

# Invigorating Selling Skills with NLP

by *L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.*

## The Vision to Sell

When it comes to the subject of NLP and Selling, we really do not lack for works that utilize the NLP communication and persuasion models. Numerous books have taken on the task of translating NLP processes for selling.

From Labord's work, *Influencing with Integrity* to *Beyond Selling* by Bagley & Reese (1987), we have many books that directly speak to the subject of influencing people. From Lisnek's (1990) work on negotiation, *Winning the Mind Game*, to Bandler and La Valle's (1996) *Persuasion Engineering*, we have other works that address other facets of the selling process. We also have entire works that directly approach sales, O'Connor and Prior (1995) *Successful Selling with NLP*, Sharon Drew Morgan (1997) *Selling with Integrity* (although she forgot to give credit to NLP as she did in her previous book), and Plotkin (1995) *Selling to Humans*.

Apparently lots of folks have caught a vision of using the NLP communication model, as well as other processes for influencing, persuading, pacing a person's model of the world, speaking the language that fits their Meta-Programs, speaking hypnotically to get a person's unconscious to want to buy, etc.

And why not? If we, as neuro-linguistic creatures experience what we do based on the Model of the World that we carry around in our heads, and NLP has various processes for detecting, matching (pacing), and utilizing that Model of the World, then why shouldn't people in sales use more effective strategies for selling? After all, selling only means that we offer a highly valued or needed product or service in exchange for something of equivalent value (like money). And, given the nature of civilization as an inter-dependent community that develops and grows based on fair exchange of good—selling thus becomes an expression of what Korzybski calls time-binding. By selling we can focus on creating and evolving ever-newer forms of expressions rather than waste time on reinventing the wheel in trying to operate in a totally self-independent way. Instead we can specialize, trade ideas, build on each other's inventions, exchange goods, share information, etc.

## Selling Presuppositions

With this vision of selling as a civilized way to offer, bargain, negotiate, and exchange goods (A Mind-Line Reframe), we have a new and positive frame-of-reference for this activity. And, for an activity that has been marred by circus barkers, the stereotypical "used-car salesman," and the loudmouthed TV commercial furniture salesman shouting about his closeout sale that you just have to get to right now for 40, 50 and 80% off, overpromising, pestering people, etc. most people in sales needs a positive frame for what they do. es Models have come and gone in the past few decades. Some of the older books indeed present sales in terms of how to manipulate people by providing information about how to play on a person's emotions in order to get an immediate "emotional" buy. But things have changed in our culture. Buyers have become more sophisticated and discovered that they didn't like many of

the facets of selling—the pressure, tricks, gimmicks, strong-arming.

So a kinder/gentler model eventually evolved, a Dale Carnegie type of presentation, that smoothed things out with a more low-key approach. Sales persons were introduced to some listening and questioning skills. They were taught to first find out a little about what the customer wanted. And yet the presupposition behind the questions remained the same as in the first Pressure Sales Model—the customer needs what you have. The sales model just assumed that. So selling skills simply provide a way for the sales person to get that job done.

These two Pressure Sales Models have, and continue, to work for lots of people. But again, as human consciousness continues to evolve, to become more even more sophisticated or jaded and overloaded with commercialism, telemarketers, etc.; another newer Sales Model has arisen.

The Buyer-Facilitation or Sales Coaching Model has arisen. Plotkin (1995) and Morgan (1997) have presented this paradigm in NLP terms. Kevin Davis (1996) *Getting Into Your Customer's Head* has done this in the general field of selling. This style of selling starts from an entirely different set of assumptions and beliefs.

Davis (1996, p. 15) has described this customer-focused selling approach. The following chart summarizes the key differences between the traditional sales approach and the new approach.

