

SALES

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THE NOBLE ART
OF SELLING
(Explained simply)



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Any resemblance to real events and/or to real persons living
or dead is purely coincidental

On the cover: the trabocco (in the variants also known as
a trabucco, bilancia o travocco) is an old palafitte fishing
platform typical of the Abruzzi coast. The Trabocchi
coast, protected as a monumental heritage, corresponds to
the stretch of the Adriatic coast of the province of Chieti
(Abruzzo). It is also present in some parts of the Molise,
Garganica and Tyrrhenian coast.

To my grandmother, Algisa

Fishing for customers, not fish

My grandmother Algisa, ninety years old, wanted to know what I did for a living. I told her I was a fisherman, like my grandfather, except that instead of fish I look for satisfied customers. She gave me a calm smile, as if she had understood more than I had explained. Perhaps she knew something that many salespeople forget: a good fisherman doesn't just cast the hook and hope. He watches the water, knows the seasons, respects the rhythm of the sea, and knows that every fish has its habits.

This book starts from there, from the conviction that selling resembles fishing a great deal. Not in the sense of chance or luck, but in the sense of patience, observation, and method. Someone who fishes without method works hard and goes home with an empty bucket. Someone who studies the behavior of fish, the temperature of the water, the currents, and the times of day when they bite, comes back with results that repeat.

But the sea of selling has changed. In the past, the salesperson was the fisherman who knew where the fish were, and the customer relied on his experience. Today the customer carries a map in his pocket: he searches, compares, reads, and asks his contacts for advice, often before he ever meets a salesperson.

Faced with this change, there are two typical reactions. The first is to cast ever larger nets: more calls, more emails, more advertising, more pressure. It is the method of someone who believes that fishing more means fishing better, and it often ends up depleting the sea. The second is to treat the customer as an enemy to be tricked with the right bait. This path, too, leads away from trust, which is the one thing no competitor can easily copy.

The experienced fisherman takes a third way. He chooses the right spot, prepares his equipment, watches the signs, and waits for the moment when the fish is ready. He does not force the catch; he makes it natural. In commercial terms, this means understanding the customer, offering useful information when it is needed, listening before proposing, and letting the decision mature.

A fisherman learns early that patience is not an option but a condition. Fish do not bite on command. There are days when the sea seems

empty and hours when nothing happens. Yet the fisherman never stops watching, checking his bait, adjusting his aim. He knows the result depends on a sum of small gestures repeated with consistency. Selling works the same way. The first contact often bears no fruit, nor does the second, and the third sometimes seems like a failure. But every attempt leaves information: about the right moment, the language that works, the most common objections. Those who give up at the first silence lose exactly the information that would have made the next cast more effective.

The sea teaches another lesson. The biggest fish is not the one you catch once. The fisherman who respects the environment will fish tomorrow, the day after, and for years to come. The fisherman who empties the reserve in a single season ends up with a depleted sea and no future. In selling, a customer won once and then lost is a catch that will never be repeated. The satisfied customer who returns, who speaks well of you, who introduces you to other customers, is the reserve that feeds tomorrow's catch. A well-managed sea always produces; a plundered sea, in time, stops giving fish.

This book offers no magic recipes, nor promises of easy sales. I wrote it from my field experience, hoping to offer food for thought to those who do,

or would like to do, this work, which for me is the most beautiful and noble of jobs.

The chapters follow the path of the fisherman: first you learn to read the sea, then you choose your equipment, cast the hook with method, manage the catch, and finally look after the reserve so that it keeps yielding.

You don't need to read it in order. Each chapter can be read on its own, like a stop on a journey that can be retraced many times. The important thing is to carry the question I have found most useful in many years of work, and which is essentially the one my grandmother would gladly have asked me: not how many fish you caught today, but what sea you are leaving to those who will fish after you.

Happy fishing, and good sales.

The metaphor of the screwdriver

Anyone who runs a company or works in sales will have read books or articles on selling. Almost always, these are advice and strategies designed for the B2C (business to consumer) market, which force B2B (business to business) companies to adapt them to their own world. But the B2B market has its own peculiarities, and trying to apply B2C techniques to B2B is like trying to turn a Phillips screw with a kitchen knife. You can get some results that way without ruining the screw (or the knife!), but it is much better to use a proper Phillips screwdriver or a power driver.

So what are the levers of selling in the business-to-business market? Just as in B2C, the customer researches online before buying. He searches for and finds, often without even noticing, companies that share knowledge in their sector, that have a good online reputation, and that base their strategy on the experience of the people who use their products. Trust matters to everyone, but if we observe what really counts for a purchasing company, we notice that price, availability, and

discounts are outweighed by usability, reliability, and after-sales service.

All B2B companies are very good at each of these parameters, or at least they claim to be. To stand out, they usually focus on one of these elements and turn it into their strength: some make after-sales service their flagship, others focus on ease of use. These are valid strategies that help differentiate from competitors. But they remain, at heart, simple marketing.

