



Selling, Art or Science?

JIM HOLDEN



Having been in the sales training business for more than 30 years, we have seen all manner of sellers: strong performers, average sellers, and those who just don't make the grade. But behind all of this has always been the debate as to whether sales is an art or a science, almost to suggest that, for some, sellers are born and not made.

The intent of this manifesto is to apply unconventional thinking to the question of art or science, not only resolving the issue, but also putting forth the significance of the answer from both a seller and supplier company perspective. To begin, let's look at what we mean by "art." For us, art is an expression of one's imagination and talent. It may result in a painting or sculpture, or it could be a wonderfully designed building, or something as intangible as an ingenious strategy to defeat a competitor, in order to win an important deal. Or is it?

Artistic ability is generally considered to be innate, coming from within an individual. A person is simply born with it, suggesting that if you've not been born with it, don't expect to paint like a Picasso. In addition, such talent is difficult to understand and explain—we see the result of talent, but not the talent itself. Who can say what was in Picasso's mind when he revolutionized European painting and sculpture with something like Analytical Cubism.



Figure 1
Guernica, 1937 by Pablo Picasso

Science, on the other hand, is quite different. It seeks to systemically organize knowledge in a very reliable way that can be repeated and predicted. So, if you hold a tall glass of beer above your head and let go, the result is predictable, not to mention tragic. As such, science seeks to eliminate all unknowns, precisely explaining cause and effect relationships in the natural world. But, the laws of physics do not apply so neatly to people, their abilities, and actions. And so, we must rule out sales as a pure science. At the same time, if you are able to define the intangibles of selling, the stuff that people generally don't see but know exists, perhaps we can move away from the view that selling is totally innate in nature. For example, let's look at conducting a customer executive meeting.

How to Run a Successful Customer Meeting

To help us here we would like to borrow an excerpt from our new book, *The New Power Base Selling*, which is published by John Wiley & Sons and hit book stores in early May, 2012. There are two aspects to conducting a successful customer meeting, the tangible and the intangible. On the tangible side, we know that a successful meeting requires the right process, which is shown in the following checklist:

<u>Executive Meeting Checklist</u>	
✓	Capture Attention
✓	Engage Critical Business Issue
✓	Test Value of Solution
✓	Secure Sponsorship
✓	Confirm a Return Ticket

OUTCOME:
CREATE A SUPPORTER

- **Capture Attention:** Establish credibility and rapport by sharing insight regarding the customer's business, industry, company, or customers. Senior executives are motivated to meet with external thought leaders to gain objective market insight, which they cannot always get from the people who report to them. Earn the right to talk about your company as it relates to the customer's business. For example, if you are speaking with a CIO, share emerging trends in IT that could enable him or her to significantly advance the company's growth objectives.
- **Engage Critical Business Issues:** Confirm your understanding of the issues most critical to the customer's business success. Work to build a deeper understanding, along with new insights into the customer's world, in order to strengthen the solution that you are selling. It is powerful when you can formulate a solution or even the basis for a solution in real time during one of these executive meetings.

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- **Test the Value of Your Solution:** Having formed a solution or, again, even a framework for a solution, experiment with your questions to determine how to most clearly articulate the value that you will provide. Make certain that there is a direct or indirect connection to the customer's priorities.
- **Secure Sponsorship:** An executive will endorse your solution if the business value you say you can provide is both relevant and credible. But also take time in the meeting, or at a more informal moment, to understand what is personally driving the executive. That is, how a successful solution will affect him or her within the company. Perhaps it could lead to a promotion or strengthen a relationship with a key executive or better justify an increase in the department's budget allocation.
- **Confirm a Return Ticket:** Before you conclude the meeting, agree on how you will report back to the executive. Suggest that you will close the loop with him or her only at significant points in the process. You don't need to send the executive an email informing him that you've set a meeting with someone he recommended. Instead, report back after you have met with the other person on, for example, the magnitude of the financial impact your solution could have on their business. That is a noteworthy matter that warrants touching base with the executive.

