

## What is Trust-based Selling?

~ Questions and Answers

By **Charles H. Green**

### ***Q. What is Trust-based Selling™?***

A. Trust-Based Selling™ is based on two simple propositions:

1. Trust is the single biggest motivator of buyer behavior
2. As buyers, we trust those who put our interests ahead of their own.

It follows that **buyers will buy from sellers who put the buyer's interests ahead of their own.**

Trust-based Selling™ applies those principles to the sales process.

### ***Q. Putting the customer's interests ahead of your own--Isn't that a recipe for losing money?***

A. Quite the opposite. Customers overwhelmingly prefer to buy from people they trust. Such customer relationships are far more lasting, effective and efficient than relationships not built on trust.

As a result, trust-based relationships are also more profitable. That dynamic overwhelms the occasional situation of opposing buyer/seller interests.

### ***Q. Isn't Trust-based selling just a fancy term for good old-fashioned customer focus and needs-based, consultative selling?***

A. "Customer focus" in business has become just a tactic—a tool to induce buying. This treats customers as objects. Selling today is described as a process whose goal is closing, and whose purpose it is to get the sale.

### ***Q. Well, isn't that the point? To get the sale?***

A. For most sales program, yes. But the objective of Trust-Based Selling™ is to build the relationship; getting the sale is a consequence. Relationships nurture transactions--focus on transactions alone kills relationships.

In Trust-Based Selling™, customer focus is not a tactic, it's the whole point.

***Q. Is this some kind of New Age paradox thing, where you supposedly get what you want by not trying to get it?***

A. It is a paradox, but it's been around forever. We all know when someone is trying to sell us something for their benefit, not ours. We don't trust them; we buy from them only if we must, and then carefully. By contrast, we return constantly to those who clearly have our interests at heart first and foremost. The paradox is: we buy the most from those who clearly aren't trying to "sell" us.

***Q. What major companies practice selling based on trust?***

A. As a whole, officially, probably no one. The dominant sales models in corporate business today are based on transactions, closing, and the pursuit of competitive advantage. Those models encourage companies to treat customers as objects in pursuit of the seller's goal.

***Q. Then who does sell based on trust?***

A. In those very same companies, many really effective individual salespeople do sell based on trust; but they do so in spite of, not because of, the way they are taught to sell. If behaving in a trustworthy manner appears to conflict with the accepted sales wisdom, they will do so anyway--quietly.

They understand that their own long-term success is inextricably tied up with doing the right thing for the customer. Selling based on trust is a lot more common than sales programs would have you believe; it just isn't taught.

***Q. In business today, there is very real pressure for short-term performance. You can't afford to invest and wait around for these kinds of long-term returns.***

A. That's based on a mistaken assumption. The best short-term performance comes not from short-term-oriented tactics, but from sustained long-term strategies. The salespeople with the best quarterly results—quarter after quarter—are those who view their customer base as a long-term relationship.

Juicing your sales team's performance with monthly quotas, contests and specials just encourages salespeople to treat customers like objects, to be sold to for self-aggrandizement. That destroys trust, and quickly hurts both long-term and short-term performance.

**Q. What is “the acid test” of Trust-based Selling™?**

A. Ask yourself if you can conceive of a situation in which you’d recommend a competitor to your best customer for a non-trivial piece of work.

If your answer is no—i.e., you cannot even conceive of such a situation—then by your own admission, you always choose your interest over the customer’s. This means a customer should not--and probably does not--really trust you.

That doesn’t mean you should routinely refer competitors, or roll over and give business away. But it does highlight your motives, which drive trust. That is the acid test of Trust-based Selling™.

**Q. How does the Trust-Based Selling™ selling process differ from others?**

A. Trust-based Selling™ is not a process, but a specific set of values, beliefs and approaches. It can be applied over most existing sales processes. It is not the processes that change, but the underlying objectives and the customer interactions. The changes are simple enough, though radical in their effect.

**Q. What are those specific “values, beliefs and approaches?”**

They start with four principle values, which together increase trust:

- a. start, and end, by seeing the customer’s perspective
- b. see things in the long-term: the relationship is the customer
- c. behave in a collaborative manner with the customer
- d. be transparent in all things, including costs and profits

Some of the beliefs include an understanding of the economic power of trust, the nature of buyer motivation, and an understanding of how it is that trust is created and people are influenced.

The approaches include a variety of skills applied to common selling situations; not just stages in the sales process, but difficult situations like pricing, negotiating, competitive bidding, and scope creep.

**Q. How do you keep a salesperson from giving away the store?**

A. By systematically applying the values. Trust-based selling can’t work if the seller isn’t economically healthy, or if both parties aren’t transparent and collaborative.

Salespeople cannot themselves be successful if they are not willing to behave as an equal party to the relationship. Trust-based Selling™ teaches them to openly conduct honest customer discussions, insisting on their need for equal benefit, and defining ‘walk-away’ points. In short, it is stupid to give away the store, and Trust-based Selling™ points that out clearly.

***Q. What parts of the sales process are most affected?***

A. All parts are affected, but the personal interactions with customers more so, because it is in contact with other people that trust is most significantly created. Trust-based Selling™ uses a detailed 5-step model for the creation of trust to apply to interpersonal conversations.

Other parts of selling—e.g. website design, prospecting—are affected by other aspects of trust creation.

***Q. Do you have some unique perspectives on trust?***

A. Absolutely. Charles H. Green, founder of Trusted Advisor Associates, is co-author of [The Trusted Advisor](#) (Maister, Green, Galford, Free Press, 2000). That book, and our work before and since, highlights such models as the Trust Equation and the Trust Creation Process. The insights of Trust-based Selling™ are well-grounded in research and practice.

***Q. If selling based on trust is so strong, why is it so rare?***

A. First of all, it is not rare among great salespeople; only among sales training programs, sales gurus and sales books. Here are two big reasons:

1. The dominant theme in business today is competition, not customers. Business sees itself as being not about customer satisfaction, but about gaining competitive advantage. The thought leaders of business today have lowered the emphasis on the role of the customer compared to several decades ago.
2. Selling itself has long been associated with manipulation and trickery. By comparison, it’s only recently that selling has moved from one-off, transactional interactions about physical products to long-term, complex relationships about complex products and services. Selling hasn’t caught up to the fact of massive economic interdependencies.