



What Buyers [Really Want](#)

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The head of marketing for a US East Coast major law firm was recently asked by 3 partners to help rehearse and prepare them for a key sales meeting at a major potential new client. “If only we can convince them that we are absolutely the best in this area, which we are,” the lead partner said, “then they’ll have to go with us.”

This point of view seemed so self-evident to the senior partner that it didn’t feel like an opinion; it seemed like an obvious truth. Unfortunately, not only is it just an opinion—it also is not particularly accurate.

Lawyers, accountants, bankers, actuaries, consultants—all behave more often than not as if the key to selling lies in a powerful display of expertise. Most complex intangible services sales are sold with the implicit, if not explicit, belief that expertise is the issue. But that doesn’t make it right. And if it’s not right, then we must answer three questions:

- if expertise doesn’t sell best, then what does?
- don’t buyers seem to want to buy expertise?
- if selling expertise isn’t the best approach, why is it the dominant one?



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Good questions all. The answers lie in the psychology of buyer and seller of complex intangible services, and in trust—which is what really lies at the heart of successful sales.

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

If buyers don't primarily buy expertise, then what are they buying? The answer, in a word, is trust.

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Take a simple case. Imagine you have recently moved to a new city, and must find a pediatrician for your 2-year old child.

You have a list of 6 doctors, referrals from a combination of health plans, co-workers and neighbors. One doctor clearly has a slight edge in reputation of medical school; another has the most years' experience; another is on staff at a teaching hospital and has written several articles.

But there is one who hits it off immediately with your 2-year old. This pediatrician connects with and seems genuinely focused on your interests as a parent and on those of your child, rather than on getting you as a

new patient. In other technical respects, this physician is in the top half, but not number 1 in any category.

What do you do? Not everyone, but a majority nonetheless, will go for the pediatrician who seems to care, as long as he or she is within an acceptable range of expertise. And, they will use the word "trust" to describe their decision. There are exceptions, of course; a few people always buy purely on the basis of technical specifications, a few more buy only on price, and occasionally one seller is overwhelmingly dominant in the technical realm.

But the majority behave as if expertise has an acceptability threshold. Achieving that threshold is a **necessary** condition for getting hired—but even expertise beyond the threshold is **not a sufficient** condition. **Given an acceptable level of expertise, people prefer—strongly—to buy from someone whom they trust.** In other words, expertise serves as a first-order screen in the buying process—but not as a final decision-making criterion.

To put it simply: **most buyers of complex intangible services prefer to find an expert**



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they can trust, rather than to evaluate expertise across experts.

Then Why Don't Buyers Behave that Way?

They do. They just don't say so. There's a difference.

First, buyers are a little intimidated by the role of buyer. Usually the seller has greater

expertise. There is often a lot at stake, and the services are costly. It is often truly hard to choose between several very competent sellers. So, buyers feel a need to display some level of technical expertise themselves, partly out of natural human ego, and partly to keep the seller on his toes.

Second, corporate buyers of complex intangible services are usually professionals themselves—they worship at the same altar of expertise. And, they are particularly concerned to be able to justify their decision. Justification in business almost always consists of rational, mostly financial, arguments. Therefore buyers drive discussions in the technical direction, even while looking to assess their level of trust with the sellers.

How does this play out? Buyers look for rational reasons to justify what is finally an emotional decision, built heavily on trust. The most commonly accepted rational reasons are price and features. (Price is a very comfortable excuse for saying no—it is quantitative, impersonal, and only the buyer has all the numbers. However, price is rarely given as a positive reason for selection). Very few chief counsels will say to their CEO or board nothing more than, “I think we should go with XYZ because, basically, I think like them better and trust them more.” Yet that is how most of us do behave when buying complex intangible services.

THEN WHY DO SELLERS SELL EXPERTISE?

Professionals over-emphasize expertise for three reasons. First, that's what they think (falsely) the buyer wants— and the buyer encourages them in that belief.

Second, expertise is what we professionals are most comfortable with. Very few lawyers went into law because they wanted to sell, or because they wanted to work with people.

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They went because they love the law, and the vast majority of their learning, development, evaluations and study consist of greater and greater mastery of content expertise. The same is true for consultants, commercial

bankers, accountants and actuaries. Why would anyone want to sell on any other basis than what they're good at and spend all their time and energy at?

Finally, professionals have an emotional vested interest in selling on expertise. It is not comfortable to believe that success in selling might depend on something **other than** what we spend almost all our time and energy focused on. Still, it's the truth.

Most buyers of complex intangible services prefer to use technical expertise as a screening mechanism, and then make final decisions based on trust. Sellers who recognize this will listen more, talk less, and focus on the issues of the client at hand (rather than those of past clients). These simple client-

focused behaviors are the ways buyers assess trust. Get yourself in the door by focusing on expertise; but once in, drop it and focus on the client, not on yourself.

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