

# The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation

Matthew Dixon, Brent Adamson

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**Matthew Dixon, Brent Adamson : The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation:

177 of 180 people found the following review helpful. Challenging The Challenger SaleBy Dave KinnearThe good news about The Challenger Sale is that Dixon and Adamson further the concept of consultative selling. Even better, in my estimation, is that the authors seemed to use some solid data on which to base their theories. I like some of their approach such as, "Lead to your solution not with your solution," and "Differentiate yourself by showing your customer something new about their industry that they didn't know or provide them with a different

view. I believe the authors also get it right when they state, "In this world of dramatically changing customer buying behavior and rapidly diverging sales talent, your sales approach must evolve or you will be left behind." However, they missed an opportunity to move complex sales to the next level. By complex sales, I mean to segregate commodity sales from the intangible products and services that require trust. And by the next level, I mean a salesperson who authentically has the customer's best interest at heart and not just their own. The subtitle of this book is "Taking control of the customer conversation." As though to inoculate themselves from criticism, the authors state that they know some people will interpret this statement as being "arrogant"; while stating that it isn't. They also speak about "educating the customer"; and recognize that the same interpretation may be made about that point as well. Indeed, this reader believes that the mindset of a salesperson who takes it upon themselves to control the conversation and educate the customer/client is absolutely being arrogant. The authors seem to give short shrift to the human capacity to sense when they are being talked down to or manipulated. While you may be able to fool some of the people some of the time, most customers will sense when they are being manipulated. Many consumers today are, for the most part, immune or at least becoming immune to advertising and sales tactics that are focused on achieving the salesperson's goals. They are skeptical. They listen to their friends and associates and depend on organic search results (not paid results) when researching a purchase. Product, solution and consultative selling (which includes Challenger Sales) are all still focused on gaining the salesperson's goal of selling a product. Yet, between all the self-serving tactics and training, this book does provide some nuggets of insight for the alert reader. The authors have defined two categories of sales people, core performers and high performers as well as five major "salesperson profiles": The Hard Worker, The Challenger, The Relationship Builder, The Lone Wolf and The Reactive Problem Solver. In their research, the authors found that The Challenger was the person who continued to make sales quotas even through tough times like the 2008 recession. "The Challengers are the debaters on the team"; and have a deep understanding of the customer's industry. [Debate: to engage in argument by discussing opposing views.] They took control of the conversation, challenged the customer's thinking and differentiated themselves by educating the customer on things about their industry/customers that were new to the customer. The Hard Workers are just that, they show up early, stay late and are persistent. The Relationship Builder is an unfortunate profile title. A better profile title would be "The Appeaser." In this profile, the salesperson believes the relationship is the most important aspect of their job and will do nothing to jeopardize that customer relationship. They appease the customer at any cost — including the cost of losing a sale. The Lone Wolf is the prima donna of the salesforce. They do things their way, AND, they are high performers despite being difficult if not impossible to manage. The Reactive Problem Solver is focused like a laser on solving the customer's problem. They will sacrifice spending time generating new sales as soon as an existing customer calls with an issue or new problem. According to the data presented by the authors, The Challengers are by far the best salespeople in terms of results with 39% of that profile in the "High Performer"; category. The Lone Wolf (25%), Hard Worker (17%), Problem Solver (12%) and Relationship Builders (7%) profiles follow in order. A clearer and, in my opinion, better model for the "new"; consumer driven market is that outlined by Patrick Lencione in his book *Getting Naked* and Charles Green in his book, *Trust Based Selling*. In both of those books, the authors make it clear that the proper mindset for sales is to authentically have the customer's best interest at heart, not just the salesperson's best interest. Any model that incites a mindset or intention that is designed to sell rather than to let the consumer buy will eventually be a roadblock to success. In my opinion, a closer reading of the data and parsing of the survey results will show that the so called Challenger Salesperson is someone who first builds a trusting relationship by demonstrating that they have the customer's best interest at heart, not just their own, and then help their customer better serve the end customers. They earn the right to share insights rather than simply build credibility from a position authority. They share rather than sell, tell or educate. They listen more rather than debate. They recognize that by representing a specific company with a specific set of products and services that they are already suspected of having a self-serving and highly biased point of view. Anything they say is suspect the same way that paid results in a Google search are suspect. They work hard to gain trust to offset the natural skepticism. If we take the author's research and survey results to the logical conclusion and combine that with how consumers are skeptical of large companies and "vested interests"; we would wind up with the best salespeople being independent consultants and manufacturer's representatives rather than our own direct sales employees. Our products or services would be employed only by the customers who would truly be best served by using them as determined by someone who had nothing to gain by selling one manufacturer or consulting service over another. That is, presumably, how large complex ERP systems are sold — independent consultants and the customer review the large complex software offerings, determine the most suitable fit and the selection is made by the customer with only "arm's length"; influence by the software vendor. We would be forced to recognize that the "new customer"; (i.e. the consulting firm) is as knowledgeable as or perhaps even more knowledgeable than we are. We would definitely change our approach to be more based on trust and competency. Words are important and will establish a mindset in those who are listening. The authors have chosen words that will create aggression rather than assertiveness, being didactic rather than sharing information and focusing

