
DEFEATING THE “NO-DECISION” TRAP: THE POWER OF DIVERGENT THINKING

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Imagine if you could banish “no-decision” from your sales funnel. Just think: More deals that travel all the way to the win/loss finish line, less wasted sales time, more essential customer needs resolved and a higher share of wallet. What’s standing in your way? The wrong solution, an inadequate business case, inability to get budget? In our experience, the real problem boils down to one thing: an inability to create and build a business vision that propels your customer’s organization to embrace change.

Top-performing strategic account managers get this. They sell potential. They build a shared vision around the ability to address a compelling business need or market opportunity and then build the scaffolding of commitment to make this vision a reality.

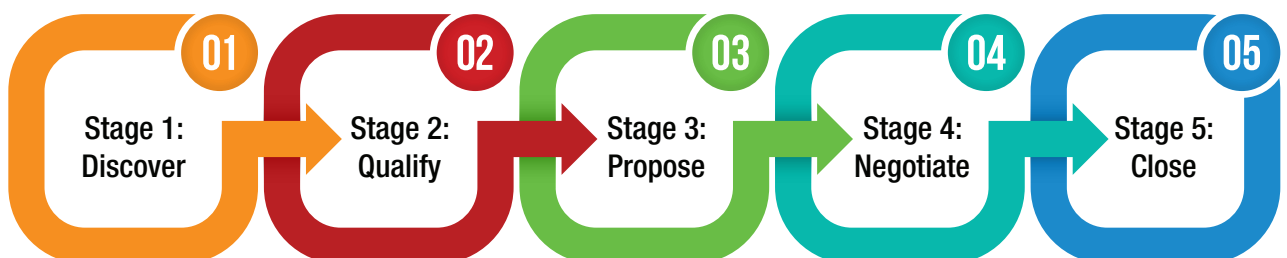
Top performers exhibit three essential characteristics, and they know how to deploy each trait based on the sales situation:

1. Divergent thinking vs. convergent thinking
2. Learning vs. teaching
3. Curiosity quotient (CQ) vs. intelligence quotient (IQ)

Convergent thinking, not divergent thinking

Convergent thinking is ideal when your customer has identified a need worth pursuing. Then, it becomes your job to move your solution down the sales stages, quantifying how your solution is superior to its alternatives in financial terms, aligning the buying center to get to “yes” and closing the deal at your target price. This requires a laser focus on addressing objections, knowing the decision-making path and being confident in the value of your solution.

Working sequentially through each stage in the sales cycle to close a deal at your price is an example of convergent thinking.



Divergent thinking, on the other hand, is best suited for when you need to convince your customer that a thorny business problem is actually worth addressing or that a business opportunity is worth pursuing. This mode of thinking enables you to collaborate with your customer to frame a vision of the future they *could* achieve...with you as a trusted partner.

Divergent thinking explores possibilities, incorporates key trends and connects the dots between your customer's abilities and the future your customer wants. Building this shared vision takes time and requires active-listening skills in order to follow the customer's train of thought. However, the investment in time pays off when you create a shared vision that causes your customer to embrace change. In essence, divergent thinking is the antidote to "no decision."

Taking it one step further, top performers find ways to incorporate something called prospect theory to add additional "stickiness" to the business vision they have just built with their customer. Why? Prospect theory, also known as risk aversion, proposes that a loss is "felt" twice as intensely as a gain. So by framing an opportunity in terms of prospect theory, the idea of *not* achieving your vision will be viewed as a loss by your champion, who will be driven to collaborate with you to make the vision a reality.

Learning, not teaching

Sellers are natural teachers. They are experts at the persuasive pitch, tuning the value message to each member of the buying center to move the deal forward. Your SAMs are probably most comfortable when explaining the key features of your offerings and how your solution stands out from the competition.

However, most buyers don't look to vendors to educate them. In fact, 74 percent of B2B buyers do most of their research online or by consulting internal experts before engaging with vendors. Buyers' perception of vendors' ability to solve business issues is equally low. Only

23 percent of buyers rank vendors as a preferred resource for solving business problems.²

A much better approach is to practice an outside-in mindset by asking questions to learn from your customer.

