

It's not Like Selling Pot and Pans...or is it?
A new way of Selling Project Management to Senior Management

by Elizabeth Larson, PMP and Richard Larson, PMP, Principals, Watermark Learning, Inc.

Have you ever felt the need or desire to “sell” the practice of Project Management (PM) at your organization? Whether you work in a PMO (Project Management Office) or in some other position and feel strongly about its benefits, you may want or need to do some major selling of PM. Perhaps it's time to stop “promoting” or “evangelizing” and start *selling*.

One of the authors' first jobs was during college, which involved selling a line of dishes to customers. It sounded so lucrative and easy from the job description: “Make big money part-time! Sell our proven product line of dishware! We'll teach you everything you need!” That was one of the authors' first jobs in college. For all of about 2 weeks.

First, there was the product line to learn. Then, mastering the sales process and practicing it (harder than it sounds). And, finally, the moment of truth: go out there and sell. Panic sets in: “You mean, go out in the real world and start selling? Talk to perfect strangers and get doors slammed in my face? Get people to actually buy something?” There must be an easier way to make a living. It was one of the hardest two weeks he ever spent. Why? Because selling looks easy, but to do it correctly is one of the most difficult professions there is.

Fortunately, selling project management to senior management is not quite as difficult as selling dishes or pots and pans. We work in the same organization and understand its culture. We know our “product line” very well. We have an insider's advantage for understanding of our buyers' motivations and buying preferences. We can also use past projects and programs as examples of successes to help reinforce our point.

So, why is “selling” project management still such a challenge? Part of the reason is the difficulty of selling intangibles, like any service or process, including the human dimension of what motivates people to buy anything. Still another is the complexity of demonstrating the organizational benefits of project management.

Given the challenges, perhaps selling project management is not so different from selling pots and pans after all. A renowned sales expert, Zig Ziglar, in his internationally-acclaimed sales book “Ziglar on Selling: The Ultimate Handbook for the Complete Sales Professional,” has developed his sales techniques into a repeatable process no matter what the industry and for any product. Why not adapt it to selling project management?

Critical Success Factors for Effective Selling

Before covering the steps in the selling process, it's worth exploring the factors that are critical to selling anything. Without these factors in place, selling will continue to be a struggle, and success will be haphazard at best.

1. **Believe in the emotional value and benefits of your product line.** It is important to get an emotional understanding of your product's benefits, not just its technical or analytical aspects. To achieve a sale, that emotional value of your product must be transferred to your buyer. As Zig says: You need "INTEGRITY, a strong BELIEF in the product, and the DESIRE to get the product into the hands of as many people as possible" (Ziglar, 1991, p. 118) and you have a major building block towards sales success.

Why? Remember that people buy based on emotions. As an example one of the authors was working on a project once that had no clear *quantifiable* benefits. Nevertheless, the project sponsor made it clear that the project would allow the organization to compete in the marketplace with its chief competitor. The sponsor was emotionally attached to the project and could 'sell' it to the senior executives, because of its emotional value.

2. **Ability to find qualified buyers.** Being willing to search for and able to find appropriate buyers or people who have a genuine need for your product or service. Why? Meaningful selling happens when you can find people who have a certain need and you can fill that need. Unsuccessful sales people also waste time trying to sell things to buyers who are not true prospects (potential buyers).

When a project manager tries to 'sell' a project to an 'unqualified buyer' in the organization, even when real benefits can be attained, 'buyer's remorse' can set in. The project stakeholders may initially express interest in the effort, but will lose interest if the project does not have the support of the 'qualified buyer,' or executive sponsor.

3. **Establish trust.** Selling requires building relationships and determining the buyer's true needs. If either of these is absent, trust cannot be established, and the sale will be far more difficult.

If the seller, in this instance project managers or members of the PMO, try to sell the benefits of project management to senior executives without a relationship, or without determining the organizational need for project management, it is unlikely that they will succeed.