The real secret of B2B selling is something else, and its lever is more powerful than all the others: making the customer understand that, with your product, he can make money. Believe it or not, this is what shifts negotiations. When an entrepreneur is focused on the possibility of earning, he almost immediately stops talking about price, discounts, and values. The words “ease of use” and “after-sales service” give way to “delivery times” and “installation methods”, that is, practical questions about how the product will help him bring in more revenue. For this reason, every time you sit down at a table with a customer, ask yourself a simple question: how can I improve his ability to make a profit through my product or service? The answer could make a big difference, not only for today’s negotiation but for tomorrow’s relationship.

The courage to begin

I still remember the first day I understood that my work would be selling. It is not a spectacular memory: no memorable negotiation, no contract signed in front of an audience. There was only a mixed feeling, a blend of enthusiasm and fear, and the question buzzing in my head: “Will I really be able to do this?”

If you are reading these pages, you have probably asked yourself the same question. Perhaps you have just accepted your first sales job, or you are thinking of changing direction and trying your hand at selling. Perhaps you are afraid of not being “cut out” for this trade, of not being able to speak well enough, of lacking the nerve that, in your mind, a salesperson needs.

Starting something new is exciting. A new job, a new territory, a new colleague: at first it seems anything is possible. Then, slowly, doubts arrive. The phone doesn’t ring as you expected, the customer brushes you off with “we’ll be in touch”,

the manager gives you a look you can't decipher. This is the phase in which many think they have chosen the wrong path.

Those who have walked this path know it happens to everyone. In sales, a newcomer's path resembles a letter J, like the one drawn on investment charts. At first the line goes down: there is training, the effort of learning products, procedures, and people. Then comes the darkest moment, when you wonder whether it would be better to turn back. And only afterward, if you stay in the field, does the line rise again, often faster than you imagined. Think of a farmer who sows in autumn. For the first few days nothing happens, and the field looks just as it did before. The farmer who gives up because he doesn't see the fruits right away doesn't know what he is losing. It is the same with sales: the first contacts we sow often bear no immediate fruit, but they prepare the ground for the harvests of the following months. Those with patience and persistence reap; those who quit in the first winter are left with an empty field.

The first step is always the hardest, because it forces you out of your comfort zone. You have to speak with strangers, ask for a few minutes of their time, accept a "no" without taking it personally. And yet, those first "no"s teach you more than a thousand theoretical lessons. They show you what works, what sounds false, where you still need to improve.

Every conversation, even one that went badly, is a piece of experience that no one can give you.

You don't have to be a born salesperson to start. I have seen shy people become excellent professionals because they had a quality that matters more than all the others: listening. Those who truly listen to the customer, who try to understand what he needs before offering him something, have already done half the work. Fluency comes with time; curiosity does not, or at least not everyone cultivates it.

You may wonder what happens if the first deal goes badly, or if the first month doesn't bring in a single contract. What happens is what happens to everyone who starts: you feel the weight of disappointment and want to give up. That is normal. But take a moment to ask yourself what you learned from that day, what you would do differently, whom you could ask for advice. A salesperson who asks these questions is already growing, even if the numbers don't show it yet.

So, if you have the courage to start, know that you are not alone. Almost every salesperson you admire today went through the same moment of doubt, and most of them said to themselves, at some point, that they wanted to quit. Those who stayed discovered something precious: selling well means creating value for people, helping them solve a problem or improve their work, and watching them smile when they realize that what

you are offering is truly useful to them.

I won't promise you it will be easy. There will be off days, difficult customers, goals that seem out of reach. But I can tell you honestly that, when done well, selling is the most beautiful job in the world. It puts you in front of people every day, teaches you to understand them, forces you to improve, and gives you back, when you least expect it, the satisfaction of having made a difference in someone's life.

So start. The field is there, the sowing has begun, and the first fruits will come.

Selling, the safest job in the world!

There is no safer job in the world than that of the salesperson. Anyone who understands the mechanisms of selling and does everything that is needed cannot fail to get results. And when they do come, they are often far greater than what the same person would achieve with a fixed salary. This awareness helped me a lot at the start of my career, and today I write it with gratitude, although at the time I was not at all convinced.

Consider an employee hired on a permanent contract. He is assigned a desk, a task, and a schedule: from 8 to 5, with a one-hour lunch break. On the first day he arrives on time, works all day, and at five he gets up, satisfied with his work. Have you ever thought that, at the end of the day, he might go to the director or the owner and ask to be paid? Anyone would laugh at such behavior.

The next day it's the same, and the day after that. For twenty-five days, and for a whole month, he

works without receiving a penny. Only at the end of the month, if all goes well, does his paycheck arrive. He works, in other words, for thirty days before touching any money. It is a rule everyone accepts, and no one considers it unfair.