Sellers are a whole lot less comfortable assuming the **learner role** and asking questions, especially open-ended questions, to learn from the customer. SAMs are supposed to be experts, right? Asking open-ended questions, especially about an area where the seller does not have a ready answer, can easily come across as being unknowledgeable, and no salesperson wants to "look dumb" in front of the customer.



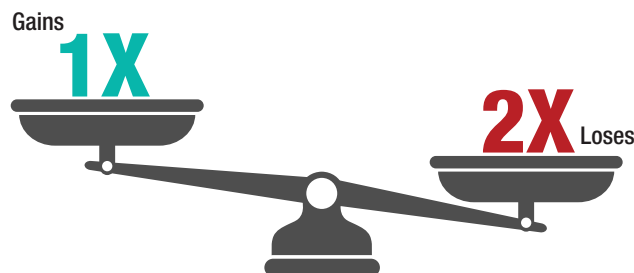
In a review of 50,000 B2B sales calls, tech company Gong.io discovered that sellers who scattered questions throughout the call, to encourage conversation, and who listened more than talked, consistently secured more follow-up meetings and closed more deals than their colleagues.³

The trick is to ask questions to collaborate with your customer to explore a business challenge that you think they have. Begin with an insight or observation, then use open-ended questions to explore how this challenge impacts their business and what it would mean to their performance to solve this issue. Use **divergent thinking** to explore all

Exploring every facet of a problem to identify all contributing factors, areas impacted and means to address the issue is an example of divergent thinking.



Ever wonder why car salespeople start with the luxury model? Because as you eliminate features or move down to a lower model to fit your budget, you perceive each step as a loss and feel each step more intensely than if the salesperson had begun with the economy brand and upsold additional features. This is prospect theory at work.¹



Sample conversation with a manufacturing customer

Begin with an insight:

Supply Chain Management Magazine noted a 15% increase in weather-related supply chain disruptions in the last year.

Use depth-interviewing techniques to learn more:

How have you been impacted by this trend?

What are some examples?

Have you tried to mitigate this risk?

What worked/didn't work? Why?

Who is impacted? How?

Build & test hypotheses on how you might help.



contributing factors and their related business impact. Follow the customer's train of thought, listen more than you talk and note those areas where your company might help. That is how you identify opportunities to explore further.

Buyers appreciate vendors who do their homework to understand their business and bring them insight. Ninety percent of B2B buyers are willing to engage with vendors earlier in their buyer process, especially for complex business problems that have cross-functional impact and are risky for the organization or their own careers.⁴ Remember **prospect theory**: Risks, such as loss of career security, carry outsized impact.

Once you define, propose and close the deal on a solution that solves a core customer challenge, be sure that you define and put in place measurements that prove that you delivered on the promised business improvement. Make your buyer a champion by ensuring they communicate the financial improvement to their leaders. This assures that the next time your buyer identifies a business challenge or opportunity, you

will be the first person they call.

Intelligence Quotient (IQ) vs Curiosity Quotient (CQ)

This last skill brings it all together.

Intelligence (IQ) is a necessary trait for any strategic account manager. Selling is complex, and SAMs have to be able to master large amounts of information and think on their feet to navigate complex buying centers and drive sales efficiency.

Curiosity Quotient (CQ) is the skill that drives sustainable sales excellence. Top performers need a high CQ to build an in-depth understanding of their customer's business, learn from their customer and collaborate with their customer to co-create opportunities to improve their business performance. In a survey of 3,000 employees across a broad range of industries, 92 percent credited people with a high level of curiosity for bringing new ideas into teams and driving organizational performance.⁵ Combining divergent thinking, questioning skills and curiosity reduces "no decision" in your sales funnel and increases customer share of

wallet. Together, these attributes drive profitable growth for both your salesforce and your customers. ■

For more information on how Holden Advisors can help you build sales excellence, contact Alicia Shevetone at ashevetone@holdenadvisors.com.

¹ Kahneman and Tversky, 1979

² Forrester Research, Myth-busting insight, 5/25/2015

³ Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. Brown, The Surprising Power of Questions, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2018

⁴ CSO Insights, 2019 Sales Performance Report

⁵ Francesca Gino, The Business Case for Curiosity, *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 2018.