4. **Match needs/wants to product benefits.** It is critical to understand the buyer's needs and wants and be able to match them with the product benefits. A simple but useful analogy Zig Ziglar uses for this is to have the light bulb go on in the selling person's mind, then make the same light bulb come on in the buyer's mind. Selling is all about transferring the emotional feeling about the product's benefits to the buyer.

We call this finding the organizational "pain," and showing how project management can alleviate the pain. For example, executives may be worried about losing market share because new products take too long to develop, don't work correctly, and cost too much to produce. The 'seller' can then promote the benefits of project management relating to quality and cost control. These benefits would directly address the needs of the organization and alleviate the pain.

5. **Ability to ask for the "sale" and deliver.** You can't sell something without closing the deal. In other words, a critical factor for selling project management is to be able to "ask for the order." Simply presenting the benefits of project management isn't enough. You must be able to ask the "prospect" to take action. And, after the buyer takes action, you must then deliver on what you proposed, or the purchaser will be unhappy and apt to have "buyer's remorse."

A Method for Selling Project Management (or anything else for that matter)

The critical success factors outlined above can be thought of as “necessary but not sufficient” conditions for sales to take place. What good sales people also need is a repeatable process or method for selling to complete the picture.

The four major steps that sales expert Zig Ziglar espouses in his book are:

1. Need Analysis
2. Need Awareness
3. Need Solution
4. Need Satisfaction

This paper will present each of these steps in turn, and relate how they can be used by project management practitioners in “selling” the concept of project management to senior management.

1. Need Analysis

To find qualified prospects for a sale, one must understand their needs and wants. For complex sales like selling Project Management, it is often necessary to help prospects discover and uncover their needs, much like we do for the requirements on any project. A successful sale is made when we can fulfill an identified need, meaning we don’t create the need, but instead discover it and satisfy it.

People buy because they need or want something. If we can also provide a reason or an excuse to buy, we increase our chances of selling dramatically. And like requirements on a project, people often buy what they *want* over what they *need*. We only need a limited set of clothing to survive, yet we buy multiple shirts, jackets, skirts, shoes, etc.

Zig says: “Often, people have no idea what their needs may be because they don't know what is available...The basic question is not, ‘Do you need a new computer?’ The question is, “Would you like to reduce errors in expensive promotional mailings as well as time spent entering names?” (Ziglar, 1991, p. 119)

Prospecting for Buyers and Needs

To understand and find qualified prospects, it helps to visualize oneself in the place of an executive. Ask yourself “If I was a senior manager, or in charge of a business, what would I want PM to do for me?”

Prospecting involves probing into the needs of prospects, and probing starts with good questions. Develop an attitude of curiosity and sincere interest in your prospect to uncover those needs, both logical and emotional. For selling PM, this requires having a sincere interest in the business challenges and issues at your organization. In the end, PM is all about solving business problems.

Here is an example of combining logical and emotional questioning, with a template of 3 questions to end a sales session with. This example emphasizes the benefit of saving money, and it could be adapted to other benefits as well. Warning: this technique works provided you have made a case that results in a YES to the 1st question:

- ✓ “Can you see where our product would save you money?”
Above: gets at fear of losing money, an emotional level. An old adage: “Fear of loss is greater than the desire for gain.”
- ✓ “Are you interested in saving money?”
This question moves into logic.
- ✓ “If you were ever going to start saving money, when do you think would be the best time to start?”
This question calls for immediate action. Back to emotions, and a reminder about the fear of not wanting to lose money.

Applications to Selling Project Management

- Find qualified prospects, meaning they have a need to be satisfied and the authority to buy. These are commonly sponsors of projects.
- People make emotional decisions, and often buy things they want over something they need. Remember to ask questions that help you understand the emotional component of an issue, not just the logic behind it.
- Give prospects a reason to want and an excuse to buy PM, such as identifying people at other companies who benefit from PM (want) at the same time you demonstrate cost savings of employing PM (excuse).
- Learn to be a sincere questioner, and develop your interviewing skills. Probe to understand business needs and “drivers,” and work to solve business problems, not just implement solutions.

