

# PREMEDITATED SELLING

Tools for Developing the **Right** Strategy  
for **Every** Opportunity



**Steve Gielda** and **Kevin Jones**

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# Preface

We have been working with sales leaders in Fortune 1000 companies for more than 15 years. During that time alone there have been many books written on strategic account management and many training programs developed with the intent of helping salespeople become more effective when working with their top accounts. A few years ago, we were working with the vice president of sales at a large Fortune 1000 company. This person told us that he needed a way to help make the company's strategic account management process more actionable. He wanted a way to help his team think and act strategically. He wanted his team to be more proactive in analyzing the multiple opportunities within a single account and be smarter in the way they put together a strategy to win the business. This VP needed his team to be able to use the strategic account management process in a way that would help them determine where they should invest time, who they should invest time with, and which strategy would best demonstrate the company's ability to help their customers achieve their business outcomes.

We assumed that since this company had already implemented a reputable strategic account management process, they had every tool they needed to be successful. Unfortunately, we were wrong. Instead the

“process” being implemented inside this company was seen by the sales force as nothing more than forms, unnecessary paperwork. And while these forms were excellent repositories of information, they did little to change the way the salespeople approached their business.

The sad reality is that this company, and its VP of sales, aren’t alone. In fact, there are many companies, of all shapes and sizes, implementing strategic account management processes without achieving the intended results. Our experiences with many other Fortune 1000 companies have revealed that many salespeople are *not* using their strategic account management process to think and act more strategically when working with their top accounts. Instead, they are merely filling out forms believing they are being strategic in their approach, and unfortunately, their sales managers are encouraging that behavior.

Our experiences with top-performing salespeople show that they know how to think and act strategically. Top performers are more intentional in their strategic account planning and meditate on their approach before acting. Top performers don’t just collect data and fill out forms, they know what data to collect and what actions need to be taken to successfully leverage that data. This book has been written to help you become more actionable, intentional—more “premeditated”—in the way you approach every sales opportunity.

This book provides you with a set of tools to help you organize critical opportunity data and ideas for how to use that data in developing an opportunity strategy. We broke this book into five segments that are fundamental to any sales strategy. Within these segments we identify the types of information any seller needs, provide tools to organize the information, and ideas to analyze the information and develop a path forward. Each of the segments, although independent of each other, work together to provide a complete plan for a sales opportunity. These tools work. We've used them and our customers have used them. Approaching any sales opportunity without them is like taking a long drive without a map.

While this book is intended for salespeople and sales leaders, those individuals aren't the only ones who can benefit from the application of the concepts. Knowing how to develop the right strategy for every opportunity isn't going to just help a salesperson win more deals, it is going to help the business manage critical functions that rely so heavily on accurate sales forecasting. Operations will have a better sense for planning, finance will have a better handle on future cash flow. Deals that inexplicably move from "won" to "lost" don't just impact the salesperson's commission—they impact the way businesses run.

**"There are plenty of books on sales strategy but very few that are as useful as this one. I greatly respect Steve and Kevin's contribution."**

NEIL RACKHAM  
Executive Professor of Professional Selling  
University of Cincinnati  
Author of the classic *SPIN Selling*

# Chapter 1

## Thinking and Acting Strategically

A darkened plane at 35,000 feet—a late-night flight home from a tough client meeting—is a great place to reflect. And on this flight, there is a lot to reflect on. A deal had been lost. This opportunity had seemed a sure thing, a sure thing that was now dead. Why? A mental post-mortem of any sales opportunity is—or ought to be—inevitable, especially for an opportunity that slid inexplicably from the “won” to the “lost” column. Questions of what could have been will haunt your thoughts. What was missed? Was the pricing model off? Did a key influencer get overlooked? Was my competitor’s solution really better than mine? Ultimately, salespeople on the losing side are desperate to know why their opportunity went south.



## And You Think You Lost Because of *Price*?

Although much has changed in the field of sales during the two decades we've been in this business, one element that hasn't changed is a salesperson's readiness to blame a lost opportunity on price. In our years as sales performance consultants, we have asked salespeople the following question countless times: "Why do you think the customer selected your competitor?" By far, the number one response to this question is "price." It may be phrased in a number of ways, but the crux of the message is, "I couldn't create enough value for my customer to select my solution over other less costly alternatives." Ironically, although price is the reason sellers most commonly give for losing a deal, it is seldom the reason customers give for choosing the competition.