On the intangible side, a successful meeting is as much about managing emotions, as it is about implementing good processes and conveying information. High performing sellers know that productive conversations are actually less about what they say or what they think the customer has heard, as they are about how the executive feels at the end of the meeting. Will he or she support the seller and a particular solution with enthusiasm? Will the executive be indifferent or perhaps feel challenged? Sensing emotional reactions, reading them correctly, and responding appropriately in real time are essential to executive meetings. To accomplish this, sellers are trained to observe carefully, ask the right questions, and excel at listening. The same could be said for giving presentations that are both informational and powerful. Sellers don't need to understand the psychology that drives emotional response, but instead need to know what to look for and how to respond to what they see. So, in this example, selling, while not pure science, is also not entirely innate, as in an art. But where does that leave us? The answer lies with a new perspective on selling, which views it as a management science.

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Customer Meetings and Presentations as a Management Science

So why is running something as straight forward as conducting a successful customer executive meeting or giving a presentation considered a management science? First of all, executive meetings tend not to be so “straight forward.” Our data from over 28,000 seller surveys suggest that interacting with executives is a real challenge and that 80% of sellers don’t do it well! Secondly, success is based upon both tangible and intangible factors, as we have identified. These factors approach art and science, but conceptually sit in between them. As such, a management science bridges art and science. It is often characterized by models. For example, managing emotions during a meeting can be modeled for sellers. That doesn’t make them psychologists, but it does give them the ability to know what to look for and how to respond to it in real time. Likewise, the process for an Executive Meeting Checklist that we introduced for conducting an executive meeting is also a type of model. Another model would focus on how to prepare for such a meeting. As you can see, something becomes a management science when all the right factors can be modeled. This drives understanding, measurability, directional predictability, and most importantly, manageability. The result is to increase sales proficiency, along with scalability within an organization. In our view, the reason so many sellers do not do well in setting up and conducting executive meetings is that they are missing key models.

And, when selling is viewed as an art, no one looks for these models. But when selling is viewed as a management science their absence becomes readily apparent.

Selling as a Management Science

Now, let's jump from the micro selling environment to a macro perspective on selling. To accomplish this, we will again use an excerpt from our new book, *The New Power Base Selling*. Here, we examine the Holden Four Stage Model of Sales Proficiency, which presents the building blocks that enable sellers to engage and defeat competitors. The model shows how this type of advanced selling is a management science—one that can be understood, managed, scaled and optimized to drive maximum revenue.

The Holden Four Stage Model shows that the best sellers do something that most sellers do not. They manage, well and in balance, both customer and competitive issues. These are shown below in Figure 3. How well sellers manage this balancing act is described in terms of four stages of sales proficiency.

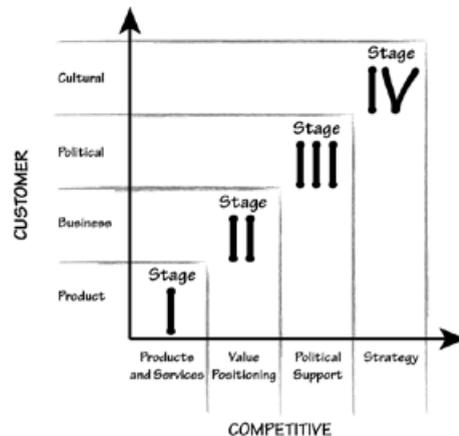


Figure 3
The Holden Four Stage Model

As we walk through each stage, you will have the ability to assess yourself, your sales manager and, in fact, your entire sales organization. Perhaps more importantly, you will develop an ability to describe precisely what you do and why you do it in a language that management can understand. You can have confidence in the fact that the Model is based in science and engineering and backed by extensive data that distinguishes it from the traditional thinking so often put forth in sales books and training.