2. Need Awareness

It may sound as if need awareness should occur before need analysis. The reason it is the second stage of selling is that after discovering and analyzing the prospect’s needs, both the sales person and the buyer must become aware that a need exists and what it is. Ziglar maintains that for selling, we must both 1) successfully identify one or more needs that can be clearly articulated and 2) the prospect must be aware that there is a need and understand the specifics of the need.

Another way of stating this is that for need awareness to occur, the “light bulb” must go on in the sales person’s mind first and then the same “light bulb” must go on in the prospect’s mind. What this stage means (and for those light bulbs to come on) is that we must understand the prospect’s true needs so well that we could overcome any objections that might appear. Active listening is crucial to determining needs, and to prepare to handle those objections.

Ziglar mentions the unspoken “fear of loss” that is one of the biggest unspoken objections when someone is contemplating a major purchase, for example, buying a house. Probe until you find the real concern.

For Project Management, this “fear of loss” might be handled by running pilot projects, benchmarking against other similar businesses, or doing outcomes assessments. Sponsors and other business leaders often address symptoms (and request solutions to those symptoms) rather than discover root causes to their situation or problem. Again, root causes are discovered by probing.

Applications to Selling Project Management

- There are five sales “knowledge areas” that are crucial:
 1. **Product Knowledge** – knowledge about project management and its benefits can instill confidence in your mind and in the “buyers” of projects.
 2. **Industry Knowledge** – the more you know about your industry, the more you know the needs of your “buyers” and why they have those needs.
 3. **Pricing Knowledge** – the level of investment needed for your product (i.e., project management processes).
 4. **Application Knowledge** – understanding how projects can help the business will increase the support for Project Management.
 5. **Competition Knowledge** – there is always the possibility that project sponsors will seek other avenues for solving their problems. Or, if a competitor is perceived as having an advantage, emphasizing this fact may help sell the concept of project management in your organization.
- Of these, Product and Industry Knowledge are the most important for Project Management professionals. Projects are needed when there is an “imbalance” in the business, and change is desired. Projects succeed when the project objectives directly address the causes of that imbalance, and sponsors commit to them.

3. Need Solution

People don't buy a product; they buy what the product can do for them. Zig says: “We don't buy what the product is; we buy what the product DOES FOR US.” (Ziglar, 1991, p. 128) In other words, business leaders don't want to invest in project management for its own sake, no matter how compelling a discipline PM is for *us*. What business executives want are things such as reduced costs, more products (and revenues) or new ones quicker to market, happier customers, etc.

Features, Functions, and Benefits

All too often, projects focus on the features and functions of the products they are producing. Whether a project produces software, a training class, or a new car, a significant amount of time is spent on articulating the requirements for what the product IS (features) and what it will DO (functions). Much less time is devoted to determining the ADVANTAGE of using the new product (the benefits to the business).

If we did spend more time on selling the benefits of project management, first, we would better understand the “buyer's” true needs. Second, typical project scope would better reflect those needs, and increase our chances for success. Third, the end-product of our projects would be more usable and our “buyers” would be happier with the outcomes. Fewer projects would be cancelled, less rework would occur, and organizations would be more productive.

Applications to Selling Project Management

- Zig says: “Don't waste your time and the prospects' time telling them what the product IS. Tell them what it can DO and why it will do it for them.” (Ziglar, 1991, p. 128) In addition to focusing on project management deliverables, such as a Charter or Communication Plan (what the product IS), make sure to stress project benefits of those deliverables from the buyer's perspective (what it will DO for the organization).
- Think about what people buy when they invest in projects or for the infrastructure that helps increase PM maturity. It will help when trying to convince people to adopt your proposals.

4. Need Satisfaction

The final stage of the selling process is to close the “sale,” deliver the product, and service what was sold. Closing is probably the most feared word in the sales profession. Yet, if you have followed the first three stages, closing is the next logical step, and is begun by “asking for the order.” However, many sales professionals – not just project management practitioners – do not ask for the “order” consistently.

The “need solution” stage will be the time to make any formal presentations on proposals, such as to launch a PMO, or to initiate a major program or project. The “order” might be for your organization to initiate the PMO, and the presentation is not enough. You also need to *ask* the decision makers (buyers) to approve the “sale.” Belief in your product or service demands that you ask for the order, and not wait for the buyer to act.