In sales it is exactly the same. It is not a blind attempt made in the hope that it works out. It is a process that follows precise rules, and these rules are based on averages and the law of large numbers.

In my experience I learned to reason with a simple rule, the 4x4 rule. Of course it has variations, depending on the product or service, the market in which you operate, and the price, but the underlying principle remains the same.

Suppose that, in a normal business, you need to make four phone calls to get one appointment. You call four people and propose a meeting, with no commitment, to present the service calmly. Most will say no, but on average one in four will say yes. At this point the salesperson makes four complete presentations, in their offices, at their companies. From four presentations, on average, one sale is born. To reach a sale you therefore need four appointments, and to get four appointments you need sixteen phone calls. As the great Gianfranco Nacinelli used to teach: “Sixteen contacts make a sale.”

Let's take a concrete example. Suppose each sale

brings in a profit of 160 euros (just to simplify). If it takes sixteen contacts to get one sale, then each single contact is worth on average ten euros. Every person you call, even if they answer “No, I’m not interested”, has earned you ten euros. You can even thank them: “Thank you, that was very kind, I’ve just earned ten euros.” Then you move on to the next call, and the same thing happens.

You can also do the math in reverse. If you make four calls an hour today and want to double your earnings, you simply need to make eight an hour. Work is measured in contacts, and contacts multiply.

Rejection is part of the job. The most important point is this: the salesperson’s work doesn’t start when the customer says “Yes, I’ll buy it”, and it doesn’t end there. Every contact is part of the work. Even the person who says no, even the one who doesn’t let you finish your sentence, is one of the sixteen steps needed for a sale. Every “no” is one sixteenth of the earnings you are building.

This is why a salesperson who knows the trade has no reason to fear rejection. Rejection is not a personal defeat. It is a statistical fact, expected and accepted, that is built into the math. Whoever understands this stops experiencing every “no” as a judgment on themselves and starts seeing it for what it is: the price of every “yes”.

After all, selling can be learned. The fear of rejection often comes from ignorance of how the process works. When you know the rules and have a clear view of the numbers, the phone stops weighing on you. It becomes a work tool, like a pen or a calculator.

The salesperson's trade holds up even in crises. A salesperson who knows the job can rely on something few other professionals have: the certainty of a method. It does not depend on a boss who decides whether to reward them with a salary, nor on a company that may downsize its staff. It depends on the contacts they make, the quality of their presentations, and the consistency with which they apply the rules.

For this reason, even in periods of economic crisis, a prepared salesperson can stay afloat with greater peace of mind. Not because difficulties don't exist, but because they know how to produce results, and they know that every person they meet, even those who say no, brings them closer to another sale.

Selling is the best job in the world. I recommend it to everyone, on condition that you know its rules and have the courage to apply them day after day.

Sell this pen!

In the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the protagonist asks a friend to sell him a pen. It is a short scene, almost a game, but it contains more lessons than many sales manuals. The request seems simple, yet it puts the salesperson in front of the greatest difficulty of the trade: convincing a stranger to want something he never thought he wanted.

But why a stranger? Someone who sells a pen to a friend has an enormous advantage. He knows the person, understands how they think, and trust already exists. The stranger offers none of this. He has no reason to listen to us, no hurry, no stated need. For him the pen is an object he already has, that costs little and can be replaced at any time. The salesperson therefore starts from zero and must build, in a few moments, what in real sales takes weeks.

The most common mistake is to talk about the pen. The instinctive reaction of someone who is

challenged is to “describe the object”. The pen is elegant, writes well, has a smooth ink flow, is made of metal. These are all true statements, and they are almost entirely useless. The customer already knows what a pen is.

A good salesperson, faced with the pen, does not present it right away. He asks. Who is it for? To sign contracts, to take notes, to give as a gift? When is it used? What happened the last time a pen failed you? Each question narrows the field and turns a generic object into a specific solution.

A good salesperson creates the need, or rather, brings out a need without imposing it. He can point out, tactfully, that many pens run out at the worst moment, or that a clean, confident signature conveys trust to the person receiving it. He doesn't have to say anything false or exaggerate. He simply has to connect the product to something the customer already considers important.

But this often isn't enough. The pen in the film is a pretext, but its lesson concerns every sale. Dr. Craig Wortmann of the University of Chicago, in his “Professional Selling” course, used to say that there are no impossible objects to sell, only salespeople who have not yet found the reason the customer should be interested. Those who approach a stranger with curiosity, with simple questions and respect for his time, have already

done half the work. Selling a pen to a stranger is hard precisely because it forces you to do what makes every great salesperson great: understand before proposing, and listen before convincing.