First, great sellers manage customer issues very well. Per the vertical axis in Figure 3, they present value to a customer along a continuum, starting with the specific value their product provides. While all sellers address product value, performers go further and connect that value to critical business issues that move them up the value chain. Behind these business issues often sit political considerations, such as aligning with powerful people and advancing their Personal Motivators, or what is driving them personally. The latter is a nontraditional expression of value, which marks the domain of the high performer.

The top of the continuum presents an organizational expression of value. We know that when a seller can generate business value in a manner that supports the customers' principles and beliefs—the factors that characterize its culture—that the perception of value is maximized. Conversely, operate in a manner that the customer does not understand or appreciate and the

risk that they will discount value is very high. In short, the way in which you create value can be just as important within some accounts as the value itself.

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Still, you cannot manage the customer environment in a vacuum. It must be managed in balance with the competitive environment, which is shown on the horizontal axis of the Holden Four Stage Model. This also works on a continuum and first requires that a seller assess the strengths and weaknesses of competitors' products. As sellers then move to the right on the horizontal axis, life gets a bit more interesting. Here they determine how the competition has positioned its value in terms of business impact for the customer, political impact as it relates to powerful customer individuals and organizational impact on the company. Moreover, they look at how the competition will likely capitalize on these expressions of value in terms of strategy.

Sales performers do many things well, but perhaps their most distinctive attribute is their ability to clearly identify what they are counting on to win. Strategy is their intellectual sword, but they're also aware that possessing insight into the competition's strategy is just as important as

having one of their own. Only then can a seller feel confident that what he or she is doing during a sales campaign is directionally correct—and that it will lead to victory.

Managing the customer and competitive environments in balance gives us the ability to characterize sales proficiency in terms of four stages. You will see that patterns emerge that help us label each stage as follows:

Stage I: “Emerging Sellers”

Stage II: “Solution Sellers”

Stage III: “Compete Sellers”

Stage IV: “Customer Advisors.”

In our book, we look at these four stages in terms of the five dimensions: intent, focus, relationship, value, and knowledge. For our purposes here, we will look only at intent and focus, in order to make the point that the Model supports the view of selling as a management science.

Intent

In terms of intent, **Stage I Emerging Sellers** want simply to be considered. Making the short list is cause for celebration; they merely want to survive today and grow into the job. Think about when you might have been at this stage in your career. **Stage II Solution Sellers** differ in that they want to make a sale. In fact, many of these individuals would sacrifice longer term customer loyalty in favor of a short-term revenue win, particularly at the end of the quarter when the pressure to close orders becomes intense. Each sales situation is the main event for these Sellers. However, they often lack an objective and quantitative approach to determining if they should pursue an opportunity. They essentially go after anyone—or anything—that’s warm and breathing.

Stage III Compete Sellers want to “own” the customer department where purchases are being made. They place the emphasis on repeat sales, and work to develop a long runway of business. In contrast to Stage II Solution Sellers, they use written criteria to answer the following questions:

- Should I pursue this business?
- Can I win this business?
- Will winning lead to more business?

Stage IV Customer Advisors carry the thinking even further. They want to “own” the account, seeking the lion’s share of the business. This person not only services demand, but knows how to create it in a very politically astute manner. Customer Advisors work hard to establish themselves as thought leaders with their customers. They don’t just take business; they make sensible business recommendations that reflect “out of the box” thinking. And when they need to tell a customer something that they know they might not want to hear but need to hear, they diplomatically explain their position. Perhaps the customer is about to embark on a new initiative that the Customer Advisor knows from experience will fail. Instead of remaining silent—which so many sellers would do to avoid confronting or disagreeing with the customer—the Stage IV Customer Advisor might say, “I know that you are very excited about this project and we want to be supportive, but our experience in this area suggests that there could be significant risk of failure. Can we take a few minutes to discuss this?”

Take a look at the diagram regarding sales intent. At what stage would you objectively place yourself? Where would you place your sales organization?