Just recently, we were working with the sales team of a large software company. Part of our project was to evaluate lost opportunities in hopes of finding out what was going wrong. Salespeople inside this organization clearly felt that the majority of deals lost were due to non-competitive pricing. In fact, in the evaluation of these lost opportunities, salespeople blamed price for the loss in more than 75 percent of the cases. In post-mortem interviews with clients, however, we heard a different story. Not only was price *not* the number one reason customers chose an alternative solution; price didn't even make their top three. Instead, customers provided other reasons for selecting alternative solutions, such as not being comfortable with the company's level

of post-sales support, the lack of efficacy data for the product, the ease of use or training curve of implementing the new product, and so forth. The fact that price was rarely mentioned as a deciding factor came as a surprise to the salespeople who had worked with these customers. How could they have overlooked the real reasons their customers went with the competition?

The sad truth for our client—and for many sellers on the losing side—is that there was little understanding of the buying process the client was going to use, who was going to be involved in the process, and which factors were going to be important when evaluating alternatives. What do you do in the absence of good information? You make assumptions about what's important and why. Sellers will approach clients by emphasizing product strengths and attributes that they believe are important. They will anticipate issues and challenges that have presented themselves before. Sometimes a salesperson will get lucky in this method and hit his mark, but more often, he will not. Acting on assumptions, letting history solely influence your approach—in short, depending on luck, makes for a pretty poor sales strategy.

## **Getting Ahead of the Curve**

With enough analysis, and the right customer resource, any salesperson can uncover the real reason an opportunity went south. Unfortunately, having this knowledge doesn't change anything—the deal is

done, and you came out on the losing end. But wouldn't it be nice to have known the reasons you lost before the deal was actually over? If you had known you were in a losing position, what would you have done differently? The process we provide in this book, when used appropriately, can minimize the need for lost opportunity post-mortems by helping you win more and lose less. It will help you understand where you stand in the eyes of the customer, by highlighting your strengths and revealing your vulnerabilities. Gaining this insight allows you to act before it's too late. And while the information you procure may prompt you to take a variety of actions, from modifying call points, to bringing in additional resources, or simply walking away, it is this ability to act on good information that will alter your outcomes.

### **One Word—Strategy**

During the 2000 United States presidential election, Will Ferrell performed exceptional impersonations of George W. Bush on *Saturday Night Live*. During one such performance, Ferrell's character was asked to sum up his presidential campaign in one word. Ferrell's response was as memorable as it was brief—"strategy." As laughable as the word is, it may just be the best summation of the process many salespeople employ when approaching major sales opportunities. Many salespeople spend time gathering account information; they then put that information into a company-mandated account strategy "form," and then they sit through an agonizing meeting that management

often calls an “account planning session.” Unfortunately, these meetings are more like an interrogation of the sales rep so that the manager can be brought up to speed on the account. There is very little value created by this process—this is strategy.

## What Does “Premeditated Selling” Mean?

We struggled in coming up with a title for this book that would reflect the value of the solution we present inside its covers. We asked ourselves countless times, “What is it that we hope people will do differently after reading this book?” The answer is simple. We want people to give more forethought to how they manage a sales opportunity. We want them to develop more proactive strategies that will help create opportunities for success. There were a lot of terms we could have used in our title, but we settled on *premeditated* because of its direct meaning—“to meditate, consider, or plan beforehand.” Putting aside the term’s association with well-planned crime, the definition was an exact description of what top salespeople do when working on an important sales opportunity—they meditate, consider, and plan beforehand.

## A Premeditated Selling Process

This book will show you how to develop a sales plan for each unique opportunity inside your accounts, using a five-step process that has proven itself successful. This process evaluates a sales opportunity

from various angles, providing you insight into your situation and ideas for moving forward. Each step provides tools to help you analyze an opportunity and gather the information you need to make your next move. The five steps of the Premeditated Selling Process are:

1. Understanding the buying factors
2. Leveraging the key players
3. Optimizing the buying environment
4. Influencing the competitive landscape
5. Quantifying the value of your solution

**Step 1—Understanding the buying factors:** the analysis of the buying process your customer will use for making their purchasing decision. By understanding how your customer will actually make their decision, you can modify the speed with which you act, the resources you use, and the strengths you present. We'll explore this topic a bit further in chapter 2. We'll challenge you to think about the answers to questions like:

- How has the buying process for similar products gone in the past? Is it a consistent process?
- What is the sense of urgency driving your customer's buying process?
- Is there a need for consensus among the decision makers or is diversity of opinion okay?

In today's market we must be able to answer these questions plus many others regarding our customers' buying factors.

**Step 2—Leveraging the key players:** the analysis of the individuals involved in the buying process—their influence and their perceptions of potential solution providers. By gaining insight into your advocates and adversaries, including who they support and why, you can develop a plan of action to capitalize on your positive relationships while minimizing potential threats. In chapter 3, we're going to take a deeper dive and provide you with a tool that will help you better analyze the key influencers in every sales opportunity. We'll challenge you to think about the answers to questions like:

- What's been said or done to make you believe your advocate is really your advocate?
- Is there a way to leverage your advocates to neutralize your adversaries? If so, how can that be done?
- Who are your competitors' advocates? Are they the same as yours?