Since Professor Wortmann's course was entirely online, and to pass the exam you only needed a written report and photographic documentation, I thought I could get by by inventing a story, and that I didn't really need to do it, that is, to actually succeed in selling a pen to a stranger. But what would I have learned? Probably nothing. The challenge was to do it for real, in real life, or at least to try and put myself on the line. So I decided to do it for real, and I succeeded. How did I do it? I went one Saturday to the market in the city centre. The excitement was great, and until the last moment I thought about backing out. Then I saw a guy my own age chatting with friends, and I gathered my courage, went over to talk to him, and simply told him the truth: that I was taking a sales course and the exam was to sell a pen to a stranger, just like in the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. I asked if he would be willing to help me by buying my pen, and he was happy to do it. We took a photo, him with the pen and me with the banknote, and in the end he said he was glad he had done it. Thinking back, I still get emotional today; that experience contained more lessons than many sales manuals.

Why?

“Why?” is the question that opens doors. It is a short word, almost trivial, but it contains what every salesperson should be looking for: the reason. The customer tells you what he wants, but rarely tells you why he wants it. And it is precisely in the why that the real need, the real obstacle, and the real opportunity lie hidden.

When a customer says “I need a quote”, “We’re looking at several solutions”, or “The price is too high”, he is describing a situation on the surface. Underneath lie motivations that can be very different from one another. The quote may be needed to compare two suppliers, to justify a choice already made, or to buy time. The high price may be a real budget limit, or a lack of clarity about the value the product brings. The salesperson who doesn’t ask why has to guess, and guessing is expensive. He proposes the wrong solution, emphasizes the wrong advantages, and

responds to objections the customer never raised. The salesperson who asks why, on the other hand, receives information. And with information he can build a proposal that actually resembles the customer's problem.

The why is a diagnostic tool. A doctor doesn't prescribe a cure without first asking about the symptoms, how long they have lasted, and how they appear. Selling works the same way. Every "why" is a small diagnosis. When you ask "Why do you need this now?", you find out whether there is a deadline, an urgent problem, or a project about to start. When you ask "Why did you choose this approach?", you understand which criteria the customer considers important and which are simply habit.

Asking why several times, going a level deeper with each answer, allows you to reach the true reason. The customer says: "We want to change software." The salesperson asks why. The answer is: "The current one is slow." Again: why does that matter? "Because our sales reps waste time waiting for data." And finally: why does this weigh so much? "Because we lost two important deals for this reason." Now the salesperson knows that the real problem is not speed in itself, but lost opportunities. And from there he can build a proposal.

"No" is information! Let's go back to the 4x4 rule

(explained in the earlier chapters) and to the value of every contact. Every “no” contains information, and the why is the way to extract it. When the customer says “I’m not interested”, the polite salesperson can close with a thank-you, or can ask tactfully: “May I ask why you’re not interested?” In most cases the answer is an objection that can be overcome, a piece of market information, or simply the truth: this is not the right moment. In any case, the “no” becomes data. Knowing why a customer is not interested allows you to improve your message next time. A salesperson who systematically collects these whys stops repeating the same mistakes and starts refining his pitch. It should not feel like an interrogation. One precaution is necessary. The word “why”, said in the wrong tone, can sound accusatory, as if you were asking the customer to justify himself. “Why aren’t you buying?” puts people on the defensive. “How come this solution doesn’t seem right to you?” says the same thing in a softer way. For this reason the “why” must be accompanied by genuine curiosity. The salesperson must want to understand, not prove he is right. It is best to include it in a sentence that shows interest: “It helps me understand, why is this aspect important to you?” The customer feels heard, and with listening comes trust. And trust, more than any argument, is

what leads to the sale.

There is one last why, perhaps the most important, that the salesperson must ask himself: why am I proposing this particular product to this particular customer? Is it because I believe it really serves him, or because it is what suits me? A salesperson who asks himself this honestly sells better, because the customer perceives the difference. And he sells more calmly, because he knows he is offering something useful and not just pushing a product.

Selling is a trade of questions before answers. Those who learn to ask why, with curiosity and respect, discover that the customer already knows how to say yes to what he really needs. The salesperson's job is to help him recognize it, and to do that you have to start from that small, powerful word: why.

Sales Enablement

If you look at the performance of a sales team, almost always they form a bell curve in which the largest share of revenue is brought in by twenty percent of the salespeople, the so-called “Top Sellers”. These are people who could sell with their eyes blindfolded and their hands tied behind their backs. Everyone would like teams full of these salespeople, and companies often spend enormous sums on sales training courses where methodology gurus and motivational speakers provide representatives with the knowledge, skills, attitude, and structure to become “Top”.

But it doesn't work. Studies show that the average salesperson forgets more than 80 percent of what they learn in training within 30 days. The representative returns to the office, puts the binder with his notes on the shelf, and sooner or later falls back into his old habits, continuing to follow the path of maximum result with minimum effort rather than adopting the new notions he heard in training. They cannot put into practice what they

listened to.