Figure 4
Holden’s Four Stages of Sales Proficiency, Intent

Focus

The second dimension is focus. It's a given that all sellers address product issues. However, **Stage I Emerging Sellers** center most of their time and effort on the product. They have been trained on product strengths and weaknesses, and tend to view the world in this context. **Stage II Solution Sellers** have learned that effective selling also requires them to look at the product through the customer's eyes, which is their primary focus. They're aware that they must recognize and address customer needs with empathy, compassion and commitment. To their credit, these Solution Sellers focus on the customer with an eye towards coming up with solutions, in order to get closer to the real needs driving the sales situation. As an example, Stage II Solution Sellers will often put just as much time into making a solution work for the customer as they did in selling that solution.

Stage III Compete Sellers certainly do not lose sight of the product and customer; however, they concentrate primarily on the competition and determining what it will take to win. The competition is at the top of their list, earning them the title of "Compete Sellers." While other sellers tend to avoid opposition, this group actively seeks competitive intelligence—that is, information from other sellers within the supplier company that have competed with this specific

competitor—in an attempt to figure out what they can expect from a specific competitor. They then formulate a strategy to win the business that takes this competitive information into account.

You can see an example of this when one supplier is in the lead. He understands what the customer needs, has created an effective solution distinct from the competition's, and has aligned with powerful people within the account. At the same time, any competitive intelligence the seller has gathered can raise a red flag for him. For example, it may suggest that the competitor might attempt to change the buying criteria in the 11th hour of the sales situation, just as it is peaking. Not knowing how this might happen—but being aware that it has occurred in the past—the Stage III Compete Seller works to collapse the timeframe by providing the customer with an incentive to place the order sooner. This allows him or her to preempt the competition and win the business.

Stage IV Customer Advisors go even further. They look beyond the product, customer, and competition to center in on the customer's customer and their competition. They reconcile how their company will contribute to the customer's business success over time by providing significant added (and often unexpected) value. As such, solutions are tied to customer critical business issues that move them up the value chain where there is strong competitive differentiation—and where elasticity of demand will support higher pricing that corresponds with the increased value. These sellers work to conceptually draw a line from their solutions to increases or decreases in the customer's market share.

An example might be introducing check imaging to a community bank in order to free employees up from more mundane tasks to better focus on customer support and better service. While other sellers would perhaps stress the cost savings of reduced labor content, the Customer Advisor puts an equal emphasis on the ability to pursue higher value activities that are aligned with strategic company initiatives, such as increasing customer satisfaction.

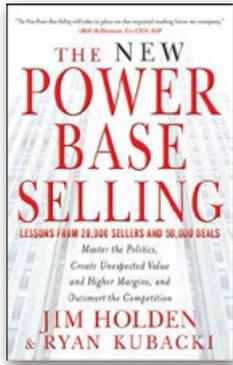
Regarding focus, at what stage would you objectively place yourself?
Where would you place your sales organization?



Figure 5
Holden's Four Stages of Sales Proficiency, Focus

The Holden Four Stage Model addresses key factors like intent, focus, and others within a context that describes the customer and competitive environments. True to any management science, it enables sales proficiency to be documented, measured, understood, and managed. This in turn increases sales proficiency, consistency of performance, and scalability within sales organizations. Success is based upon both tangible and intangible factors. **It approaches art and science, but sales as a management science conceptually sits in between them bridging the two.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jim Holden founded Holden International in 1979, and throughout its almost 30-year history, Holden has grown to be a world-renowned leader in the sales process improvement field. In 1990, he established Holden as the first company to model sales effectiveness, an achievement that garnered the Ernst & Young Regional Entrepreneur of the Year award for the Service Industry. Mr. Holden is also a globally recognized business author, with titles including *Power Base® Selling*, *World Class Selling*, *The Selling Fox*, and *The New Power Base Selling*, co-authored with Ryan Kubacki.

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