Traditional approach	Customer-focused Selling
Present Fixed solution	Identify buyer's needs
Explain features & benefits	Provide Information on product's uniqueness
Aggressive Sales Pitch	Give buyer time to learn
Overcome objections	Help buyer resolve fears
Close sale & move on	Provide values & future results
Manipulation	Influence

The two NLP books that present this Buyer-Facilitation Model with regard to selling are Plotkin's and Morgan's. In the book, *Selling With Integrity*, Morgan begins by articulating principles or presuppositions of the buying facilitation (Ch. 3). If you didn't know better, you might think she invented it herself, and yet it simply represents basic NLP understandings about communicating and relating structured in the SCORE Model format. And, overall, her six principles that make up the facilitating process for buying involve: "a questioning and listening process that facilitates a buyer's discovery of how best to get his or her needs met." (p. 23).

Undoubtedly these principles will sound very familiar to NLP ears.

## **Selling/ Buying Principles**

"1. You have nothing to sell if there's no one to buy." This elegantly reminds us to not begin with our map for selling, but to first check out the territory. In other words, come into sensory awareness, open your eyes, ears, skin, etc. and look around. Do you see a buyer yet? Don't

hallucinate a buyer in everybody in front of you. Don't assume that. Lots of people even go through what externally might look like some "buying activities," but are just passing the time of day. They're not out to buy. Here we need to check it out and not impose our map onto the other person. We have to first qualify people to see if they have either a need or a want for what we have to offer. To do otherwise sets up the seller for frustration and disillusionment and leaves the buyer feeling manipulated and pressured. Not good.

"2. Relationship comes first, task second." Ah, this sounds like basic NLP. After all, when interacting in communicating and relating with anybody, for any purpose or task (whether education, therapy, law, medicine, parenting, etc.), we first check to see where we stand with the person and where the person stands with us. In other words, we always pace, pace, pace, and then lead. We begin by matching the person's model of the world and with the NLP tools, we can do this physically, emotionally, and conceptually.

In fact, the NLP attitude is that the individual, as a person, matters more than any task or product that we would like to lead that person to purchase. We take this attitude, in fact, because, after all, people tend to not like being treated as numbers or objects. Do you? And this also holds true for just about every field: teaching, psychotherapy, medicine, etc.

"3. The buyer has the answers; the seller has the questions." This correlates to Bandler's often repeated refrain, "People are not broken, they work perfectly fine. Of course, what they do may not be much fun, but they do it again and again methodically and dependably!"

The Buyer Facilitation Approach to selling says to avoid approaching people from the position of a "superior expert" who knows what he or she needs! Instead we recognize and respect the person's internal resources, skills, competencies, uniqueness, etc. And this, in turn, leads us to ask lots of questions (Meta-Model questions, Meta-Program questions, SCORE Model questions) in order to discover the person's Present State and the person's Desired State. Accordingly, we also recognize that the person only has a "problem" if he or she experiences a gap between Present State and Desired State.

"4. Service is the goal; discovery is the outcome; a sale may be the solution." This introduction of the idea of service may seem strange at first. Yet it really speaks about a most resourceful state and meta-state of the sales person. When in selling, we adopt a service attitude in what we have to sell, whether a product or service, then we adopt more of an explorer's position rather than the know-it-all expert who's going to tell someone what they need. Even more recently, Jeffrey Gitomer (1998), author of *The Sales Bible*, has written an entire work about the ultimate importance of first class, memorable customer service in his book with the shocking title, *Customer Satisfaction is Worthless; Customer Loyalty is Priceless*.

This corresponds to idea or frame of abundance in NLP. When we come from the frame that we live in a world of plenty and opportunity, not one of scarcity, then we don't have to make a sale, we don't have to put the pressure on a given person. Rather, we feel freer to explore, to facilitate, and to discover. To do this, we will use lots of Meta-Model like questions. This enables us to engage a person in a discovery of his or her model of the world in order to specify goals, objectives, intentions, etc. And we do this as a service in respect of the person's uniqueness. If the discovery leads us or the person to considering our product or service, then it enriches both parties in a Win/Win way.

“5. People buy [typically] when they can’t fill their own needs.” I changed this from “only” to “typically” because, while most of us will buy when we can't meet our own needs, most of us have also bought things that didn't fulfil our needs and when we just wanted to spend our money. Other reasons and purpose drove us. And this becomes true with a vengeance with those who become compulsive buyers.