David Scott's book *The New Rules of Sales Enablement* offers an innovative solution to this problem. Salespeople don't remember what they learned in courses. But they remember well the stories they heard after the course ended. They remember Marco (a Top Performer) showing photos of his new holiday home, and they think: "How did he earn so much?" They think: "If I did what Marco did, I could buy a holiday home too." The purpose of Sales Enablement is exactly this: to turn average performers into Top Performers. But how? Scott simply talks about making available to all salespeople what are called "Sales Playbooks", which tell everyone how the Top Performers closed the contract that earned them the bonus that paid for the seaside house, how they eliminated the competition, and how they won the trust of the customer "so-and-so" that earned them the bonus. "Sales Playbook" means making the experiences of the company's Top Performers available to all salespeople. I myself used Sales Playbooks in a recent experience that increased sales by over 50%.

The price war is a lost war.

Almost every market, sooner or later, reaches the moment when someone lowers their price. A competitor announces a discount, another responds with an even deeper cut, and within a few weeks the sector turns into a battlefield where the only criterion for choosing seems to be the figure printed on the price tag. It is a war that seems easy to fight, because price can be compared at a glance. But it is a war that is almost always lost, and the reason lies in what the price does not say. When a buyer doesn't know a product or service well, price becomes the most immediate criterion. It is the only piece of data that can be read without effort, compared in seconds, and that seems objective. The problem is that price is often the easiest question to ask and the poorest in information. It tells you how much something costs, not how much it is worth, or whether it really solves the buyer's problem.

The salesperson who enters the price war accepts playing on a field where the customer has already set the rules. He talks about discounts, percentages, limited offers, and in doing so he stops talking about the problem. The buyer, on the other hand, is looking for a solution. If the salesperson cannot show why his solution works, the lowest price wins by default.

When this happens, a race to the bottom that never ends begins. The dynamic is predictable. The first to cut prices gains a few more customers. Competitors respond, because losing market share is more frightening than earning less. After a few cycles, everyone is selling at reduced margins, nobody has the resources to invest in quality, service, or content, and the customer, used to discounts, has learned to wait for the next offer before buying. There is no winner: there are weaker companies and more distrustful customers.

The solution is content-based marketing, that is, the ability to educate and inform, which shifts attention from price to value. Those who invest in useful information build a relationship of trust that price competition cannot easily dent. The customer who has learned something from you no longer buys at a discount from whoever comes along first. Superior quality, attentive service, and a solid reputation can cost more without being

perceived as expensive, as long as the customer understands why. Perceived value is built through experiences and stories, not through discounts.

Lowering prices seems like a straightforward choice: less profit per unit, more units sold. But the math rarely works out. Every euro of discount is subtracted from the margin on every sale, and to make up for the loss you need volumes that often don't materialize. Moreover, discounts attract customers who buy only for the price, and who leave without hesitation at the first cheaper competitor. They are expensive to acquire and not very loyal.

Time is another hidden cost. The energy spent defending price is energy taken away from understanding the customer, building relationships, and offering useful content. The effort devoted to a continuous negotiation takes away the time needed to ask "why" and find the solution that makes the real difference.

How do you get out of the war? The way out is not to ignore price, but to shift the comparison. Before discussing figures, you must clarify the customer's problem, show how your offer solves it, and what result it brings. When the customer sees value in concrete terms, price stops being the only yardstick. In practice this means several steps. Create content that explains the real costs of a wrong choice, such

as lost time, missed opportunities, or problems avoided. Provide proof: customer testimonials, case studies, data. Offer different options, so that the customer can choose the level of service he needs, instead of choosing only between “expensive” and “cheap”. And above all, train salespeople so they know how to talk about value even when the customer immediately asks for a discount.

In conclusion, the price war is a lost war because it drags everyone toward the same bottom: ever-smaller margins, ever more similar products, ever more disloyal customers. Only those with the resources to endure the cuts the longest win. Those who want to win must stop fighting on the ground of price and go back to understanding the customer, offering useful information, telling an authentic story, and demonstrating, with facts, that their solution is worth what it costs.

Artificial intelligence in the B2B sales process

In the B2B world, the sales cycle is long, involves several people, and feeds on information. A company does not decide in a single phone call: weeks or months pass in discussions between technical managers, administrators, and top management. In this context, artificial intelligence does not replace the salesperson, but it changes the way the salesperson works, where he invests his time, and what he knows about the customer before speaking with him.

To understand its role, we must start from a simple fact: B2B selling is full of work that does not sell. Account research, CRM updates, meeting minutes, preparing offers, answering the same questions over and over. These activities are necessary, but they take hours away from contact with the customer, which is the only moment when trust is built. AI is useful above all here, in reducing support work and giving time back to those who need to speak with people.

