

# Creating Imaginative Sales Solutions

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**T**here is consistent data (supported by survey verbatims across multiple industries) that emphasizes that your customers desire “proactive innovation” from their suppliers.

Your customers want their Account Teams to deliver competitive advantage through:

- **Unique** solutions that address problems that specifically apply to their business (reflecting their industry, and their distinct go-to-market strategy);
- **Inventive** solutions that incorporate a customized mix of varied resources, competencies, tools and partner contributions; and
- **Worthwhile** solutions that deliver quantifiable business results.

At the same time, there is often frustration (both internal and external) at the lack of skills within organizations to creatively apply the available tools and resources on behalf of customers.

In this article, we’ll explore sales creativity from five perspectives:

1. Setting Realistic Expectations
2. The Creative Process
3. How-To Tips and Techniques
4. Strengthening Personal Creativity
5. Strengthening Corporate Creativity

## 1. Setting Realistic Expectations: No One Thinks You’re “Picasso”

Without question, the message to “Get Creative” can be a formidable barrier in and of itself. First of all, the notion of creative contribution runs counter to the “Be Normal” message that we’ve all received since our earliest school days or the “I did it this way” commentary from tenured sales managers. This norm-driven socialization process might help promote obedience to authority, but the associated inhibition does little to stimulate inventive problem-solving.

And even when you can get past that, how many

times in a generation does a Steve Jobs, or a Miles Davis, take center stage? Understandably, most Strategic Account Managers (SAMs) feel that, as mere mortals, there is no way to rise to meet that challenge. The reality couldn’t be further from the truth.

Creativity is not rare, nor is it some mysterious power that is limited to artists or people with high IQs. Rather than being focused on blockbuster innovation (like introducing the next iPod) it’s far more useful to think of creativity as “developing imaginative solutions”—the kind of thing that your salespeople do every day.



**CREATIVITY IS NOT RARE.**

## JUMPstart the Creative Process

1. Start with a spark by being observant and using empathy to connect needs with solutions.
2. Fan the flames by getting a lot of ideas in motion, quickly.
3. Spread your message by telling the story of your solution in a compelling way.

### 2. The Creative Process: Three Steps to Stoke the Fires

The principles that marry sales results with creative idea generation are fundamentally a simple 3-step process:

- Start with a spark;
- Fan the flames; and
- Add more fuel.

Your creative sales spark will catch fire with an in-depth understanding of your customer (and your customer's customer) that is grounded in both data and personal observation. Your best insights will come from being observant and from your ability to connect needs with solutions requires a dose of empathy.

Second, fan those flames!

You want to get a lot of ideas in motion quickly, without pre-judging their likely success or failure. As you move forward, prototypes and tests will help your managers envision outcomes and generate rapid enhancements.

Finally, add more fuel to ensure your fire becomes contagious. To spread your message, be able to "tell a story" that captures the essence of your contribution. Paint a vivid picture by imagining your successful solution featured in *Business Week*, or *Velocity*®. How will the headline read? What sidebar stories would be added? How do you imagine the key quotes?

### 3. How-To Tips and Techniques: Five Ways to Find Imaginative Solutions

In practice, creativity is the ability to look for patterns that lead to ideas, and join known elements into new combinations that deliver enhanced value.

The complete list could go on and on, but here are five tested approaches for creating imaginative solutions:

#### Look at Your Internal Resources for Inspiration

Most companies are sitting on a treasure trove of untapped information about their customers, and their customers' markets.

### WHAT SPECIAL CAPABILITIES CAN BE FOUND AT YOUR FIRM?



Think about your own internal market data, understanding of industry trends and issues or "best practices" research. Think about the data your company captures as a simple part of each transaction.

- How could you leverage that information for your customer?
- How could that information be wrapped into your proposed solution as a value-added element?

There's inspiration here from Fandango, the online movie ticket seller. With its database of demographic information and movie-going habits, Fandango now offers consumer research to the movie studios as they work on their marketing campaigns. This initiative didn't get underway until 2002, but now (according to the October 2005 issue of *Business* 2.0) non-ticketing activities have become nearly 50% of Fandango's revenue!

#### Look to Your Internal Skills for Leverage

The odds are that you've got some distinctive jewels in your own corporate closet...why not take 'em out and show 'em off!

What special capabilities can be found at your firm?

- Systems & Operations expertise?
- Supply chain proficiencies?
- Financial acumen?
- Customer service excellence?
- Effective training programs?

There are a number of widely known examples here, including:

- GE's extraordinarily successful expansion of customer relationships to include operations and financial consulting services; and
- The Disney Institute's corporate training programs sharing customer service and leadership expertise.

Ask yourself: How can I leverage our internal capabilities (or wrap them into my offering) in a way that adds creative value to distinguish my solution?

## Be a Connector

Most business people are familiar with the catalysts of social change introduced in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*:

- The "Connectors," who seem to know everybody; and
- The "Mavens," who have expertise they love to share.

Today there is a wide variety of web-based social networking tools available that add steroids to the process (such as LinkedIn, Spoke and Ryze).

Building on the same principle, there's also tremendous (and often untapped) value in your company's relationships. You can look for ways to leverage the expertise (and relationship value) of:

- Third-party relationships;
- Other customers;
- Suppliers; and
- Consulting resources.

