People thirst for new ideas; and in the absence of ideas, they will crawl through the desert towards a mirage. When they discover there is no water, they will drink the sand. The last decade has produced a business and economic environment such that has not been seen since the economic depression of the 1930s. We have been in a business desert that made each of us question strategy, tactics and all things sales, as part of our frantic search for a miracle game-changer.

Enter the Sales Executive Council’s (SEC) “Challenger” sales model – the much written, talked and blogged about “new thought” in sales. SEC’s concept of the Challenger sales approach was born from antidotal research among many of its members, and has been highlighted in Harvard Business Review, written about in books, and has generated a great deal of hype.

The Challenger at a Glance

For those who may not be familiar with the Challenger sales model, its high profile entry into the sales world probably has more to do with its drastic departure from customary thinking about the sales role than any documented ROI associated with it. It promotes that all sales professionals should assume the aggressive role of Challenger with all customers and prospects. The “Challenger” role was deemed more successful than that of “Hard Worker,” “Relationship Builder,” “Lone Wolf” and “Reactive Problem Solver” roles defined as part of SEC’s research. Unfortunately, a “Sales Consultant” role was not considered in the analysis, which would have changed the findings considerably.

The Challenger places the onus on the sales professional to engage the customer/prospect with an in-depth knowledge of their company/industry and its challenges and opportunities that is beyond what they or anyone in the customer organization already possesses, AND to come armed with an entirely new way of looking at their situation. The goal is not to help a customer solve his/her problem, but to provide a completely new solution to a problem the customer does not yet know they have – and do so without the customer’s input.

A Flawed Relationship Model

A fundamental departure of the Challenger sales model is that it does not recognize the nuclear role of the sales professional-customer relationship and collaboration as key drivers of a successful sales process. This is evident in its violation a well-proven model of interdependent relationships. Interdependent relationships fall into one of two categories: chosen and non-chosen. Chosen relationships function better with far fewer problems than non-chosen relationships. Business relationships are a type of chosen relationship. Think about these types of relationships and their corresponding choice level:

- Friend—Friend (choice)
- Customer—Sales Professional (choice)
- Husband—Wife (initially choice)
- Parent—Child (not a choice)
- Teacher—Student (not much of a choice)
- Boss—Employee (some choice)

According to Dr. Ron Hunninghake from the Riordan Clinic, true relationships are freely chosen over time and the number of problems within these freely-chosen relationships is dramatically less than non-chosen relationships.

In his book, Control Theory, Psychiatrist William Glasser described the concept of external control and its impact on the health of relationships. Healthy relationships are built upon the freedom of choice. Unhealthy relationships are built on the assumption of external control. External Control is the assumption that an individual somehow deserves or needs to control those with whom they are in an important relationship. According to Glasser, external control violates our need to be free, creating a relationship dynamic something like this:
As we start down the Challenger path, we must question whether or not the business relationship could be mutually synergistic and nourishing to both parties. Long term, will customers really want to spend time with Challenger-type individuals? A Challenger sales professional who leads off the sales process with disruptive ideas or “insight” without an established relationship runs a huge risk of alienating the customer and forever losing the credibility to leverage his/her insight.

The sales-customer relationship is a contract between the two in the sense that it is freely entered into by both parties for the benefit of both parties. According to the Corporate Executive Board, “Challengers strive to build constructive tension, while Relationship Builders avoid at all costs.” This “constructive tension” may inadvertently put the customer in a subordinate position.

The Challenger sales professional is described as one who “always has a different view of the world,” “understands the customer’s business,” “loves to debate” and “pushes the customer.” Is this a feasible foundation upon which to build and sustain a productive long-term relationship with customers – especially when there is no existing TRUST, CREDITABILITY or RAPPORT in the relationship?

According to Glasser relationships are built on “seven caring habits” that are essential to healthy relationships: listening, encouraging, trusting, supporting, respecting, accepting and willingness to negotiate disagreements.

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<th>Glasser’s “Seven Caring Habits”</th>
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<td>Listening</td>
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A customer-business advisor relationship has to embody these principles both at the individual level as well as the organization level. We are not suggesting that just having a relationship is all that is needed to create value and drive sales success, but it is critical to any long-term synergistic relationship. Business advisors understand how to create collaboration both within their own organization and the customer organization. Consider the long-recognized “seagull principle” in which outside consultants come in with no previous exposure, descend down on organizations dropping new insights on inventory, production, market strategy, pricing strategy and on and on, make the sale and exit just as promptly. Today this level of “expertise” is flatly rejected by most organizations, as are the associated sales attempts.

External control psychology is based on the flawed notion that having control does not require one to listen. External control leads to false empowerment; but our human desire for freedom is too great for this dynamic to work in a long-term healthy relationship. What Challenger does not consider is that most customers expect their most trusted partners to have a mutual respect for their organization. This authentic partnership between organizations creates more long and short-term value.

**High Risk**

The notion that the Challenger sales professional has more knowledge than his/her customer is both illogical and potentially insulting to customers. While the Challenger model cautions against the negative aspects of control and confrontation in customer relationships, it does not take into consideration how to build a relationship in advance of implementing the model. It assumes the representative has relationship equity at the outset, thereby excluding the engagement process for new sales. If you have no relationship equity, any confrontational or control qualities that you contribute to the relationship will immediately put you in a negative position.

