

# How to Sell: Stop Pitching and Start Listening and Relating

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As coined by Stephen Heiman and Diane Sanchez in "The New Conceptual Selling," No-Sell Selling means that people love to buy but hate to be sold, and they buy for their own reasons, not for ours. Interestingly, most of us spend a good portion of every day engaged in some aspects of selling. In his most recent book, ["To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth about Others."](#) Daniel Pink notes that all workers in every type of job spend at least 41% of their time in "sales-mode", defined as time spent persuading and selling. He suggests that successful sales today requires that people be tuned into others, to understand and empathize and to be able to be able to put themselves in the customer's shoes. The most effective selling happens when you really understand the needs and buying behaviors of each prospect.

Traditionally, many lawyers have not been effective at sales. In part, it is because lawyers place a premium on their own expertise and credentials, not realizing that successful selling is more about building trust and connecting. There also are personality traits that impede selling. On one end of the spectrum are those who are introverts and technical lawyers first, who are uncomfortable engaging in discussions and who are passive. On the other spectrum are extroverts, those whose personalities and style often make them the center of attention. According to Daniel Pink, "Extroverts...often do not take the time to understand what the person getting the sales pitch wants, since they are too busy talking about themselves." Researchers are now finding that the most effective "salespeople" are those who are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum since they know when to ask and listen, promote dialogue and embed credentialing into the discussion about how to solve the problem.

In [a survey conducted by the Wellesley Hill Group](#) on how clients choose their service providers, clients cited four recurring problems with the way professionals sold their services. The professional(s) doing the selling:

- "Did not understand my needs"
- "Did not listen to me."
- "Did not convince me of the value I would receive from using his/her services."
- "Did not craft compelling solutions to meet my needs."

Usually, by the time a firm is invited in to meet with a client or prospect about a piece of work or a new relationship, the firm has already been screened by the prospect. This means that the prospect/client likely has already learned a fair amount about the firm and the lawyers with the expertise. This is how they got asked to a pitch meeting. Unfortunately, many law firms still treat a sales meeting with a client or prospect as if it were an introductory screening meeting. This results in the lawyers talking about their expertise, their firm, and the experience all of their colleagues in the room have had. Too often, firms still come armed with PowerPoint presentations and pitch books, some of which are half an inch to an inch thick and full of things about the firm the client may well have no interest in. This is what we call "pitching" and it doesn't sell.

***So, stop the pitching! Stop the presentations! Stop the pitch books!*** Start using client-focused dialogue and engage in the type of collaborative problem-solving you would do if you represent that company. Really listen to clients and let them guide the discussion to the issues that most concern them. Give them something real by which to evaluate your

skills and expertise, and more important, give them a sense of your personality style and approach in working together. You then don't have to tell them about it, it speaks for itself.

Here are some pointers on effective, consultative selling.

**Do your homework.** Before every meeting with a prospect (and even an existing client,) make sure you know what the prospect wants to learn about in the meeting. What law firm(s) is representing them currently on other similar matters? Why are they interested in speaking with your firm? Is this a courtesy visit (the chief legal officer or other executive asked the legal department to meet with you?) or is the company looking to hire an expert for a specific piece of work? Are they shopping around for free advice or for the least expensive bid? What other firms are being considered? What is the extent of your relationship with the prospect? Do research online to look at their litigation and deal histories, recent publicity, their values and corporate culture and the bios of those in decision-making positions. Review industry issues and the prospect's competitors.

**Be strategic about who will attend the meeting.** Ask the prospect specifically who will be attending from their end. What are their roles? Their areas of interest? How many people would they like you to bring and are there specific attorneys they expect to be there? Once you have found this out, brainstorm internally (and without ego!) about who from the firm should attend. Be sure you mirror the prospect's composition. There are still far too many horror stories of firms bringing five to ten partners to a pitch, or a team of four to five white men meeting with prospects that have women and other minorities in the meeting and on the decision-making team. Do not bring anyone to the meeting just for appearance's sake, however. Prospects see right through this. Also, think about who brings the right expertise to the meeting, and the chemistry. The most expert or the person with the historic relationship might not be the right person to go along in every instance.

**Be prepared and rehearse.** Once you've done your background research, meet with the group that will be visiting with the client. Determine if there are additional pieces of information you need before you meet with the prospect. Decide how you will run the meeting, who will speak when, and most importantly, who will guide certain aspects of the discussion, i.e., which 2-3 questions each person will ask to elicit more information on needs, challenges, and possible solutions. Review the bios and relationship histories of those who will attend the meeting and make sure that someone finds a way to connect with each individual personally.

**Keep the meeting client-focused – stop talking and listen!** Begin by reviewing your proposed agenda and format. Ask the prospect if they'd prefer a different format or want to shift the focus to a different priority. Aim to talk less than 50-60% of the time. *Remember: you gain control of the selling process when you give up controlling the conversation.* Prospects want to be the focus of your attention – they want to tell you about and have you understand and propose solutions to their problems. Don't allow anyone on your own team to monopolize the discussion – it will make the prospect wonder whether you work collaboratively and also why you even brought others to the meeting if they don't actively participate. Your primary objective of this meeting is to understand the prospect's problems, engage in some potential problem-solving, convey your unique strengths, skills and value through that approach and ultimately, make a good connection that begins the process of trust-building.

**Show don't tell.** If you have done your homework well, instead of talking to the prospect about what the firm can do to solve the prospect's issue, use the meeting as a mini-strategy session. Start working through the specific problem the client is having now. Doing this will enable the prospect to see how well you listen to them and would work with them. It facilitates a productive dialogue and even may help them begin to solve the particular problem. It is a much better way to demonstrate your competence and build trust from the outset.

**Do the right follow-up.** If you have done a good job in the meeting surfacing issues, describing potential solutions and making meaningful connections, the prospect should welcome some follow-up. This may be a formal proposal or less formally, it may be that you then send some specific information about a series of cases and experience you have in a particular sector or with a particular issue. It might include a link to a few bios or to some articles or memos on the subject. Do not leave the meeting without mutual agreement to next steps.

Many sales opportunities do not result in new business after only one meeting (unless it is a case specific and time-sensitive pitch or transaction.) It is an ongoing process of making yourselves relevant and valuable to the prospect and building the relationship.

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