, as are competitor price comparisons and functional limits. The primary challenge is to offer a better mousetrap that is, perhaps, cheaper, delivered on time and connected to a complete warranty program. If it breaks, you simply send the customer another one.

But when you sell professional services, the attributes connected to the sale are not initially visible to the buyer. You cannot switch on a consulting experience, check out a technology assessment before completion or know what a migration process looks like until it's completed.

It's also difficult to see how your staff will ultimately become more confident and skilled in carrying out a systems implementation program until they apply training knowledge to a real-time customer problem issue and experience. However, you can make the intangible tangible if you follow four critical steps when discussing professional services with a prospect.

### **Making intangibles, tangible:**

#### **1. Involve them in a “day in the life.”**

Take your prospects on a journey where they visualize what a “day in the life” of a particular service looks like and how it's experienced. For example, when discussing what an SAP experience looks like as the company goes through reengineering, strategy alignment, change management, resistance and team training, illustrate how a typical day unfolds and what happens as customer teams work differently; how new processes work; how customer service representatives use different scripts; and what customers experience when the system is in place. Going through this exercise cuts anxiety and boosts positive perceptions. Everyone likes to know in advance what to expect in and how to prepare for the future. This fundamental change management idea is easy to apply to any services sales situation.

#### **2. Use analogies and stories.**

To make your discussions visible, use business analogies and stories. Discuss how others you have worked with have had similar experiences, issues and concerns. These analogies and stories should show how your company applies services expertise, talent and tested processes to encounter, analyze and solve problems. Doing this lets your prospects envision their own companies experiencing the same positive results — an important step in getting them closer to saying yes.

#### **3. Discuss best practices and lessons learned.**

Prospects love to hear about best practices and lessons learned because few companies have the time and energy to examine a few hundred situations to determine what does and doesn't work. Carry at least three to four best practices in your back pocket to walk clients through so they can see and feel, at an emotional level, how these ideas can work for them. This builds confidence and makes these solutions visible in their minds

#### **4. Show the value in service offering features and benefits**

Every professional sales representative must clearly understand the features and benefits of at least three to five of your key service offerings. The services sales professional's responsibility is to explain your services' exact features/characteristics and benefits/value to the client. More importantly, the seller must constantly ask the question, “Why should this prospect care about this particular service offering?” If your features and benefit statement doesn't emphasize value with clarity and focus, step back and rethink how to best present your service offerings.

The following example highlights a positive feature and contains a benefit/value-connector statement on an email analysis for a client:

**Customer:** "I'm very interested in any way I can improve my email system."

**Seller:** "Based on what you've told me, I'm sure we can help. The analysis we need to conduct only takes two days to complete (feature). And through the process, we can save you money, time and hassle (benefit/value)."

#### **Four steps to better sales success**

The ability to sell intangibles is a skill sellers must master. Using four critical steps — involve your clients, use analogies, discuss best practices and present valuable benefits — brings clarity, focus and success to all those who venture into the world of selling professional services and solutions.

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