SALES

The Challenger Sale

by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson

The best sales reps do not just build friendships. They teach customers something new and take control of the sale.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Challengers are only about a quarter of all reps, but they are roughly 40 percent of star performers - and in complex sales they take 54 percent of the star spots.**

CEB scored more than 6,000 reps on 44 attributes. The harder and more complex the sale, the wider the Challenger's lead over every other profile.

02 **The friendliest rep finishes last. Relationship Builders are 21 percent of reps but only about 7 percent of star performers - and just 4 percent in complex sales.**

The profile most companies hire for - likable, generous with time, allergic to tension - is the weakest of the five. Harmony is not a sales strategy.

03 **Loyalty is won in the sales call, not by the product. 53 percent of B2B customer loyalty comes from the sales experience itself.**

In CEB's loyalty study, brand and product each drove only 19 percent and value-to-price just 9. How you sell outweighs what you sell.

04 **Do not pitch features. Teach the customer a reframe: a bigger, underappreciated problem hiding inside their own business.**

Commercial Teaching gives customers a new way to see their world, then makes the cost of ignoring the problem undeniable. Insight creates the urgency that feature lists never do.

05 **Lead TO your solution, never WITH it. The insight must point at the one strength only you have - and your product enters the conversation last.**

If your teaching does not lead to your unique differentiator, you educate the customer and a cheaper rival collects the sale.

06 **A teaching conversation has a choreography: Warmer, Reframe, Rational Drowning, Emotional Impact, A New Way, Your Solution.**

Credibility first, then the surprise, then the numbers, then make it personal, then show the better path - and only then your product. Skip the story and the data does not move anyone.

07 **Tailor the same insight to each stakeholder's own scoreboard. Finance hears margin, operations hears risk, the front line hears workload.**

Resonance is personal: a complex deal needs people with different priorities to each find their own reason to say yes. One generic pitch persuades none of them.

08 **Take control of the money talk and the deal's momentum. Challengers raise price early and push back when a deal drifts.**

Assertive is not aggressive. Challengers are comfortable with pushback on both sides, so deals move to a decision instead of dying in polite delay.

09 **Constructive tension is the engine, not a side effect. Challengers debate the customer's thinking instead of smoothing every disagreement over.**

Teaching creates intellectual tension - 'your problem is bigger than you think' - and taking control creates commercial tension. Both kinds keep a complex sale honest and moving.

10 **Challengers are made, not born. Teach, tailor, and take control are coachable behaviors that ordinary reps can learn.**

The book's second half is about exporting the model to the core of the sales force: with the right coaching and manager support, average reps can be built into Challengers.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, researchers at CEB, studied more than 6,000 sales reps across 90 companies, scoring each on 44 skills and behaviors, to answer one question: what separates star performers in tough, complex sales? Their answer shocked the sales world. Meanwhile, a second CEB finding set the stage: the average customer is already 57 percent of the way through a purchase decision before ever talking to a rep - so showing up to 'discover needs' means arriving after the thinking is done.

The reps sorted into five profiles: the Hard Worker (21 percent of reps), the Challenger (27 percent), the Relationship Builder (21 percent), the Lone Wolf (18 percent), and the Reactive Problem Solver (14 percent). Challengers made up roughly 40 percent of star performers, and 54 percent in complex sales. Lone Wolves came second among stars but follow their own instincts and cannot be coached or copied. The Relationship Builder - the profile most organizations try to hire - finished dead last, with only about 7 percent of stars and 4 percent in complex sales.

Challengers win with three behaviors. They teach: commercial teaching leads a choreographed conversation - a warmer that shows they know the customer's world, a reframe that reveals a hidden problem, rational drowning in the cost of that problem, emotional impact that makes it personal, a new way of solving it, and only then their solution. They tailor: the same insight is reshaped for the company and for each stakeholder's own priorities, building the consensus a

complex deal needs. And they take control: they talk about money without flinching, welcome debate, and keep the deal moving, creating constructive tension instead of avoiding it.

The proof that this matters sits in CEB's loyalty research: 53 percent of B2B customer loyalty is driven by the sales experience, against 19 percent for brand, 19 percent for product and service, and 9 percent for value-to-price. Customers stay loyal to reps who teach them something valuable about their own business. And because the Challenger behaviors are skills rather than traits, the book closes on how managers and coaching can build Challengers across the whole sales force - not just find them.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, build one reframe before your next sales talk: pick a cost your customer is quietly paying that they have never added up. Open the meeting with the insight - show them the problem and its price tag - and save your product for the very end, as the answer to the problem you just taught them.

By Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, first published 2011. Read it if you sell anything complex and want the research-backed habits of the reps who win most.