You Can’t Teach a Kid to Ride a Bike at a Seminar

Sandler Training’s 7-Step System for Successful Selling, Second Edition

David H. Sandler

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KEY CONCEPTS

- **Selling is a process people must learn.** Practice, reinforcement training, and coaching can help salespeople perfect their craft.

- **Individuals must separate their identities as human beings from their roles as salespeople.** Failure to make a sale does not affect an individual’s worth as a person.

- **Salespeople can control the sales process by creating a series of upfront contracts with their prospects.** The traditional selling method of making a presentation and waiting for a prospect to make a decision puts too much power in the hands of the prospect.

- **The sales process begins by building rapport.** To successfully bond with prospects, salespeople must make sure their prospects always feel at ease.

- **Salespeople must stop selling features and benefits and instead focus on prospects’ pains, or the problems or needs the salespeople’s products or services can solve.** Once salespeople show how their products can ease pain, prospects will be eager to buy.

- **Before making a sales presentation, salespeople should confirm that prospects have the money and authority to purchase their products or services.**

- **The three components of being a successful salesperson are the right behaviors, attitudes, and techniques.**
**Summary**

**Introduction**

David H. Sandler was a salesman who hated everything about the typical sales process. He hated making cold calls and giving presentations only to discover prospects did not have the money or authority to buy his products. He also disliked waiting for prospects to make up their minds about buying, because he knew the prospects were using their time to approach other suppliers to find better deals. Sandler decided to turn the sales process on its head and put the salesperson, not the buyer, in control. He wrote *You Can’t Teach a Kid to Ride a Bike at a Seminar* to explain the Sandler Selling System more than 40 years ago, and in this updated edition he continues to offer timeless sales training and coaching advice.

**Identities vs. Roles**

Sandler believed that in the traditional sales process, the prospect held the upper hand. He also thought that because most potential customers were naturally suspicious of salespeople, it made them believe they could withhold information and pretend to be interested in an effort to gain more insight that could be used to persuade their current vendors to lower their prices. Sandler resented what he called *unpaid consulting*, or when prospects wanted his expertise for free.

Sandler found the solution to his fear of cold calling and the traditional sales process in general in *transactional analysis* (TA), a branch of psychology that came to prominence in the late 1960s while Sandler was struggling with his career. TA was based on the belief that people live their lives around structured scripts as they try to obtain certain goals. Using TA, Sandler realized individuals had to separate their identities as people from their roles as salespeople. If someone hung up the phone on him during a cold call, he might not be succeeding as a salesman, but it did not affect his worth as an individual.

Traditional sales training only addresses roles, not identities. Sandler’s approach, dubbed the *Sandler Selling System*, addresses self-awareness and encourages salespeople to learn from their mistakes.

**Rules for Success**

Before explaining the seven steps for successful selling, Sandler explains that salespeople must keep 10 basic conditioning rules in mind:

1. Learn time management.
2. Commit to the profession full time.
3. Become both mentally and emotionally tough.
5. Cultivate a support group.
6. Know when to use product knowledge.
7. Know the competition.
8. Keep a journal.
9. Create a successful prospecting system.
10. Use an established system for selling.

Continuing to chase down an unqualified opportunity may count as hard work, but it is definitely not smart work.

Without this training and conditioning, salespeople will not be able to follow through with the seven steps of the Sandler Selling System.
**Step One: Establish Rapport**

In order to move forward with new sales, salespeople must bond with prospects and develop *rapport*, or a common point of view. Using technical jargon, engaging in one-upmanship, or appearing needy about an order can all make a prospect feel uneasy (or “not-OK,” in Sandler’s words). If prospects begin to feel not-OK, they often end the conversation before it can lead to a sale.

*Role success or failure is merely a measurement of how well you are doing in your acquired roles. But in no way do roles affect your value as a human being.*

Successful salespeople use techniques such as mirroring customers’ body language or matching their tonality and volume in conversation to subtly indicate they have things in common. They also listen closely to prospects’ communication styles. People primarily communicate using either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic methods, and their language usually reflects their preferences. For example, visual people say things like, “that seems fuzzy,” “I am having trouble focusing,” or “I can see it in my mind’s eye.” Once a salesperson knows a prospect’s primary sense, he or she can choose language that appeals to it, increasing rapport.

**Step Two: Establish an Up-Front Contract**

Once rapport has been established, salespeople should introduce an *upfront contract*. This involves the two parties mutually agreeing to discuss business. Salespeople can use upfront contracts to set their agendas by determining why prospects want to talk and what they will discuss. Salespeople can also bring up their own fears, such as discussing money, and get prospects to agree to deal with monetary issues in a forthright way.

In all cases, salespeople should seek straightforward “yes” or “no” answers from prospects. A “no” should end the discussion, while a “yes” should create a closed compartment that signifies the end of this step and the beginning of the next.

An upfront contract should contain five elements:

1. The *objective*, or the goal the salesperson and prospect share for the discussion.
2. The *time* allowed for the meeting.
3. The *salesperson’s role*, or what he or she will do before, during, and after the discussion.
4. The *prospect’s role*, or what he or she will do before, during, and after the discussion.
5. The *conclusion*, or what might happen at the end of the meeting.

Agreeing to an upfront contract allows both salespeople and prospects to ask questions, gives them the opportunity to decide if the relationship is the right fit, and provides an end result for the sales call.

