



Selling from [Principle](#)

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How do you cope with complexity in your sales life?

It's tempting to respond to complexity with more complexity: throw more time management tools at it, break it down into pieces and manage the processes, use more CRM.

The other approach is to respond to complexity with less complexity: move "upstream" and deal with general principles that can be interpreted so as to give general guidance to specific situations.

Salespeople and business developers show a preference for the former, I think. We also, as a rule, are focused on tactics more than strategies; tips and tricks more than insights; action steps more than plans. (Think of the proportion of the articles in this and other selling sites that start with "Top 7 Tips for xxxx." I know, I've written my share of them).

When we focus on process-mapped complexity and tips and tricks, we miss several things. A strategic perspective. A reminder of what's important. The opportunity to re-invent, re-apply and re-affirm the basics of the business.



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And that's not all. Principles-based selling creates trust. Buyers trust people who appear consistent in their approach. Thinking from principles means that employees are internalizing what's important to the company. And if principles are constantly being tested in

the real world, then you'll find out far sooner if there are market-meets-principles problems.

Selling by principles affects the customer's experience. If you're trying to remember 100 different techniques for 200 different situations, you cannot help but appear inwardly focused, preoccupied, and—worst of all—manipulative. How can you appear otherwise if you're responding to every client comment with a mental download of your playbook?

Selling from principles lets you respond to thousands of situations—without the cost of mentally withdrawing while you process your client's comments. That raises two questions: What do

these 'principles' look like? And how do you sell from principles?

WHAT DO PRINCIPLES LOOK LIKE?

Here are my own four principles. You should pick your own. I have evolved mine over the years, and written about them (see Trust-based Selling). They work very well for me; I can't guarantee they'll work for you. But here they are as an example.

1. Start with **client focus**—for the sake of the client. That's not the same as client focus for *your* sake; that's the client focus of a culture. And I don't mean that you should throw away all thoughts of what's good for you. I just mean start with, lead with, begin with, what's important to the client—for the sake of the client.
 2. Practice **collaboration**. Treat the client like a collaborator: not a 'buyer,' not the enemy, and not even the 'client' (as in separate because of 'professionalism.')
- As a stretch goal, consider *writing your next proposal together with the client*—seated on the same side of the table.

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3. Have a **medium-to-long term perspective**, not a short-term perspective. Another way to put this is: never think transaction, always think relationship. Never allow yourself to think of a deal, a discount, a favor, an agreement, without thinking whether you'd do that same deal 20 more times—and without

having that discussion with the client. In meetings, make sure to talk about what the meeting means for the relationship.

4. Default to **transparency**, unless to do otherwise is illegal or injurious to others. Don't ask 'why share this,' ask 'why not share it?' Open up your cost

structure, your internal processes, your likely decisions; even your inner thoughts. Nothing builds trust faster than transparency—it screams 'I have no secrets from you.'

Those may sound like motherhood and apple pie to you, and there's no question they are abstract: that's why they call them principles. The trick lies only partly in the choice of principles: it lies mainly in where

you *apply* them. And the right answer is: nearly everywhere.

HOW DO YOU SELL FROM PRINCIPLES?

The way you sell from principles is to notice your responses to situations—and increasingly base those responses on your principles. Again, I'll draw from my own four principles as a source of situations and responses.

- **Client asks you how much experience you have in XYZ area.** Your first words should be a direct answer: "6 years, three clients, for myself; the team of four have 1, 7, 0 and 0 years respectively. Would you like more detail, or not?"
 - Client focus (respect the client; answer the question asked, don't spin it; and respect the client's time, don't hijack it for long answers)
 - Transparency (tell the truth, don't withhold. Straight up).
- **Client insists on influencing your choice of project staff.** Your response should be to understand why, and then to suggest joint approaches to the issue going forward.

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- Client focus (respect their reasons, and their reasoning. Ask about it).
- Medium-to-long term (this is not a one-off bargaining; it's an opportunity to jointly forge new joint processes for future sales).
- **Client forces you to deal with 3rd party buyers, purchasing, and RFPs.**

Resist the temptation to go around the purchasing people; treat them as the new client (because they are).

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- Client focus (the organization made this process; your old client doesn't want to choose between you and his employer; and your new client doesn't want to be disrespected)
 - Transparency: say that you'll not say anything to the end client you wouldn't say to purchasing—then deliver on your promise.
- **Client asks you, 'Why should we buy from you?'** Your first words should be, "I don't know that you should! So it would be arrogant of me to say so. Let's talk about what

would be right for you to do, and then we'll see who you should buy from."

- Client focus: (this is a setup for you to talk about yourself; surprise them by not doing so—talk about them).
- Collaboration: Offer to work with them to figure out what's right for them. Then do just that. And be willing to walk away if that's the right thing for the client.
- Transparency: share the reasons why most clients who buy from you do in fact buy from you; give the client objective evaluative criteria from which to make meaningful selection choices between firms.
- **Client says, 'Your price is out of line.'** Your answer: "There are four things people mean when they say that: help me understand which you mean." (The four meanings are: not enough budget, more than I thought, I need a 'win,' and more than competition).
 - Client focus: take the question seriously; show that you can stay client-focused when others might feel threatened.
 - Collaboration: show you're willing to work together; it's not an 'objection,' it's an inquiry.



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- Medium-to-long term: show it's not about this deal, it's about assuming a longer term relationship, which frees you up to talk about this as just a possible deal you may or may not engage in.

Sorry, it's not a quick-hit, tip-trick, drive-by process. It takes a while. Most good things do, though. But the process will produce a lot more value than most tips—I'd be willing to bet.

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WORKING OUT YOUR OWN PRINCIPLES

Being about principles-based selling, it would be inappropriate to have 'tips and tricks' about developing principles. But fear not—it doesn't have to be hard.

Sit down at a quiet place with two blank sheets of paper and a pencil. Think about the principles of business you believe in. Not me, you. Write them down.

On the second sheet, write down the 7 toughest questions or situations you encounter with clients. (It's OK to go to 9 or 10).

Now, over the next few days, connect the dots. What do your principles tell you about how to respond to *your* toughest client questions?

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