

Selling High Value Consulting Services

Part 2: Client's don't always know how to buy...

Executive summary

Buying large consulting projects is even more stressful for clients than for the selling consultant. This simple fact is missed by a lot of consultants – at considerable cost. The ‘rainmakers’ understand the effect that this has on their client’s buying behaviour and they adapt to it. How they handle their clients’ stress and uncertainty explains how they manage to ‘create buyers’ and the others do not.

The client’s stress comes from a mixture of uncertainty and their inability to control the purchase. When a client buys a commodity that is well specified, has many potential suppliers and prices can be driven down, then they feel that they are in control. But when the project is large, the issues are not fully agreed and the finishing line is not clearly defined, then the client feels that they are in an ‘uncontrolled’ buying situation. The stress is mostly with the buyer and not the seller.

The buyer’s stress is all encompassing, because selecting the right consultant and the right project will greatly affect the buyer’s reputation, career prospects and bonus. The really successful consultants know that you must treat the patient first and then the illness!

This mini series explores these insights to give you tips and tools which will help you to sell high value consulting services.

Introduction ‘Controlled versus Uncontrolled Purchase’

Understanding the buyer’s level of confidence to buy is very important. They are unlikely to tell you that they are not sure which consultant to select or how to buy a large complex project. If you do not spot your buyer’s stress then you can end up addressing the wrong issues – which will get you nowhere.

When the problem and the solution can be defined before the buyer starts to look for a consulting partner, they are in a very powerful position. They know what they want, they can recognise who is capable of delivering the project and they are aware of the market rates. This is known as the ‘**controlled purchase**’. This buyer can choose between the different suppliers and is able to negotiate a keen price. They know that they are in control and this creates a ‘master/servant’ buying relationship in their mind.

Contrast this with a more complex situation where an organisation is struggling with a business challenge. Their strategy is not producing the right results, their competition is pulling ahead of them and their market performance is going backwards. This is a typical starting point for many major consulting projects – many of which will deliver fees in excess of £1million. Selling this type of project is very different from the simple project where the buyer is in control.

In this ‘**uncontrolled purchase**’ the buyer needs a lot of help to define the root causes, the right approach and the accessible benefits from getting the project right. At this point the buyer does not know exactly what or how to buy. The rainmakers recognise this. They know that they need to win their client’s confidence and become their confidant (trusted adviser) before you can start to craft the approach together. This is peer to peer problem solving and is much more of a partnership than a master/servant relationship.



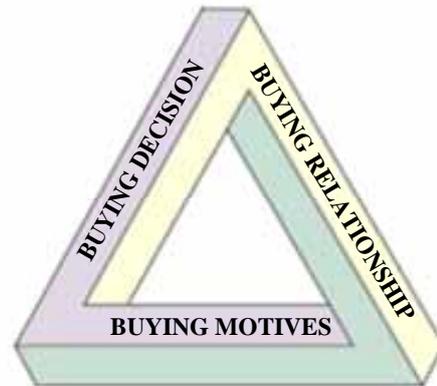
Having the insight to understand your clients buying confidence has a great effect on how you build the buying relationship. It affects what you talk about and when. Let's look at 3 things the rainmakers recognise and how they go about building their client's confidence to buy.

Insight: Clients don't always know how to buy....

Before rainmakers attempt to sell anything, they want to understand what their client understands and does not understand about their situation and needs. We use our B2B Sales Triangle as a roadmap to help navigate this uncertain space.

The 3 sides of the triangle remind us to look for 3 things

- the buying motives
- the buying decision
- the buying relationship



The Buying Motives



Clients only buy 'mega projects' when they cannot do the work themselves..... so they don't know exactly what they need to buy!

Uncovering the buying motives for the mega project is vital. It's tough for both the buyer and the seller when the buying motives are not clearly defined at the beginning. We tend to assume the buyer knows what they want - because that's the impression they want to give!

The vital exercise here is to uncover how much the buyer knows about their situation without belittling them and to discover if they have a real need. Just because the buyer is not happy with their current situation does not mean they are going to buy anything. We need to distinguish between a PROBLEM and a NEED. Clients can be equally agitated about both, but they can learn to live with problems!

When clients are unsure what to buy, they will often confuse problems and needs. The rainmaker will help the client to distinguish between them. If they agree that there is a need then they will start a joint discovery to see whether anything needs to be bought or not. We need to build the 4 problem solving dialogues which will uncover later.

The Buying Decision



If they don't know exactly what to buy..... then they probably don't know who should be in their buying team!

When a client is unsure what they need to do about an issue it is logical that they won't know which colleagues should be helping them. Some colleagues may be part of the problem and therefore not in a good position to help. Given that no big buying decision is made today without consensus in the leadership team, the challenge doubles. The client has to determine what their real needs are and who has to agree with the decision before their real needs can be agreed. This cannot be rushed.

In this double uncertainty, the rainmaker knows that they not only need to help their client to assess the situation, but they also need to help their client understand who is part of the problem and who can be part of the solution. This requires immense diplomacy and can only be tackled when a high level of trust has been developed.

The Buying Relationship



Their buying decision cannot be totally objective, because the solution is not pre-defined..... so they let some subjectivity influence their buying decision.

The controlled purchase will be based on objective analysis and assessment. The situation is controllable because the facts are clear, the solution is available and the buyer can recognise who is competent to deliver the solution. The buyer has already established their buying confidence and does not need a confidant. They know what to do and will either delegate the buying decision or buy at arm's length.

The uncontrolled buying decision is very different. With the best will in the world, some situations do not have all of the facts, do not have a rational explanation and do not have a clear solution. How does the buyer make an objective decision when all the facts are not available? This is called 'the rational gap'.

The rational gap has to be influenced by subjective views which they will use to compensate for the lack of total objectivity. "We think this is the problem, we think we should do this and we think we should do it with this supplier." Most large consulting projects are decided like this! The bigger the decision, the harder it is to be absolutely objective. The rainmaker knows how to explore and influence these subjective areas that will have a great influence on the buyer's decision. These subjective influences become the buying proxies that most people miss! Finding the subjective buying proxies is vital.

Conclusion

We have uncovered the 3 insights that have a huge effect on our clients when they set out to buy large consulting assignments. You may be surprised that a client will seek to buy when they are not sure what they need, who should help them decide and what subjective decision criteria they should use to help them. But it happens all too often and misunderstanding the rational gap is fatal.

These insights give us huge clues as to how we should work with our client to create a buyer, rather than simply trying to sell to them. We need to build trust and help them de-risk their buying decision. The following articles will explore the known pitfalls we can avoid and the 'how to' tips in order to overcome these particular challenges to the sale. The B2B Sales Triangle help's build the roadmap to sell large complex assignments.

This series of articles will continue with:

- Part 3 Selling pitfalls we don't need to fall into
- Part 4 Creating buyers is better than selling
- Part 5 Rainmakers' stories

There will be a 'Webinar', hosted by Top-Consultant, at the end of the series in June. If you are involved in selling high value consulting services and would like to participate in the Webinar, please email us for further details at: insightswebinar@b2bsalesconsulting.co.uk

Can we help you to grow your profitable revenues?

B2B Sales Consulting is a group of experienced Business to Business Sales Professionals who work with Consulting and IT Service Companies, to grow their profitable revenues by improving their market readiness and their sales effectiveness. If you would like to contact us to discuss how we might tailor a specific approach to growing more profitable sales for your organisation, please contact either of us at the email addresses below.

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