Before the contact, you need to understand the

customer. The first area where AI adds value is preparation. A salesperson about to meet a potential customer can use tools that summarize the company website, recent news, press releases, public posts by executives, and open job postings. From this information, useful signals often emerge: an expansion into a new market, a change of management, a project that requires exactly the kind of solution being offered. However, this research must be done with judgment. While we await an AI that doesn't "hallucinate", we could run into an automatically generated summary with errors or wrong interpretations. AI speeds up research, but responsibility for the content you bring to the table remains human.

During the negotiation, in meetings, transcription and summary tools can record conversations, extract the commitments made, the objections raised, and the names of the decision-makers involved. A salesperson freed from the task of taking notes can focus on questions, observe reactions, and pick up nuances. This is where the method of questions, that is, asking why, finds its natural place: the AI records, the salesperson investigates. (It must be made clear that recording conversations requires the consent of the participants and compliance with privacy rules, in particular the GDPR for those operating in Europe. A serious company defines internal rules about what is recorded,

where the data is stored, and who can consult it.) After the meeting, follow-up and personalization. After a meeting, the temptation is to postpone the follow-up email. Generative tools make it possible to prepare drafts of messages consistent with what was discussed, with the right content to attach or link at the stage the customer has reached. The key point is real personalization: a generic message, written by a machine and sent to dozens of people, produces the opposite effect of what is intended. The message works when it picks up a precise detail from the conversation and proposes the right next step.

The choice of content can also be assisted. A system that knows the customer's stage, the role of the person you are speaking with, and the materials available can suggest which guide, which case study, or which demonstration to send. It is the logic of the salesperson as a content curator, described in the previous chapters, made faster.

With historical data from negotiations, AI can help estimate which opportunities are most likely to close, which have been stalled for too long, and which customers show behaviors that usually precede a purchase. For a sales director, this is a valuable tool for allocating resources and revising revenue forecasts.

Forecasts, however, are only as good as the data they are based on. A poorly maintained CRM,

with incomplete or outdated information, produces wrong forecasts with an apparent precision. Before relying on a predictive model, the company must invest in discipline around data entry. Without this foundation, AI amplifies the disorder instead of reducing it.

There are also risks not to underestimate, since every advantage brings its own risks. The first is standardization: if everyone uses the same tools to write the same proposals, the message becomes indistinguishable from that of competitors. The second is the loss of competence: a salesperson who delegates every step to the machine does not develop the judgment needed in difficult negotiations. The third is trust. B2B customers are increasingly alert to whether they are talking to a person or an automated system, and deception, even unintentional, costs dearly.

Artificial intelligence is a tool for doing better the work that matters: understanding the customer, building trust, guiding the purchasing process. Those who use it to eliminate human contact lose the advantage that remains fundamental in B2B, namely the relationship. Those who use it to free up time, improve preparation, and make communications more relevant gain an edge. In my experience, the difference is not made by the technology itself, but by the discipline with which the company integrates it into its own sales method.

Long live “referrals”

Where do new customers come from? Ask a sales director and he will list a familiar set: cold calls, trade shows, paid campaigns, the occasional spontaneous inquiry. Ask him whether there is a system for turning existing customers into new contacts, and the answer will, in most cases, be a shrug. Referral sales are fashionable in conversation, but few organizations treat them as a real strategy. They happen by chance, when a customer is so satisfied that he mentions a name over dinner. The companies that win, instead, design referrals as an engine, fuel them with method, and measure them. Your best customers can become advisors, ambassadors, people who introduce you to colleagues, partners, and friends who have exactly the need your company knows how to meet. A single trusted recommendation can open a door that prospecting would have taken months to unlock.

That is why the useful question is not only “who has bought from us?” but also “who would be

willing to vouch for us?” These people are your “angels”. Most companies have never identified them, and even less often have they cultivated them. But a referral is often worth more than a lead, because it comes with something no cold call can offer: trust that already exists. The potential customer hears the name of a person he respects, and the first conversation starts from a position of credibility rather than suspicion. This brings three practical consequences that every sales director should recognize.

The first is trust. A prospect introduced by a contact who is known to them starts the dialogue already willing to listen. The distrust that normally greets a salesperson drops, and the time spent proving credibility is reduced.

The second is the sales cycle. A warm introduction gets past the search and mistrust phases more quickly. Conversations become deeper from the first meetings, and the decision can come with fewer meetings. Shorter cycles mean more deals closed per quarter with the same team.

The third is cost. Cold prospecting consumes time, data, advertising budgets, and patience in the face of repeated rejections. A referral costs a fraction of all this, because the work of building credibility has already been done by someone else.

Embarrassment is the obstacle, not the solution.

Many salespeople hesitate to ask for a referral. They fear appearing needy or damaging the relationship with an inappropriate request. Yet a satisfied customer is usually happy to help, and many are simply waiting to be asked. Embarrassment is a psychological barrier, and like the fear of rejection discussed in this book, it is overcome with method and experience.