on the salesperson rather than on the customer. It is unfortunate since the authors are exactly correct that "In this world of dramatically changing customer buying behavior and rapidly diverging sales talent, your sales approach must evolve or you will be left behind." Sadly, their prescription will result in more of the same salesperson focused tactics. Ironically, if you want to sell more you have to stop selling. Instead, build trust, demonstrate competence, be dependable and always authentically have your customers best interest at heart, not just your own.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A must read

By Kindle Customer

One of the most interesting books I've read on sales. I'm not sure this approach works for all - and in fact the book says it probably won't - but the Challenger approach is certainly a different approach to the Customer than the same old Solution Provider approach. I think that you can recognize that this approach has been taken by many companies we encounter daily.

A lot of food for thought... full of insights.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great Research and Interesting Insights, But Wanted More

By christopher provines

As a value expert, advisor, and author of *7 Secrets of Selling to Procurement: A Guide to Decoding Procurement for Smarter B2B Selling and Negotiating* I thought this book had many excellent points, but left me looking for actionable ideas at times. First, the good parts:

The research that is the basis of the book seems well done and provides some interesting insights. As someone who has worked in procurement, the idea of relationship selling has always been suspect to me. Of course relationships matter, but B2B buyers are looking for so much more from suppliers. Suppliers who can provide real insights to help customer's run their business better, save money, or grow is what buyers want. The research from the book seems right on, and confirms this. A sales professional who can challenge the customer and provide these insights is a very valuable resource, even to professional buyers.

Now the areas I found lacking:

I thought the book could go farther in provide more specifics about how to actually implement some of the research findings and ideas. Things like quantifying value for customers, dealing with professional buyers, and integrating the learnings into the sales process would be nice to address in future editions.

Overall, I would say it's a nice step forward, great confirmation, and well worth reading. I still gave it 5 stars for the research.

What's the secret to sales success? If you're like most business leaders, you'd say it's fundamentally about relationships-and you'd be wrong. The best salespeople don't just build relationships with customers. They challenge them. The need to understand what top-performing reps are doing that their average performing colleagues are not drove Matthew Dixon, Brent Adamson, and their colleagues at Corporate Executive Board to investigate the skills, behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes that matter most for high performance. And what they discovered may be the biggest shock to conventional sales wisdom in decades.

Based on an exhaustive study of thousands of sales reps across multiple industries and geographies, *The Challenger Sale* argues that classic relationship building is a losing approach, especially when it comes to selling complex, large-scale business-to-business solutions. The authors' study found that every sales rep in the world falls into one of five distinct profiles, and while all of these types of reps can deliver average sales performance, only one-the Challenger- delivers consistently high performance.

Instead of bludgeoning customers with endless facts and features about their company and products, Challengers approach customers with unique insights about how they can save or make money. They tailor their sales message to the customer's specific needs and objectives. Rather than acquiescing to the customer's every demand or objection, they are assertive, pushing back when necessary and taking control of the sale.

The things that make Challengers unique are replicable and teachable to the average sales rep. Once you understand how to identify the Challengers in your organization, you can model their approach and embed it throughout your sales force. The authors explain how almost any average-performing rep, once equipped with the right tools, can successfully reframe customers' expectations and deliver a distinctive purchase experience that drives higher levels of customer loyalty and, ultimately, greater growth.

The most important advance in selling for many years. -- Neil Rackham, author of *SPIN Selling*

About the Author

Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson are managing directors with CEB in Washington, D.C.