Yet typically, we only buy when we can’t take care of some need. This explains some of the negative feelings that we as sales persons may encounter when selling. Often people show up to examine products or services, make decisions about what to buy, etc., only when they have felt the move away from motivation that they need to buy because they cannot take care of something on their own. The tires are bald and they have to replace them. The transmission has locked up. The employees are grumpy from all the stress they face and need training in stress management skills.

Times arise when we have to connect with others in order to get more information, new skills, products, etc. People (and companies) typically only turn to external resources after they have exhausted their internal resources.

“6. People buy using their own buying patterns, not a seller’s selling patterns.” This highlights the difference between some of the old sales models and the new ones. Under the old Put the Pressure On approach, sales people tended to assume that people buy, or ought to buy, according to how they sell. Yet to do this guarantees frustration with people.

The NLP approach recognizes that everybody moves through the world with their individual mental map of the world and therefore people use their own strategies for buying. They have strategies for feeling motivated, for gathering information, for making decisions, for acting on their decision, for relating to a sales person, etc.

So we begin with the person’s buying patterns rather than blindly using our preferred way to sell. Since people operate on the world from out of their own model of the world—their own values, beliefs, frames of references, interests, understandings, etc., they will inevitably and inescapably use their own strategies, Meta–Programs (perceptual filters), learning histories, and Meta–States. When we attempt to impose our selling strategy on a prospective buyer for how to think, feel, respond etc., this only makes the process harder. It only makes “resistance” more possible. It only blinds us to the person’s processes.

In addition to these principles of selling, Plotkin (1995) added several others. Among them he included:

“Customers are human beings who should not be categorized.

Value and respect each person’s beliefs, values, experiences, dreams, hopes, and boundaries.

Dialogues involve questions and answers, give and take, and, ultimately, synergy.

Meetings involve feelings as well as facts.” (p. 15)

## **Selling Skills**

With selling skills we come to some of the key values of NLP for selling excellence. If we can count on buyers to use their own unique buy strategy, then the more we know about these structures the more this will assist us in improving our skills. So first we will want to learn how to detect, recognize, and then utilize the buyer's strategies for feeling motivated, gathering information, making decisions, making a commitment, relating, etc. The quicker we do, the faster we can get busy honing our skills to meet him or her at that person's model of the world.

Nor does it end there. Skills for effective selling also involve the self skills necessary for our own selling strategy. This will involve skills for powerful state management, facilitating another person's strategies, communication skills, questioning skills, rapport skills, etc.

Consider state-management skills. In order to get into just the right state for selling, a person needs to have a way to frame and reframe the very activity. They need to give it a positive meaning so that it allows them to operate in a way congruent with their values, beliefs, and identity. To think of selling as manipulation, unethical playing on people's emotions, stretching the truth just to make a sell, strong-arming someone into putting down money for what they don't need, etc. will obviously not put most people in a very resourceful state. We need to do better than that. We need to reframe the meanings we give to selling.

Masterful selling also involves skills in Meta-States and meta-stating. After all, in the Buyer-Facilitation Paradigm of Selling, the seller will need to adopt a meta-level position to the buyer from the very beginning. As a salesperson, we will first want to find out why the person wants to buy, what values, needs, and outcomes would be served by the product, how the person wants to gather information, make a decision, etc.

When we do this, we invite and coach the buyer to move into content. We ask questions that seem harmless about the content of the person's wants, needs, criteria, use, and desires. And getting the buyer into content allows us to move to process or structure. It enables the sales person to notice the form of the buyer's processes. It allows us to notice their higher frames about values, criteria, identity, etc. So at first the seller works with structure and we do that by using questions to facilitate the buyer to become aware of his or her needs, wants, current situation, desired outcome, etc. At this stage in the process, we sell by acknowledging the person, seeking to understand, and asking good meta-questions: Where are you now? How did you get here? What's missing? Where do you want to go?

Here also Robert Dilts' SCORE Model becomes very powerful for the selling-buying process. Morgan utilizes the SCORE Model questions in her book, although she doesn't credit Dilts or even call it the SCORE Model. Yet these meta-level questions facilitate the buyer in moving from Present State awareness to Desired State awareness.