**Step Three: Uncover the Prospects’ Pain**

Instead of selling products by touting features and benefits, the Sandler Selling System focuses on solving *pain*. This pain can include whatever problems prospects are struggling with that salespeople’s products or services could help resolve. Pain is a strong emotion, and when salespeople show easy, accessible ways to get rid of it, prospects will be more likely to buy.

To move a prospect through the pain step, the salesperson should:

- *Ask how long the prospect has had the problem.* If it has been a very long time, it is possible the prospect has learned to live with the problem, and the salesperson should move on.
• **Probe the pain by asking questions that delve deep into the problem.** The salesperson should guide the customer to discover his or her own pain—pointing out a prospect’s pain can be embarrassing and detrimental to the relationship.

• **Show how the product or service can eliminate the pain.**

Salespeople should use skills such as active listening—repeating speakers’ words and providing feedback on what they are feeling—and asking questions to help uncover pain. Before they will buy anything, people have to discover for themselves that they want a product or service, and asking them about their problems can help them reach that conclusion.

**Step Four: Discuss Money**

With most traditional sales, a prospect’s budget is often discussed too late in the process. The Sandler Selling System encourages salespeople to be open to discussing money early on for two reasons:

1. After having explored their pain, prospects will be more willing to pay whatever it takes to relieve it.
2. If prospects do not have the money to pay for pain relief, there is no reason for salespeople to continue trying to sell to them.

However, salespeople should not discuss actual prices immediately; instead, they should see if prospects will share their budget amounts on their own. If prospects do not provide an actual number, salespeople can mention products or services that could help alleviate some of their pain that are available in one price range and other products or services that could completely solve their pain in another price range, and then ask which would be a better fit.

If prospects cannot find room in their budgets for a purchase, salespeople can consider breaking big-ticket items into smaller pieces, such as 30-day trials or one-day consulting offers. By making small sales, salespeople have an opportunity to show that their products or services will perform as well as indicated.

**Step Five: Deal with Decision Makers**

While discussing money, salespeople must also determine if the prospects they are dealing with have the authority to make purchasing decisions. They only want to give their sales presentations once, in front of people who can actually buy their products or services. A good way to glean this information is the news story approach, or asking potential prospects *what, where, when, how, and who questions* about their companies’ decision-making processes. If other people need to be involved, salespeople can then arrange meetings with all of the decision makers.

If it is not possible to speak before the entire decision committee, the next best thing is for salespeople to help prospects organize their own presentations for decision makers. This requires teaching prospects how to sell the products or services, including how to identify the decision makers’ pain.

**Step Six: Present the Solution**

When giving sales presentations, salespeople must show how every feature and benefit of their products or services relate to their prospects. They should begin their presentations by reviewing all the conclusions reached with prospects, confirming agreements on pain, budget, and decision making. They should then present the features and benefits, explaining how they solve the prospects’ pain. If prospects have several pain points, salespeople should start with the ones that are most bothersome or important to their businesses. The information should be brief, simple, and direct.
Sometimes a prospect will be ready to close a deal in the middle of a presentation; however, the salesperson should never offer to write up the sales order right away. Instead, he or she should ask the question: “What would you like me to do now?” This puts pressure on the prospect to make a final decision, but eliminates any chance that the prospect can say he or she was forced into a sale.

*Buyer’s remorse,* when a buyer starts second guessing a decision or deal, can be a serious problem for salespeople. Sandler suggests bringing the topic up as a third-party story by relating a previous incident where a buyer backed out, then getting an agreement from the buyer that it will not happen during this deal. This technique cannot stop all buyer’s remorse, but it does add another layer of commitment.

**STEP SEVEN: REINFORCE THE SALE**

Thousands of salespeople have learned the Sandler Selling System over the past four decades, but Sandler himself taught that the system was only part of what salespeople need to be successful. They also need to modify their behaviors and set goals. Goals are important because salespeople can use them to improve both their identities and roles, see their strengths, set priorities, and define or establish their value systems.

The *Sandler Success Triangle* shows that *behaviors, attitudes,* and *techniques* are the three cornerstones of success. To get to the top, individuals must develop and refine all three.

Behaviors are composed of three things:

1. Plans.
2. Actions.

Salespeople need to be self-starters who set goals and use them as *motivation,* or the ability to see a desired future, make plans to achieve it, and then move steadily toward that goal. Successfully reaching goals will also often help salespeople improve their attitudes.

**FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

*Estimated Reading Time: 4–5 hours, 288 pages*

*You Can’t Teach a Kid to Ride a Bike at a Seminar* by David H. Sandler is aimed toward salespeople with all levels of sales experience. The book is written in an accessible, encouraging style, and Sandler shares many stories of his successes and failures while clearly explaining his system. It also includes diagrams, anecdotes, and an appendix specifically for teams working in an enterprise selling environment. This updated edition also includes tips and commentary on Sandler’s methods written by David H. Mattson, current CEO of Sandler Training.

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*Acknowledgments*

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About the Author

David Sandler developed the Sandler Selling System, the methodology behind it, and the concept of “reinforcement training” for substantive change and lasting success. In 1966, Sandler was a struggling young salesman who was troubled by the scripted way in which he had been trained to sell. He decided to take charge of his sales calls by making “verbal contracts” with his prospects—effectively challenging them to convince him to sell rather than trying to convince them to buy. His approach was radical and it proved to be highly successful. Sandler refined his sales philosophy into a comprehensive selling system and founded the Sandler Training organization to share his approach with other salespeople. His methodology was founded on basic principles of the psychology of human behavior, and it has stood the test of time.
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