



# Living Your Vows in a Whirlwind Economy

by Seleste Lunsford

A Business Issue  
Quick Read

*In today's economy, selling needs to be more like a marriage and less like a whirlwind romance. The concept is pretty basic: Predictable long-term revenue growth requires enduring, mutually-beneficial customer relationships.*

The challenge lies neither in grasping that point, nor in popping the question, but in doing what it takes to live up to your vows.

## Find the Right Customers

To reach and exceed their revenue goals, salespeople need customers who value what you sell — ideally expressed in a clear value proposition. Whether product-centered (“We sell world-class widgets”) or service-centered (“We grow your business”), a value proposition — like a marriage proposal — frames the kind of relationship you want.

Yet a recent AchieveGlobal study found at least two trends that complicate your customer relationships. Increased competition has made commodities of many products and services, and savvy customers now rely on arms-length buying models — RFPs, reverse auctions, procurement teams, and others.

To weather these challenges, it's important to segment and prioritize customers based on *the value they find in you*, not just the value you find in them. Then sift this data for the specific customers most likely to value what you sell.

## Define a Relationship Process

Even among organizations that sell on price or convenience, few realize long-term success with-

out equally long-term relationships. Our study found that leading sales organizations now support these relationships by matching salespeople to specific market segments, allocating resources to the best opportunities, and leveraging multiple sales channels, such as distributors and e-commerce.

In addition, these organizations often tailor a relationship process for each customer segment. As a result, they're far more likely to send the right salesperson to the right customer to generate the right return.

Relationships thrive or fail based on defining moments in every customer interaction. Make these moments positive with a relationship process that matches your activities and resources to the buying patterns and expectations of each market segment.

A tailored process benefits customers through your solution, of course, and equally through the expert counsel of your salespeople. The process benefits you through longer-term revenue streams and protection from competitors and price pressures.

## Build a Welcoming Home

Customers tend to stick around when your house is in order. A welcoming home begins with a coherent

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sales strategy, which tells everyone what to sell, to whom, and how to sell it. Yet a mismatched sales culture or support system can sabotage even the best-laid strategy.

At the heart of your sales culture, values and beliefs drive decisions, activities, motivation, performance, and turnover. Even so, our research found that mergers, acquisitions, other big changes, and related short-term thinking can crush the effort to maintain long-term customer relationships.

Promote the needed values and practices by making relationships a strategic centerpiece and by making learning and development a cultural norm. Once your team agrees on the beliefs that guide decisions, reward information-sharing and celebrate success.

Like cultural challenges, overwrought systems and policies can weaken customer relationships. For example, if you think your CRM or SFA software hasn't lived up to the hype, perhaps people simply don't know how to use it.

To remove systemic obstacles, streamline your market, territory, account, opportunity, and sales-call planning. Align compensation and incentives to strategy. Re-calibrate coaching and performance management to support desired behaviors. Find and use effective CRM or SFA software. Finally, select or create essential collateral, ROI calculators, and other selling tools — and deep-six the rest.

### Learn from Each Other

Strategy, culture, and systems *support* customer relationships. *Building* relationships takes salespeople who can demonstrate knowledge in a number of areas that affect the customer's perception of them and of your organization:

- Global and national business issues
- Industry trends and events affecting you and your customers
- Product features and benefits
- Customers — both organizations and people
- Each stage of your relationship processes
- Politics in the customer's organization

Help everyone see the wider context and nitty-gritty details for each market segment. The payoff is nothing less than the mutual understanding without which no customer relationship can survive.

Besides applying this knowledge, salespeople need to be obsessive about maintaining each customer relationship. Support that daily effort by giving salespeople the “why” behind your expectations. Provide frequent developmental opportunities, and then recognize and reward the desired behaviors.

Just as critical, give people the skills to cultivate long-term relationships — not just in-the-moment sales skills, but prospecting, presentation, negotiation, service, strategic, and other skills as well.

### To Have and To Hold

While it's mainly salespeople who interact directly with customers, a customer marries your entire family. The truth is, everyone in the sales organization plays a role in every long-term customer relationship:

- Senior executives define the sales strategy and cascade it to others.
- Divisional or regional VPs communicate the strategy, oversee its execution, and develop sales leaders.
- Sales managers communicate and apply the strategy as they coach and develop their teams.

Provide opportunities for all to learn and grow. Only then will your customers sustain you, in the toughest economy.

- Salespeople, service reps, technicians, and other frontline people acquire, grow, and retain individual customer relationships.

So, to retain your valued customers, people at every level — even executives — need to demonstrate your shared values as well as level-specific knowledge and skills.

Like any partner, a customer can change as reflected needs and expectations evolve. That's why at least one marriage cliché applies equally to sales: Never stop working on your relationship. Stay in touch with market trends. Revisit and adjust your strategy. Refine your culture. Re-structure systems to support your strategy. Provide opportunities for all to learn and grow.

Only then will your customers sustain you, even in the toughest economy.

#### About the Author

Seleste Lunsford, AchieveGlobal Executive Consultant, advises clients nationally and internationally on developing effective sales people, sales leaders, and sales systems and processes.

Seleste has held positions in sales, product management, marketing, and management consulting. These positions honed led her considerable abilities in strategic planning, market analysis and business-case development, process redesign, and product design and development.

Seleste has written for numerous national publications, including *Selling Power and Pharma Voice*, and is co-author of two books: *Secrets of Top-Performing Sales People* and *Strategies that Win Sales*. She is a sought-after speaker at business conferences.

Seleste earned an MBA from Florida State University, where she also earned a B.S. in physics.

### About AchieveGlobal

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