

INTENT- A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF SUCCESS IN SELLING

by Jerry Acuff and Wally Wood

In selling, intent is everything. By intent, I mean purpose. Your intent is the state of your mind at the time of an action—having your mind focused on a specific objective. The related idea of intention is your plan to do something or the course of action you plan to follow. If intent is your state of mind at the time you carry out the action, what is your intent when you interact with a customer or prospect? That question's answer has a far-reaching impact on sales success and may be as important as any other facet of selling.

Solana Beach consultant and author Brian Tracy says, "The first thing you should feed your mind is purpose. Customers respond to the energy and enthusiasm that are created by a sense of purpose."

If your intent (or purpose) is merely to sell something, you are me-focused. If your intent is to teach or to learn what customers want and help them get it, you are other-focused. When your selling is other-focused, your actions are driven by the need to understand the situation before you can prescribe or recommend a solution (your product or service). When you are other-focused, you more carefully prepare for your interactions with customers and you routinely ask questions about them, their business, their situation, their desired outcomes, their internal challenges to a potential change, etc. before you start suggesting why and how your product or service might be a fit for their situation.

The right intent opens minds; the wrong intent closes them. And very few buyers buy when their mind is closed. We need to be exceptional at opening minds and your intent will do that more effectively than anything else. If you

approach a situation with the wrong intent, it is usually immediately apparent. People are so accustomed to salespeople being "me-focused," their radar is always up. They are poised to shut down at the first sign of a hard sell or the awareness that they are in the presence of a "typical" sales person. When customers sense your intent is right and that your purpose is focused on them and not on you, they listen, ask questions, and appreciate your approach to them and their situation. They are far more apt to engage in a conversation with you and have a meaningful dialogue, which leads almost directly to more sales.

Great salesperson act (consciously or unconsciously) in accord with the **Eight Laws of Sales Intent** every day. The laws of sales intent are nothing more than a comprehensive set of beliefs. One of the most powerful concepts to comprehend and never forget is that beliefs drive behavior and if you possess these beliefs and they drive your daily actions you will be most certainly be on the road to sales greatness. Here they are:

1. Have empathy and see things from the customer's point of view.
2. Focus on them and not on me.
3. Find people who truly want what I am offering.
4. Be seen as different, unique, and the consummate professional.
5. Master the knowledge needed to be seen as an expert in my business.
6. Prepare for every call, not because it is important to me but because it is important to my customers.

7. Use words and find language that will resonate with and be compelling to my customers.
8. Have an internal locus of control because I understand I am responsible for the outcomes of my actions.

Let's consider the implications of each.

I intend to have empathy

I began to understand the need to be other-focused when I was a district sales manager. I learned quickly that success means having the ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings or difficulties. Salespeople who have empathy try to put themselves in the customer's moccasins. They want and need to understand the customer's problems, challenges, and stresses from the inside if possible. Research on interpersonal relationships indicates that empathy is one of the most important requirements for building positive, constructive relationships, both personal and business.

One way to see the world from the customer's perspective is to spend time with them observing how their operation works. As a manager, I required each of my sales representatives to "work" in a customer's office at least a half a day each quarter. We would ask customers (usually ones we didn't know so well) if we could spend time as a volunteer. We told them it was a requirement for the reps' learning and development (which it was) and that the reps would be happy to do whatever was asked. Our objective was to see what life was like on the other side of the desk. Our sales people answered the phone, did filing, cleaned out closets, and, in one office, spent a half a day installing toilet paper holders.

The results were amazing. My sales people saw that the 10-15 minutes they spent in that office on a typical call was just a snapshot in time. It may have been the most important part of their day but it was far less important to the customers. Reps learned that everyone has a

difficult job and everybody is important. In almost every case we improved our relationship with that office. What our people learned about their customers and their point of view was invaluable. I am convinced that this policy that lead to us understanding the customers point of view played an important role in our being one of the top districts in the country every year for eight consecutive years.

I intend to focus on them not me

Before great salespeople pick up a phone or walk into an office, their intention is always to focus on their customers' best interests.

Salespeople (or their marketing departments) often tend to pre-determine that prospects may be good candidates for their products; even cold calls are not random. Too often, however, when reps assume that prospects need what they are selling, they do not probe effectively for real problems or concerns. They just offer up what they have got without ever trying to learn if there is a fit. They "present" more than they converse, and this is far from focusing on "them."

If you tell customers what they need without trying to understand their situation, it's the throw-it-against-the-wall-and-see-if-it-sticks sales process. Sometimes salespeople are so caught up in their own wants and needs they are oblivious to the customer's.

I intend to find people who truly want what I am offering

This seems blindingly obvious. Why waste your time (or theirs) on people who don't want what you sell? Organizations and salespeople work hard to identify the most likely prospective customers. New software and online services help smaller companies find sales leads. Online social networking services like LinkedIn.com, Jigsaw.com, and Spoke.com can help identify contacts through mutual acquaintances.

While these tools can be useful, the problem remains: You do not know if people truly want what you're selling until you talk with them.

They may not want what you are selling, although from the outside they seem to be likely prospects. They may want what you're selling, but not strongly enough to make a decision now or to take the time to listen to your proposal. They may want it, but it's the end of the budget period or the CEO has just instituted a cost-cutting program or their credit cards are maxed out. They may also need it and not realize it, which is where you can help.

I intend to be seen as the consummate professional

In a perfect world, customers see great salespeople as unique resources, so the question is: How unique—and valuable—do you want to be in the minds of your customers?