A simple, sincere request works best. Thank the customer for a specific result, explain what kind of person you would like to meet and why you think they could benefit, and make it easy to say yes or no. Offering a short draft of an introduction email, or a three-way phone call, removes friction. The request should never be transactional or pressing: it is an invitation to share something that did the customer good, and the customer must feel free to decline.

It is also worth asking those who have not yet bought. A prospect who chose a competitor, or who is not ready right now, may still have a sincere opinion of your work and a network that matters. Asking respectfully, while keeping the relationship alive, can open doors that a purely commercial approach would have closed.

Build a referral system, not a lucky habit. A referral strategy requires the same discipline as any sales process: clear steps, defined responsibilities,

measurable results.

Start by identifying your “angels”. Observe the customers who renew, who buy more, who speak well of you in reviews or on social networks, who take part in your events. Classify them and select the few whose opinion really carries weight with their peers.

Then offer value before asking for anything. Share information useful to their business, invite them to exclusive content or events, recognize their successes. The request for an introduction should appear as a natural step in a relationship that is already giving them something.

Then make the request specific and simple. Ask for an introduction to a well-defined type of person or company, not a generic “anyone you know”. Provide the words they can use and follow up promptly when the introduction happens. Thank everyone who helps, even when the introduction does not produce a contract.

Finally, measure. Keep track of how many referrals arrive, how many become meetings, how many become customers, and how quickly they close compared with cold leads. These numbers turn the referral from a pleasant habit into a line item in the sales plan that a director can defend in a budget discussion.

The most important question is uncomfortable but useful: are you cultivating your “angels” to create

a steady flow of new opportunities? If the honest answer is that it only happens when someone remembers, the referral engine is not running, and the company pays the full price of cold acquisition for business its own customers would gladly bring. A referral is not a trick and cannot be forced. It is the natural result of outcomes people want to talk about, combined with the courage to ask for the introduction. Organizations that build this capability create a sales engine that grows with every satisfied customer, and that competitors cannot easily copy, because it rests on a trust that took years to earn.

Gross margin or net margin?

When deciding which customers to invest in, the most frequent question is the wrong one. Companies ask “which customers do we want more of?” instead of asking “who is really making us money, and who is costing us?”. The difference is not one of form but of substance, and it depends on a single piece of data that many companies calculate badly or not at all: margin expressed in euros, not in percentages.

The percentage trap. For many years, even the ranking of the most profitable customers was built on a seemingly logical criterion: the percentage margin. The customer who yields a 40% margin seems better than one who yields 15%, and the choice seems obvious. Yet the percentage tells only half the story.

A customer with a high percentage margin who buys little may generate only a few euros of real profit. A customer with a lower percentage margin but significant volumes can bring in much more. Those who look only at the percentage tend to

pamper the wrong customers, devote sales time where the return in euros is marginal, and neglect those who, quietly, support the largest part of the result.

Net margin: how much each customer contributes in euros. The net margin is the contribution in euros that each customer makes to the company's profit, after direct product or service costs. It is a concrete number that can be added up, compared, and turned into decisions. Ranking customers by net margin means asking how many euros each relationship returns to the organization over the period considered.

This change of perspective has an immediate effect on how you reason. The salesperson no longer asks only which customer is most attractive on paper, but which customer produces the largest result in absolute terms. And resources can finally be distributed, that is time, visits, attention, and marketing budget, according to an economic criterion rather than an impression.

Once customers are ranked by net margin, ABC classification becomes a simple and powerful operational tool.

Group A includes the few customers who generate most of the total margin. They are often a surprisingly small minority: in many companies, 15 or 20% of customers produce the majority of profit. These customers must be protected,

served with priority, and involved in loyalty and development initiatives. Losing a group A customer weighs more than winning ten small ones.

Group B consists of good customers to develop. They already have an economically healthy relationship, but have not yet reached their potential. This is where the most promising investments are concentrated: needs analysis, proposals for complementary products, targeted content that helps both sides grow.

Group C gathers customers who absorb time but create little or no margin. They may be customers who constantly request assistance, who negotiate aggressive discounts, who buy in minimal volumes, or who require attention out of proportion to the return. This does not mean abandoning them on principle, but it does mean recognizing them for what they are and deciding consciously how to manage them: standardizing service, revising terms, or accepting that not every relationship deserves the same investment.

Who is eating your margin? One of the most useful questions that segmentation allows is this: who is consuming resources without returning margin? The C customer who requests frequent visits, the custom project that requires hours of unpaid work, the discount granted out of habit. These are hidden costs that often do not appear explicitly in financial statements, but that erode the

overall result.

Recognizing these costs makes action possible. You can revise the price, change the service model, introduce clearer terms, or decide to reduce commercial attention toward these relationships and free up time for the customers who really make the company grow. It is not a cynical choice: it is a choice of responsibility toward the team and toward the sustainability of the organization.

