



Features, Benefits [and Trust](#)

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A new Officer at a major global consulting firm told of a significant client relationship. The relationship was a very positive one, personally as well as in terms of work done. Several projects were completed over the course of a year, all with good success, before the work ran out.

Over the next 6 months, the consultant thought many times of the client, but never felt that the ideas or information at hand were sufficient to justify asking the client to spend time in a meeting to go over them. Then one night they met at a cocktail party.

After pleasantries were exchanged, the client looked a bit uncomfortable. “Look,” the client said, “I have to tell you we gave some work last week to a competitor of yours. I might have liked to see you get it, but—well, you hadn’t called, so I guess I just didn’t figure that you cared.”

This vignette is like O.Henry’s short story about two newlyweds. Each sold the thing dearest to themselves—he his watch, she her hair—to buy an anniversary gift for the other. She for him—a watch fob. He for her—a hair decoration. Both stories are bittersweet tales.



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Features, Benefits and Trust

The Officer made the very common mistake of assuming that clients buy features and benefits. In truth, most of them buy trust on top of those. The consequences aren't often tragic—but that's just because most competitors are also only selling based on features and benefits. The few that get beyond features and benefits can enjoy huge competitive success.

When buyer needs are complex, they can be described as problems.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FEATURES AND BENEFITS?

Nothing—as far as they go. But in the businesses of complex intangible services (law, accounting, consulting, enterprise software, banking), they are not enough.

Features and benefits are common terms in the lexicon of selling. Simply, features are objective characteristics of the product or service in question--acceleration for a car, office locations for a law firm. Benefits are solutions to client needs--speed in transportation, or global representation for a corporation.

Most sales programs suggest focusing on the buyer's needs first, and then describing the product's features in terms of benefits that meet those needs. Thus a car salesman would discuss the desirability of speed with the buyer, and then discuss the car's acceleration as responsive to that need. A law firm would make a point of articulating the client's desire for global representation, and then highlight the benefits of its multiple locations given that need.

When buyer needs are complex, they can be described as problems. Consultative selling is a structured approach to identifying client problems and helping formulate integrated responses. It is simply a systemic version of matching needs, benefits and features.

Sound pretty fundamental? It is. It works, though—at least in the areas of tangible goods and services. But it doesn't go far enough in the world of complex intangible services. In particular, it doesn't address trust.

WHY DO COMPLEX INTANGIBLE SERVICES DEMAND MORE?

Because clients want more than good, even great, problem-solving. Suppose a client



Charles H. Green, 2002

Features, Benefits and Trust

approaches me with a problem. I research and manage and structure that problem very well, and provide just the right solution. Suppose further that the client returns repeatedly, and each time I provide the same excellent, problem-solving service. Have I then earned my client's trust?

But—in complex intangible services, the complexity is unbounded, and there is no end to problems.

The answer is no. I may have earned a deserved reputation for reliability and quality, but that's about all. Notice what is missing in the scenario. It is always reactive, never proactive. It never mentions reaching out and getting to know the client or the client organization. It presumes the client problem definition is right. It shows no interest in finding out what other

issues might arise, or where the next problem might come from. It shows no attempt to find patterns in the problems. It shows no sense of personal connection. Basically, the scenario shows no interest in the client beyond representing a source of problems to make the professional successful.

Contrast that with a professional who also provides very good solutions to problems. But in this scenario, the professional listens for what's behind the client's concerns. She asks questions; she is willing to take risks by hypothesizing and brainstorming with the client. She looks for patterns, and tries to understand the client industry. She talks about the client as an individual and how he is affected by the issue at hand. She does not hesitate to offer observations outside the scope of the job at hand if they are valid and useful to the client. And she is very direct about difficult issues like pricing, scope creep or staffing, because she handles them in a larger relationship context.

Which scenario do you think creates more client loyalty? Which do you think is more profitable? Which do you think ultimately provides better client service?

Of course, there are a very few buyers in all businesses who buy solely on price or features; some do so out of fear of being bamboozled, others do so because they feel they understand benefits better than the salesperson, and are willing to do the job of relating features to needs and benefits themselves.



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Features, Benefits and Trust

And most buyers in most businesses react well to needs-based selling, or its large-scale cousin, consultative selling. In these cases, the seller actively helps the buyer articulate needs or problems, and then matches up benefits and features to address them.

But—in complex intangible services, the complexity is unbounded, and

there is no end to problems. What a buyer seeks is beyond solutions; buyers prefer to find an expert they can trust to deal with problems they haven't even imagined yet. An expert they can trust isn't just a professional with fine expertise and a great track record. An expert they

can trust must have other qualities as well.

An expert they can trust must be curious, a good listener, have a long-term perspective, be collaborative, be unafraid to share opinions, and above all, continually have the client's best interests in mind—well beyond the mere bounds of the existing project. At root, they have to really care about the client, not just the problem.

Most clients never even get to see an expert who cares; most experts stop at problem-solving. This is a huge competitive opportunity; because, if given the opportunity, clients can tell if you really care about **them**, not just about their work, and the difference can matter hugely.

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