Handling Objections

Asking for the order is rarely simple or easy. Frequently, buyers have objections that you must overcome. Objections are not considered negative by sales professionals, although they may feel negative to most people. Objections actually show interest in the product we are selling, or may indicate feelings about the product or issue it is designed to solve. Lack of objections often means lack of interest, which in turn usually equates to lack of feeling, and then it will be almost impossible to complete a sale.

For example, assume you are trying to close the “sale” of adopting formal Program Management in your organization. It may be met with polite disinterest, and a lack of objections, which probably means a sale will not be made. But, if you approach the sale as leading to “more efficient use of resources,” or “increased Return on Investment (ROI),” then your “prospect” should be more engaged and emotionally involved. And, even if you are met with resistance, at least you know you are working in the right area, and can adjust your proposal to better fit.

The Q.U.I.E.T. Method

Here is an approach to handling objections called the Q.U.I.E.T. method that Zig Ziglar suggests. When an objection to your proposal occurs, the sales professional should get “Q.U.I.E.T.” and seek to understand the objection.

- Q. Begin with a QUESTION. For example, if the prospect says “The cost for a PMO is too high,” you could start by asking “Is the amount more than you could budget?” or “Do you think the cost is too high relative to the benefits?”
- U. Ask enough questions until you UNDERSTAND the reason for the objection. To gain understanding in our example you could ask “Do you consider the funds needed for a PMO to be a cost or an investment?”
- I. After understanding, then you must IDENTIFY the objection. For example, if the answer to the cost vs. investment question is “investment,” then you could ask “Just how much is it worth to have projects that support business objectives?” The conclusion is the identified objection to a PMO might be a lack of understanding about the ROI of such a function.
- E. To really identify the real objection, you must EMPATHIZE with the prospect. Empathy comes from having and understanding the same feelings as another, as opposed to sympathy, which doesn’t. In our example, assume the new PMO would cost \$500,000 per year. You could say “I understand the amount represents a large investment, especially for something new. We estimate that 200 projects per year would be handled by the new PMO. If you spent \$2500 to improve the effectiveness of each of those major projects, would that be a problem?” By reframing the issue, you can make a sale more psychologically acceptable.

- T. If you can truly empathize, then you need to TEST the objection. Sometimes people will not express their true objections. After testing and know the objection is real, then you can work to overcome it and improve the chances for a sale. You could use questions like “Suppose the large budget was not a consideration, then would you approve the PMO?” or “Suppose we could demonstrate the effectiveness of a PMO at improving projects?”

Applications to Selling Project Management

- Always ask for decision makers to act, whether it is to initiate a project, launch a PMO, or to adopt a best practice. Making a case for your initiative is not enough; remember to “Always ask for the Order.”
- As a Project Management practitioner, you are often faced with making proposals that you would like decision-makers to adopt. If they object, try being Q.U.I.E.T. and practice overcoming those objections using the 5-step method described here.

Summary

In summary, project management professionals often find ourselves in situations where we have to sell things to decision-makers. It might be selling a project, a xxx, or a new function such as a Project Management Office. By understanding critical success factors, “knowledge areas,” and a repeatable process, we increase our chances of success.

This paper presented five factors critical to sales success:

- Believe in the emotional value and benefits of your product line, not just the logical
- Ability to find qualified buyers
- Establish trust
- Match needs/wants to product benefits
- Ability to ask for the “sale” and deliver

Also covered was a 4-step sales process and explored some ways in which it can be adapted to project management and related work:

1. Need analysis
2. Need awareness
3. Need solution
4. Need satisfaction

The authors don’t need to sell dishes any longer, which is a good thing! But, using the knowledge and methods in this paper has definitely helped them improve their sales skills in their own company. And, the techniques can help you, too - so, what are you waiting for? Get out in your organizations and start selling!

Ziglar, Zig, “Ziglar on Selling: The Ultimate Handbook for the Complete Sales Professional,” ©1991, Ballantine, ISBN 0-345-37887-3