The deepest change this approach produces is cultural. Instead of chasing every opportunity for new business, the sales director begins to manage his customer portfolio as an investment. He asks where it makes sense to invest more, which customers deserve more attention, which relationships should be developed, and which should be scaled back.

The value of this analysis grows when it becomes a habit. Updating the classification every quarter, comparing results over time, checking whether B customers are actually climbing toward A and whether C customers are improving or getting worse. These are simple questions, but they can change how an organization allocates time, people, and budget.

Margin in euros is not a sophisticated metric, but it is one that no one can dispute, because it says exactly how much each relationship contributes to the result. Ranking customers by net margin and segmenting them into A, B, and C helps shift

attention from apparent revenue to real value, and answers the question that really matters: who brings in margin, and who is eating it? Those who have the courage to ask it regularly often discover that the path to growth lies not only in finding new customers, but in working better with the ones they already have.

The Churn Rate and the cemetery of inactive customers

You look at the customer list and see names that haven't ordered in months. The thought is almost automatic: "They're lost." They get archived, forgotten, and in the meantime the churn rate is accepted as a fact of nature. Yet behind that silence there is often one of the most underestimated sources of revenue in a sales organization. An inactive customer is not necessarily a lost customer. Much more often, it is a customer out of cycle, who is only waiting for the right moment and the right message.

Silence is not a verdict. The first question is not always "why don't they buy anymore?". It is also worth asking: "when did they buy, and at what rhythm?". Many products and services follow a seasonal logic, tied to calendar needs, company budgets, scheduled replacements, or consumption cycles. A customer who ordered every spring and has not been heard from in autumn has not disappeared: they are simply outside their usual window.

Without data, however, this intuition remains a hypothesis. We need a way to look at the history in an orderly fashion and see the patterns the eye does not catch.

The invisible problem of spreadsheets. In most companies, purchase information is scattered across the CRM, management software, Excel files, and the personal archives of salespeople. Analyzing it by hand takes hours, produces static charts that age quickly, and does not answer the most important question: which customers are worth reactivating, and why they stopped.

The risk is accepting as normal a loss that has never been analyzed. A 20% churn rate may seem inevitable until someone breaks it down by segment, by seasonality, and by purchase history.

You can move from raw data to useful segmentation using business intelligence tools such as Power BI, which allow you to connect different sources, build interactive dashboards, and apply dynamic filters. The operational path can be simple. The first step is to bring the purchase history and the customer master data together into a single model. You don't need advanced technical skills to start, but you do need a reliable data source: wrong data leads to wrong conclusions.

The second step is to segment. A simple filter such as “no purchases in over 365 days” brings out a

concrete group to examine, which can be enriched with other metrics, such as average historical value or unexploited potential.

The third step is to look for patterns. This is where segmentation becomes knowledge: you might discover, for example, that a significant share of inactive customers had been buying regularly on a seasonal basis. In that case, the silence is a calendar. The fourth step is to act, that is, to turn the analysis into a targeted campaign. A message that recalls the last order, proposes an update to the product, and explains why now is the right time works much better than a generic “We miss you”.

Reactivating an inactive customer calls for tact. It is better to reactivate with respect and personalization. A message that is too commercial and ignores the history of the relationship risks confirming the distance. A contact that shows you know the customer works better: recalling their last purchase, proposing a relevant update, and offering a reasonable benefit where justified by the margin. Here too, the euro margin matters, not discounting for its own sake: not every reactivation deserves the same economic lever.

It is also wise to treat reactivation as a measurable process. How many customers are contacted, how many respond, how many return to buying within a defined period, and at what average value. These

numbers show which message works, for which segment, and how long reactivation takes.

In my case, thanks to a custom dashboard in Power BI (though today it is possible to do even better with modern AI systems), I reactivated 23 of 27 customers in thirty days. That is certainly a useful stimulus, but it should be read with caution. Every organization has different characteristics, the sample may be small, and the result depends on data quality, the product, and the market moment. My advice is to test this approach on a controlled group and analyze the results: technology does not replace judgment.

Inactive customers are not a cemetery, but an archive of relationships that can still produce value. Those who do this often discover that part of the lost revenue was never really lost: it was simply waiting for someone to look for it in the right way.

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I was born in the hillside, with sea view, in a village without traffic lights but also without work. Sea and fishing were emotions more tenacious than sports. Then came the books, everything got caught, even the luck to be able to do a job that is at the crossroads of all my passions. I wrote a hasty and affectionate book about marketing, one more sentimental about fishing. I lived and worked in Canada and Scotland, in small companies as well as in corporations.

Selling through effective marketing is the goal of my work. For over fifteen years now, I helped companies grow through marketing strategies that lead the customer satisfaction.

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