

Customer Needs

While identifying the customer's needs is essential in communicating the sales message, that's just the beginning of the salesperson's task. It is now time to take your knowledge of your company's products and services and apply it to the customer's needs. Providing solutions that solve customer problems is the essence of a salesperson's role in the relationship-selling process. You are the critical link between what the company has to offer the customer and the customer's needs.

Sell FAB. Good salespeople are very knowledgeable about their company's products and services. They know product performance characteristics, service turnaround times, and a host of other important features. These facts are important, but customers do not buy features. They buy solutions to their problems. So you need to link your knowledge of company products and services facts to solutions that meet customers' needs. This process is often referred to as **FAB** (features, advantages, and benefits).

By applying the FAB approach, salespeople can make the company's products and services relevant for the customer. A **feature** is any material characteristic or specification of the company's products and services (say, antilock brakes on a car). An **advantage** is a particular product/service characteristic that helps meet the customer's needs (antilock brakes stop the car faster and in a more controlled fashion). A **benefit** is the beneficial outcome to the buyer from the advantage found in the product feature (the car will provide greater safety for the driver and passengers).

Let's examine the FAB approach in greater detail.

FEATURES. All products and services are the sum total of physical characteristics and specifications. Consider the purchase of a new laptop computer. The buyer will learn the processor speed, hard disk drive size, screen size, and a host of other features. Go to the Lenovo computers website (www.lenovo.com) and click on products. Then go to the "Laptops" and click on "ThinkPad." Several models are listed and their product features are described.

By themselves, however, product features are not very persuasive. Indeed, most customers will never even see the processor or hard drive in a new computer. No matter what the buying situation, customers do not buy product features. They buy product benefits that meet their needs.

ADVANTAGES. Customers want benefits, but they also want to know how your product is better. What makes it better? Why should I buy your product/service over one of your competitors? In short, they want to see the advantages of your product.

If you return to the Lenovo web page, look at how the products are described as "lightning fast" and "torture-tested." Notice that these descriptions don't speak to the features of the product but, rather, the advantages. Lenovo ThinkPad laptops are fast and tough, two important features for heavy business users. This is a transition from talking about what the product does (features) to how it is better for the customer (advantages).

Unfortunately, most salespeople get a lot of training on the features of products and services but little training on the advantages and benefits. Remember, the task here is to apply your knowledge of the company's products and services to the customer needs you identified earlier in the sales presentation. Simply knowing the product's physical characteristics and specifications is not enough; understanding the product's advantages for your customer is good but still probably not enough to get a commitment. Ultimately, the customer must see how those advantages benefit him or her directly.

BENEFITS. Extending the application from product features to product advantages, and ultimately to product benefits, answers one of the most fundamental questions customers have in the relationship-building process:

"What's in it for me?" Ultimately, there will be no relationship if you cannot answer that question. Customers need to understand specifically how your product benefits them, solves their problem, or meets their needs. In the highly competitive, information-rich world of today, customers expect salespeople to have a thorough knowledge of their competitors' products and their benefits.

Often, your customer will be comparing your product with at least one competitor. By phone call or visit, a Lenovo rep (direct salesperson or distributor's agent) will identify the particular customer's needs and then define the most relevant product advantages as benefits. If you go back to the Lenovo web page one more time, notice it does not describe the benefits of a long-life battery. Why not? Because the company wants salespeople to do that. If you call or visit, a Lenovo rep would find the high-speed Intel or AMD processor's ability to process the latest graphic-intensive software an advantage because it allows them to work sophisticated engineering programs while they are traveling. It is the salesperson's job to recognize the key customer issue (ability to work while traveling) and translate the product features into advantages (long battery life) and benefits (no more downtime while traveling).

For example, engineers for a manufacturing company would find the high-speed Intel or AMD processor's ability to process the latest graphic-intensive software an advantage because it allows them to work sophisticated engineering programs while they are traveling. It is the salesperson's job to recognize the key customer issue (ability to work while traveling) and translate the product features into advantages (long battery life) and benefits (no more downtime while traveling). This is an example of the synergy companies seek between their marketing communication (such as the Lenovo site) and the salesperson calling on the customer. While the website is outstanding at presenting product features and even identifying basic product advantages, direct contact with a salesperson (either inside or outside sales) is needed to connect the advantages to benefits for a given customer.

Collect the Company's Cumulative Knowledge. Salespeople are on the front line meeting customers and giving presentations. However, everyone in the organization supports them in one way or another. The support of areas like product development, customer service and support, and manufacturing is indispensable as salespeople apply the organization's cumulative knowledge to meeting the customer's needs. It is always helpful and often mandatory to tap into the knowledge base of the sales firm.

If a customer needs modifications to a product or has special service requirements, the salesperson calls in people from product development and manufacturing to get a true understanding of the issues and costs involved in making changes to existing products. When the customer has tight delivery and scheduling deadlines, it is important to contact the right people in the company to get the best, most up-to-date answers quickly.

Team selling is based in part on the premise that no one individual can successfully develop and manage large customer relationships. Applying your knowledge to the customer's needs really means applying the company's cumulative knowledge to those needs.