“What do you plan to do with your current resources? What systemic issues do you need to satisfy? What criteria will you use in choosing an external solution? How will you know when to apply the changes? At what point will you see external resources? What would you consider a solution? What issues will you have to address when introducing an external solution? How would you know if we meet your criteria for supplying the external solution?” (p. 88).

The acronym SCORE stand for:

Symptoms of present state  
Causes that have created or contributed to the problem  
Outcome desired  
Resources needed to bridge over to the  
desired outcome, and  
Effects or consequences of applying the  
resource to the present state.

This strategic way of moving through the process from present state to desired state has been called the buying decision funnel since the 1980's. Using it keeps a seller at a level where he or she can do meta-thinking about the whole process. And doing this will enable us to stay oriented and focused.

As we begin at a meta-level to the buyer's content, we focus on facilitating the buyer's process of discovery. Here the emphasis becomes relationship, rapport, and discovery. Here we make ourselves a friend to the buyer's discovery and decision making process. Once the buyer discovers that he or she truly has a need ("There is no sale without a buyer"), exhausts all of his or her internal resources ("People only buy when they can't fill their own needs"), enters into a "We Space" (Morgan) or sense of rapport with us ("Put relationship before task," "People will buy from people they trust and like"), and feels supported in the buying processes ("People buy using their buying style as they discover their answers"), then we can come down from the meta-level. At that point, we can begin to sell our product or service. As a seller, we can move from the meta-position to the primary level of content. "Here's what I've got that can meet your need!" This becomes the time to lead, to present the content of your product or service.

So we begin by creating a collaborative relationship by pacing, questioning, understanding. This sets up a win-win interaction. As a seller, we begin by taking charge of the structure and direction of the conversation. In doing this, we let the buyer stay in control of the content. By using searching and exploratory questions that assist the buyer in becoming aware of what he or she needs or wants, the conversation becomes well formed in that it truly assists the buyer in understanding and making informed decisions.

## **Invigorating Your Selling Excellence**

Given that NLP models the structure of excellence, and explicates the nature of such magic, it only makes sense that the models, skills, and especially the attitude or spirit of NLP can powerfully enrich the human experience of selling. Since selling inherently involves information gathering, communication of values and benefits, motivation, decision making, state induction, state management, state amplification, state utilization, etc., we indeed have multiple avenues for engineering selling excellence. So selling from the NLP model will invigorate this task in many ways: utilizing the NLP presuppositions about human functioning, communicating, and relating, applying the NLP principles about the structure of the magic of words and symbols, and working at meta-levels to the buyer's processes.

## **References**

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(Selling to local SMBs is very different from selling to Fortune 100 executives, for example.) However, some skills are valuable in any situation. Here are 17 sales skills that every rep needs, as well as tips for helping your teams develop them. Your sales enablement strategy should also include a documented social selling plan that reps can reference as they learn.

6. Storytelling. You might think of storytelling as a component of good communication. Professional Selling Skills® helps sellers effectively discover and address customer needs, improving in-the-moment interactions with buyers. Developing the selling skills that have benefitted millions of sales professionals around the world, Professional Selling Skills® builds a seller's ability to lead mutually beneficial sales conversations with any customer, any time. Professional Selling Skills® is a research-based sales training program designed for every seller – regardless of position or tenure. The professional selling skill of Rapport is one of the most important selling skills. Sharon Drew Morgan in her book "Sales on the Line" writes, "There are three ways to make a sale: Rapport, Rapport and Rapport." I sincerely hope these suggestions on the professional selling skills you need to develop help you further Your Sales Success. Selling is a multifaceted and demanding line of work. In addition to being able to sell, salespeople must have excellent communication, interpersonal, and customer service skills. The list of associated skills is lengthy, but the good news is that so are the circumstances under which you can apply those skills.

Types of Sales Skills. Sales skills fall into several broad but partially overlapping categories. Illustration by Catherine Song. © The Balance, 2018. Position-Based Sales Skills.