

The Synergism of Selling by Dr. Thomas Gordon

Synergism, from the Greek word “sunergos” meaning “working together,” is the action between two or more people to achieve an effect of which each is individually incapable. Truly the definition fits the process between buyer and seller. It is, in fact, a synergistic process; it requires two or more people to complete. The relationship between those individuals is critical to the general success and attitudes relating to the buying-selling process.

The concept of this selling model is that it takes the buyer and seller working together to create this true “SYNERGISM.” This can be contrary to the perceptions and stereotypes that some people have about selling. These feelings have been reinforced by sales training that has consistently taught skills designed to produce a “winner” in the buyer/seller relationship. This of course implies that there must also be a loser.

Unfortunately, the idea of winning can cause as much trouble in personal and business relationships as it can bring about success and satisfaction. The problem lies in the concept you have in mind for “winning” in the arena of selling.

Playing the Win-Lose Game

First there is the concept of Winning As Defeating Your Opponent. Webster’s has several definitions that fit this picture:

WIN:

- to gain the victory in a contest;***
- to gain in or as if in battle or contest;***
- to get possession of by effort or fortune.***

A great example of this form of winning is the football game. Each team has similar purposes: to hang on to the ball as long as possible, crush all resistance, score the most points and win, win, win. Vince Lombardi’s often quoted statement sums it up— “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” That’s pretty extreme, yet most of us would agree that trying to win at the expense of your opponent losing is at the heart of most competitive activities, from the football field to the negotiating table. It’s assumed and it’s accepted.

Consequently, nothing more is at stake than the outcome of the game (professional athletes excepted). Most of us can lose at tennis, computer games or cards and not feel threatened with material loss or become bent on certain revenge. It's worth a reminder, however, that even when winning and losing is the accepted nature of the game, some people still can't stand to lose, and will actually seek to retaliate in some way. We've all had experience with such "bad sports."

Dangers of Win-Lose Selling

The Winning As Defeating Your Opponent viewpoint can cause all kinds of problems when applied to a sales situation for the very simple reason that neither customers nor sales professionals will tolerate being losers for long. It's true that winning at the expense of the customer losing may work for a while, especially if the sales professional is always on the move, or deals with one-time sales. However, in most selling situations the consequences of viewing selling as a football game prove disastrous for both "teams" in the long run.

In the buying-selling relationship there are two methods for carrying out the Winning As Defeating Your Opponent scheme. Both methods involve someone winning and someone losing. Both can be practiced by sales professionals and by customers.

Method I: I Win and You Lose

Method I is clearly the most prevalent of the two. In a typical scenario, the sales professional tries to overwhelm the customer, wear down his or her resistance and sweet-talk him/her into buying. Finally, after putting up a game defense, the customer yields and the winner of the match is declared.

Or the scenario might be that of a customer who demands every possible concession, squeezes every bit of profit out of the sale and insists on unrealistic conditions—any or all of this so that the customer can feel like the winner, the victor.

Unlike a friendly tennis match, both sales professionals and customers resent this kind of losing; first, because it was not mutually agreed upon as one of the acceptable outcomes, and most importantly, because such losing usually has real and painful consequences. Sales professionals who agree to bad sales terms, for example, often pay a high price in terms of marginal commissions, poor performance reviews and loss of confidence that can lead to feelings of resentment. Likewise, customers who feel forced to buy from a Method I sales professional often pay a high price in product quality

or service dissatisfaction, loss of time or money, unrealized promises and personal frustration. The chances that these two “opponents” will want to meet on the playing field again are questionable to say the least.

Method II: You Win and I Lose

Method II—You Win and I Lose—can take two forms. First, whenever one person is using Method I with success, his or her “opponent” must use Method II. If the customer is to win, then the sales professional must finally agree to lose, and vice versa. It’s not that anyone wants to resolve things this way, it’s usually a case of choosing to give in or give up in order to get relief from the overbearing person. There is another form of Method II, however, that is sometimes found among sales professionals; this is a manipulative tactic of feigning defeat in order to gain a psychological “advantage” over the customer. The classic example is the oft-maligned used-car salesperson who “high-balls” the customer with an outrageous price quote which is then lowered further and further as the customer “negotiates.” The sale gets completed when the salesperson admits s/he has been defeated by a superior opponent and “gives the car away” to the victorious customer.

Regardless of how losing comes about in the buying relationship, it leaves a residue of frustration, resentment and unfulfilled needs—ingredients that don’t mix well in the formula for sales success. That’s why the concept of Winning As Defeating Your Opponent should never leave the sports arena.

Taking the Losing out of Winning

Let’s now turn to another viewpoint about winning, that of Winning As Gaining Mutual Satisfaction. Webster also offers several definitions that fit this concept of winning.

WIN:

to succeed in arriving at a place or state;

to solicit and gain the favor of;

to gain by work.

This is a point of view about winning that most people don’t think about very often. True, we do have a few expressions like, “She has that winning smile...winning personality...or winning ways,” but those meanings are far outnumbered by the expressions of winning as defeating another.

Let's look carefully at the above dictionary definitions, as each contributes to the perception of winning that this program advocates for sales professionals. The first definition suggests the accomplishing of a goal or the attainment of an important need or want. For the sales professional, "arriving at a place or state" could include getting a fair price, realistic delivery schedule, appropriate credit and compensation for making the sale, respectful treatment from the customer, etc.

The second definition, "to solicit and gain the favor of," suggests a concern for the other person, a bringing about of good will in the relationship. To a sales professional, this means doing what it takes to gain satisfaction for the customer so that the customer has a good feeling toward the salesperson. Combining the first and second definitions, the salesperson can best assure "gaining the favor of" the customer by making certain that the customer also succeeds in arriving at a "desired place or state"—getting his or her important needs met. In other words, winning means satisfying the sales professional and satisfying the customer.

The third definition, "to gain by work" suggests that organized, productive effort can produce a winning condition. This program, in fact, offers such a working method (Method III) that can result in both salesperson and customer satisfaction.

The Synergistic Model

Whereas Method I and Method II involve someone losing, Method III is an approach to problem solving that rejects losing as an acceptable outcome. Instead the intention is to arrive at an outcome, solution, agreement, contract, etc., that leaves both parties as winners with their important needs met, their pride intact and their feelings toward each other positive and respectful. This is a scenario in which the Method III salesperson is actually insisting that the customer's needs be met as well as his or her own.

No pressure or manipulation is used and no yielding or denial of important needs is going on either. Rather, the sales professional, along with the customer, is searching, through creative thinking processes, for terms or conditions that both can live with and feel good about. It's as though the salesperson is saying to the customer, "If you don't win, I don't win."

Method III is more than an intention to achieve fairness, mutual satisfaction and equity; it is a specific method involving six creative problem solving steps. These Method III steps are described in detail in the article, "Resolving Conflicts With Method III."

When this form of Method III winning characterizes the sales professional-customer relationship, both feel like winners; neither feels like a loser; no resentment is felt; rather, mutual good will and respect flow back and forth. Both parties look forward to future contacts and have no need to plot a defensive or retaliatory strategy. No one needs to get even, because both remain even; the relationship is a win-win relationship, not a win-lose relationship. It is precisely this winning approach to relationships that leads to long-term, stable and growing customer accounts.