SEC speaks of Mobilizers, Go-Getters, Teachers and Skeptics – all roles within the customer organization which can drive change. The view that even successful organizations do not have the expertise within their organization to visualize the future for customer experience, product design and/or disruptive ideas is a fallacy. In fact, internal perspective is essential for solution generation. Even the most valuable ideas will not be entertained if they are in conflict with key business drivers, values and the culture of the customer organization. The sales professional’s expertise is more than facts and figures. It must include the attitudes, history and goals of decision makers within the client organization. In short, expertise needs to be earned, never assumed.

**Limited Application**

By its very nature, the Challenger sales model has an extremely limited application. It addresses sales behavior only, within the context of SEC’s carefully defined sales role profiles. There is no consideration given to the customer dynamic or the competitive reality for the individual organization or its industry nor does it consider sales strategy or the sales process.
Chally Group’s research of over 500,000 sales professionals indicates that there are a variety of sales roles and competencies, and that one approach does not work in all customer situations. Chally expands on these insights in their recent white paper: Challenging The Sales Executive Council’s Challenger Selling Model – It’s not wrong... it’s just not new, complete, or transformational. We have consistently found that customers have totally different motivations in their business strategies. The sales organization that understands and adapts to these strategies has a much greater chance of long term success.

In reality, the customer population who would be willing to participate in the Challenger sales dynamic is finite. There are a limited number of customers who don’t know they have a problem, and an even more limited number of customers who would tolerate being “challenged” continually by their sales professional. Since the Challenger speaks to a very specific behavior style, it also limits the segment of the sales profession population who can pull it off. The Challenger book even acknowledges that most organizations don’t have the right sales team to get this done. A significant change in sales talent should be expected as part of a broad adaptation of the Challenger sales model.

**A Noble Cause**

One admirable quality of the Challenger sales approach is that it pushes sales professionals to offer authentic value to their customers via industry insight, business acumen and data interpretation. There should be creative tension and innovation that both parties bring to the relationship. The zero-tolerance approach to “order-taker” sales behavior is valid. When sales professionals focus on the area of customer need as articulated by the customer and based exclusively on the customer’s operating reality, they will compete both short and long-term on pricing actions. The more value they create, the less important today’s price becomes.

For many years this was the state of sales – functioning at a transactional level. Using this sales model, competition is intense and pricing is the lever that is used most often. But in training and in practice, the sales profession largely moved beyond this limited view of sales, and from this perspective, the Challenger philosophy of a higher level of sales contribution/value is not new.

“...sales people handling every day-to-day commodity, who are obviously not sales people...Just order takers... ORDER TAKERS are not wanted.”

- Col. J.H.W. Francis, Southern Railway (1934)

**Sales Professional as Business Advisor**

Rather than challenging, we should be pursuing a new sales reality in which sales professionals use the relationships they have built over time based on trust, credibility and rapport and create a “new normal” as an authentic “Business Advisor” to the customer. Business Advisors must work with customers - not to solicit their ideas, but to create a vision of what the ideal might look like when drawing from areas of work very different than their own. It is about collaboratively creating insight and opportunities neither knew existed.

This creative thinking is how a true advisor works with their customers. This sales professional understands at a visceral level what is impacting their customers on a daily and weekly basis. The Business Advisor understands how they can help impact their customer’s customer. It means looking for ways to influence products and services two or three levels beyond your customer. When Jeff Bezos started Amazon, who would have thought about buying a book without picking it up? He applied a current understanding of internet technology to create a new business and redefine an entire industry.

Imagine if the supplier of screens to Apple became involved earlier in the design process. Together, they could have provided a solution to screen dirt and residue build-up - one of the biggest complaints about Apple’s iPhone. Vendor input at the design phase could only have happened if they had earned Apple’s trust, credibility and rapport while adjusting their style to Apple’s needs, values, motivations and culture. Without having done so, a vendor challenging Apple’s assumptions would find themselves sitting on the streets of Cupertino wondering what happened. The importance of earning the trust, credibility and rapport that allows the sales professional to respectfully challenge and contribute cannot be overstated.
The ability to collaborate in a synergistic manner is critical. The relationship thrives from higher-level thinking, but other needs such as listening, encouraging, trusting and respecting are required for a satisfactory long-term relationship. Suggesting that these relationship characteristics are transactional is forgetting that in order to have a relationship that is capable of challenging the status quo, there must first exist a healthy relationship that tolerates and even encourages the provocation of ideas. The provocation of ideas without this trusted advisor role is at best annoying and at worst devastating to your long-term position with your customer.

There are many things within the Challenger sales model that would be effective in securing the role of Business Advisor. However, these benefits are offset by the relationship manipulation inherent in the model and its promotion of constructive tension and primary tenets to “teach, tailor and take control of the sales process.”

Ultimately, customers have spoken and their perceived value is not attached to the name of the sales process, be it Solution Selling, Consultative Selling, Acme Selling, Challenger Selling, etc. Value is recognized by the customer in terms of how the sales professional and their organization collaborate and advise the customer organization to be a better marketplace competitor both short and long-term. The opportunity is for the sales professional to have an obsession for new learning, ideas, and the ability to migrate to the trusted Business Advisor role.

“A man with an obsession is a man who has very little sales resistance.”

- C.S. Lewis