It is easy to be like everybody in selling. Just do what most other sales people do. Your intent will be clear and you will sell to the relatively small percentage of likely prospects who can be persuaded easily.

If you want to be seen as different, however, you have to actually be different. You have to believe that the less you care about the sale, the more you sell. Your intent is (usually) not to make an immediate sale, but to learn about their situation and see if there is a fit between their situation and your product or service. Your intent is also to begin the process of creating a winning relationship with this company, prospect, or client. Your objective is not a sales call but a sales conversation, and ultimately the sale if you deserve it. Only after you learn what your prospects are trying to accomplish, should the sales process turn to your hypothesis or to the premise you think might make sense for this situation.

I intend to master the knowledge to be seen as different

My experience has shown that those salespeople who take the time to master the knowledge necessary to be seen as an expert in their field are seen as exceptional. Therefore, whether

customers fully agree or not with any given point, they still view the salesperson as consultative, credible, and trusted. When you master your entire job's essential knowledge, you are most capable in front of customers because the knowledge builds the confidence you need to be great at selling.

Many companies (and salespeople) define "knowledge" only as information about their own products and applications or services, but in reality it includes much more. In addition to basic product and service knowledge, you also need comprehensive command of your competition or competing premise/hypothesis, your customers and their issues and challenges, and yourself and how your communication style and personality are likely to affect other people.

Good information is the cost of entry. You must know how your product's features and benefits apply in all situations and to the prospect's needs. You should also know the challenges the customer faces, which allows you to think of your offering on a big- picture scale. When you are able to think "big picture" versus "narrow situation" you will also be able to communicate on many levels of the business.

I intend to prepare for every call

Before every call, ask yourself: Why am I calling on this customer? You want a planned conversation to sell more to customers who want what you have—because it's important to them.

Begin your preparation for this interaction by silently stating your purpose. Say to yourself, "I am going in there to diagnose, not prescribe. I am going to have a conversation. I'm not going in there to make a sale although that may happen. I am going to find out what this customer wants and to engender thinking."

Make notes and write the down questions that will help you uncover the information you need to determine if there is a fit between the customer's wants and your product. If there is a

fit then your solution is as important as, or more important to them than it is to you.

If you truly have a reasonable value premise, you can probably find a place for your product with many more potential customers by simply changing your intent. These ideas do not work if you have a lousy product because there will be a profound disconnect between who you are, what you say, and the product you sell. You must have a product with a logical value proposition or some true uniqueness. If it does, you can find people who want it—if you focus on them and not on you.

I intend to find language that will resonate

Your ability to facilitate the conversation, advance your ideas, or sell a product or service is directly related to how well you stimulate thinking in the other person. To do so, your intent should be to use words and language that resonate with your prospects and customers. More often than not the words we choose inadvertently create a high pressure environment. Getting prospects to buy is far easier when we find words that create low pressure environments.

Sometimes salespeople will have great meetings and leave wondering why the message didn't resonate. Remember, prospects very often come with a negative bias toward salespeople. One reason they don't buy is because the salesperson's language does not resonate. The words the salesperson uses sounds like traditional sales speak and that kind of language says that they are trying to sell them something they don't need...or don't need right now...or don't need enough to buy at the price.

In your preparation, you want to think about using words and stories that get your clients to think differently about you and your product. Try using soft words rather than hard words. Say things like "you might want to think about..." rather than "you should."

Or say, "Does this makes sense to you?" rather than "Isn't this exactly what you are looking for?" These are examples of words that create low pressure environments.

Customers need us to find words that resonate, that create a low pressure environment and bring our ideas to life. Customers do not usually respond to superlatives yet sales people love to use them. Customers respond to language that sounds unbiased, authentic and clearly demonstrates an understanding of their point of view. The more we sound like we are trying to sell them the more likely they are to close their mind. If we do not bring our ideas to life with words that resonate, customers may never be able to verify our hypothesis, no matter how solid it is.

I intend to have an internal locus of control

People with an internal locus of control see themselves as responsible for what happens as a result of their actions; they tend to believe that they, not the fates or company politics or other people, control their destiny. People with an external locus of control see their environment or situation as more important in what happens to them than what they do or don't do.

Research by Gerrard Macintosh concluded that "people with higher self esteem, an internal locus of control and greater empathy would be more likely to have a more relational time perspective, and therefore, be more likely to set goals and engage in behaviors that will foster long-term relationships."

By "relational time perspective" Macintosh means that some salespeople set short-term goals (which influences behavior) while others set long-term goals. People who have a longer time perspective see near-term goals as "building blocks" for longer-term goals. This is significant because salespeople with a short-term orientation tend to be more aggressive in persuasion and negotiation and be more inclined to try to close a sale on the first call. Salespeople with a longer time perspective tend to consider

the past and future, says Macintosh, "and use a more cooperative integrative/problem-solving approach to selling." And the good news is that research has found a more relational selling behavior increases both relationship quality and customer commitment to the firm.

Having an internal locus of control makes certain that we take our own personal development seriously, our commitment to customers seriously and our commitment to excellence seriously. If our intent is to have an internal locus of control we know "if it's to be it's up to me."

No one can or should tell you what to believe. If it is true that our beliefs drive our behavior then having a keen awareness of what we believe about selling is crucial to our ultimate success. That is why intent is everything. Our intent when we interact with customers will more often than not determine whether we are exceptional or mediocre. The really important question for you is what do you believe? What is your intent or purpose when you interact with customers? These eight laws of sales intent may help you think about and help you develop your own philosophy or belief system (intent) about your selling efforts. Few things will be as important to you and your customers as your own clarity about **your** sales intent.

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