

# Aligning with Expert Buyers

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As described in *Rethinking the Sales Cycle*, the Internet and social networking/social media have empowered buyers to progress much further into buying cycles before having to interact with salespeople. By the time contact is made, most buyers have already determined their requirements and may even have a short list of vendors they are going to consider. Buyers prefer evaluating offerings and determining requirements absent any influence by salespeople because all of us have had instances where we feel we were oversold.

During calls with knowledgeable people that have done their homework, buyers will feel that selling begins when a salesperson makes an attempt to modify their requirements. For complex offerings, it is almost a certainty that the buyer's list of features/capabilities will be incomplete. There will be instances where some of the requirements may not provide the best fit for the buyer's needs. One of the strengths of superior salespeople is that they are patient. Patience is critical when talking with a buyer that has done their homework.

Premature seller efforts to alter requirements will be viewed as an attempt to convince or persuade them. This is an "old school" approach that buyers will tend to resist. If done before establishing sincerity, competence and having an understanding of what the buyer thinks they need, the conversation is unlikely to provide a positive buying experience. To avoid acting like a salesperson, there are several steps that should be taken before trying to alter the requirements list.

Several years ago, CustomerCentric Selling® suggested that when entering opportunities as Column B (a preferred vendor has wired the requirements), sellers should attempt to reengineer the buyer's vision. This amounted to having a goal shared and then asking the buyer what capabilities they needed to achieve the desired outcome. The seller then began to "fish" by posing additional capabilities in hopes of changing the requirements and displacing Column A.

Looking back, this was a premature attempt to "sell" buyers that was far too early in the initial call.

It wasn't a great approach then and today is even less effective. In today's world, there is often no Column A vendor because the requirements have been determined by leveraging the Internet and social networking/social media. This change in buying caused us to develop an "Interest Qualification" (IQ) approach to better align with buyers. It nets out to the following steps:

1. Establish sincerity by asking questions to understand:
  - a. How the buyer came to contact you
  - b. What research has already been done
  - c. The title of the person and what their function/title is
2. Ask what, if any requirements have already been established (respect their research)
3. Ask what business outcomes/goals the buyer or the organization is hoping to accomplish with the offering being discussed
4. If the buyer doesn't share a goal, ask 3-4 environmental questions (the best ones begin with the words "How do you ...?"). These questions should get buyers talking, establish competence and allow sellers to learn about how buyers currently operate without the offering being discussed.
5. If, after asking the environmental questions, no goal has been shared, offer the buyer a menu of goals that can be achieved through the use of your offering. This can either be title-specific if the buyer is a potential Key Player or organizational goals if the buyer is a non-Key Player.
6. After a goal is shared, ask the following:
  - a. What capabilities does the buyer need to achieve the stated goal
  - b. After the answer, rather than pose new capabilities, begin a diagnosis by asking how they operate today without the desired capabilities

7. Do a thorough diagnosis of their current situation. Based upon the answers you receive, you can identify potential new capabilities the buyer is likely to want.
8. By asking yes/no questions, determine what new capabilities the buyer agrees are needed.
9. Summarize the previously stated capabilities with the new ones and ask if the buyer could achieve the desired outcome with them.

Taking this approach offers several advantages. The seller gets to ask twice what requirements the buyer has already established. The seller uses a question-based approach to uncover potential new requirements. New requirements the buyer is likely to want are offered much later in the call, ideally after the seller has established sincerity and competence.

The need to reengineer buyer visions started in the mid 90's. Over the last few years the number of buyers that have done research before contacting sellers has grown exponentially. The Interest Qualification approach allows sellers to better align with these buyers, give a superior buying experience and try to influence buyer requirements much later in the call. Sellers that can execute these steps stand a good chance of becoming Column A.