We'll help you better analyze all the key influencers involved in your opportunity so you can develop a smart strategy to leverage advocate support.

**Step 3—Optimizing the buying environment:** the analysis of the trends in your customer's industry and how they affect your customer,

specifically the executives inside your customer's organization. By evaluating what's happening in your customer's world, you can anticipate unique challenges and prepare yourself to address needs that your competitors may not have considered. In chapter 4, we'll introduce you to a model that will help you think about how a single trend in the market impacts the customers in your territory; and more importantly, how it changes the way your customer makes purchasing decisions. We're going to challenge you to think about:

- Which market trends are having the greatest impact on this customer? How will they affect your sales efforts?
- What new initiatives has this account taken to leverage or combat these new trends?
- What responsibility do these stakeholders have to help their company take advantage of or combat the trends in the market?

This chapter contains two case studies that reveal best practices for reacting to your customer's buying environment, and show you how to avoid the common traps salespeople often fall into in this part of the sales planning process.

**Step 4—Influencing the competitive landscape:** the analysis of your competitive position through an understanding of what selection criteria your customer will use and how they compare you to the competitive alternatives. By thinking broadly about the criteria a customer

will use to make a decision and knowing your strengths and weaknesses against those criteria, you can develop a strategy to capitalize on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses. In chapter 5, we're going to challenge you to reassess your understanding of your customer's decision criteria. You'll be prompted to consider questions such as:

- Who have you spoken with to confirm the customer's selection criteria?
- If there are multiple decision makers, do they all agree on the same selection criteria? Whose selection criteria matters most and why?
- How does the customer perceive your ability to meet their needs?

**Step 5—Quantifying the value of your solution:** the analysis of your solution's "value," which enables you to position your solution effectively. By using the classic value equation, you can develop a strategy to build economic value, either through actual or conceptual benefits. In chapter 6, we're going to stretch your thinking around how your customer measures value. We're going to push you to think about:

- What are the most important business outcomes your customer will receive by implementing your solution?
- How will your customer measure your solution's value?
- What metrics have you chosen to measure the value impact of the outcomes?



All too often salespeople underestimate the importance of quantifying the value of their solution. They assume the customer can make the connection between their solution and the impact it can have on the customer's metrics. Unfortunately, these kinds of assumptions can make the difference between winning or losing the opportunity.

Chapter 7 explores the importance of aligning your pipeline or funnel management system to your Premeditated Selling Process. Too often steps are skipped accidentally or maybe even on purpose. Establishing strategic milestones along the way will help both you and your manager know what's happening in the account and which critical next steps need to be taken to move the sales process forward in your favor.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to sales managers. We know that managing a sales team in today's market isn't easy. You are being pulled in many different directions. You're asked to help close this deal, help put out this fire, and to be sure you have your weekly or monthly reports in on time. The list of things you must do never seems to end. So how in the world do you have time to help your team to think and act more strategically with their top opportunities? In this chapter, we're going to provide you with a simple six-step strategic coaching process that will help you guide your sales reps in developing initial strategic opportunity plans. We've included a list of strategic coaching questions that every manager should be asking their sales reps. We hope this

chapter provides you with the additional tools needed to help your team win more deals.

## Getting Started

Common sense should tell you that you need to develop a strategy before you begin to implement it. If not, it would be like the proverbial “cart before the horse.” But developing a strategy sounds akin to planning, which many people equate to paperwork, and we don’t know many salespeople who even remotely like paperwork. Filling out forms and reports can feel like a waste of time; and indeed, it does keep sellers from really crucial sales activities, like actually talking to customers. Is it any wonder so many salespeople shrink from formal planning processes?

It is our intention to help you think differently about strategic opportunity planning. Ease of use and immediate relevancy should characterize all sales planning efforts. With this in mind, we have designed tools to walk you through the five steps of the Premeditated Selling Process. These tools provide a framework for consistency, so that sales planning processes are repeatable and information can be shared across an enterprise in a commonly understood way. As you complete these tools, they may reveal gaps in your knowledge about your accounts, which are then up to you to fill. A well-designed tool can enable you to evaluate a

situation and organize your information. But it's what you do with the information that matters.

The premeditated approach to selling that we present in this book won't win you every opportunity that comes your way. But it'll help you win more of them. And if you lose, you are equipped to uncover the real reasons why—information that can empower you to win the next one around—instead of defaulting to the infamous excuse of pricing.