The opportunities here can be very rewarding. One of our most exciting (and satisfying) engagements came from the connection we were able to make between two key clients.

They both shared similar "business literacy" needs, although they were coming from very different business perspectives. By the two entering into a joint venture, they were able to share the investment associated with a PC-based Business Simulation solution that neither could cost-justify on its own.

Interestingly, one client used this business simulation as a core part of its internal leadership program so that managers could gain experience "running the bank." Our other client used the program for its key accounts sales teams that sell to banks (so that they could better understand customer business decisions and trade-offs).

## Walk a Mile in My Shoes

As noted earlier, a key part of your ability to creatively connect needs with solutions is your ability

to empathize, blending awareness and sensitivity to imagine someone else's experience.

Intuit Corporation (developers of Quicken and QuickBooks software) is famous for the attention it gives to the customer's experience with its products.

To cultivate this quality in your solutions, put yourself into your customer's shoes and evaluate the experience:

- What works (and what doesn't work) about the encounter?

## A KEY PART OF YOUR ABILITY TO CREATIVELY CONNECT NEEDS WITH SOLUTIONS IS YOUR ABILITY TO EMPATHIZE.

- What service enhancements could enrich the outcome?
- How might you build in the "Wow!" factor of unexpected delight?

## Zoom Way In, and then Zoom Way Out

Lastly, a conscious shift in perspectives can be a very helpful way to comprehensively frame your solutions and recommendations in a sales opportunity.

One of the most exciting (and productive) account planning sessions we ever led focused on helping our client respond to a specific sales opportunity using this technique.

The brainstorming session set the stage with a "macro" perspective that viewed the solution in a much broader context (such as evaluating the offering within the larger context of a customer bank's retail channel strategy).

Then the solution was enriched by zooming in with a very granular perspective, evaluating what happens



at a "micro" level by viewing the solution from the very narrow point-of-view of the end-user's transaction experience.

The compelling story that was told around these two points of view became part of our customer's winning response to an important RFP.

## 4. Strengthening Personal Creativity: A Strategic Workout Routine

Like a muscle, your creative capabilities can be strengthened with exercise.

Our recommended workout routine includes a strong dose of the "4 C's of Sales Creativity":

- **Customer-view:** Look outside of yourself and see the opportunity as your customer sees it.
- **Can-Do Attitude:** Have the spirit to imagine new approaches and the guts to accept failure.
- **Contributions of Expertise:** Leverage your knowledge and insights to the fullest.
- **Collaborative Spirit:** Willingly share what you know with your customers and colleagues; be a giver and a builder.

We've also found a number of personal approaches that can enhance your personal creative skills, including:



## YOUR CREATIVE CAPABILITIES CAN BE STRENGTHENED WITH EXERCISE.

Find a way to capture and preserve good ideas. This doesn't need to be anything formal; it could be a notebook to jot down ideas. I also like a special folder within Outlook (or organized links within my web browser) as a place to store stimulating concepts. Revisit them before you start a brainstorming session.

**Broaden your personal palette by exposing yourself to new ideas.** Make time to scan professional journals outside your industry and expertise, and (once in a while) go see a film targeted to a demographic not your own. For example, if you're a sales executive that serves consumer packaged goods companies, read *Scientific American* periodically for the "jolt" this brings to your complacency.

**When faced with a problem that requires a creative solution, look for metaphors.** Ask yourself, "What does this remind me of?" so you can identify and work to understand comparable models. As an example, for a training project focused on providing cash handling skills to tellers, we sent our development team to Atlantic City for the day to analyze the behaviors and techniques of casino dealers.

### 5. Strengthening Corporate Creativity: Strategies for Growth

In many ways, the true challenge here is not about being creative but about making sure that natural creativity isn't ground down by corporate norms.

Smart companies (such as General Electric and Proctor & Gamble) are increasingly asking themselves, "How can the creative process be effectively managed and accelerated?"

Four important guidelines are noted below.

#### It starts with your hiring models.

Ensure that your employee screening process identifies candidates that are inquisitive, empathic and grounded in an understanding of human needs. Look for indications that an individual is resourceful and able to explore ideas from multiple perspectives.

#### Remember that no one is as smart as everyone.


Make brainstorming a natural part of the way you do business. Don't think of brainstorming as a drawn out half-day affair, rather, use brainstorming in crisp, bite-size 45 minute slices. Implement a formal process and insist on prepared teams that come into the session ready to rock!

#### Create a cultural bias toward innovation.

Characteristically, the most creative companies tend to be decentralized and empowered. They also include a variety of perspectives across age groups, cultures and professional disciplines. Make sure your incentive system rewards new ideas rather than punishing failures.

#### Lastly, create tools and resources to leverage your corporate assets.

Implement a database of solutions so that SAMs can easily search solutions that have been created before. Organize the database to be sortable for easy access to multiple views of the information (by customer, by industry, by marketplace, by business problem, by solution family, etc.). Simplify communications and content management so your teams can spend their time creating innovative solutions (rather than struggling through the recreation of boilerplate descriptions and product sets).

Bottom line, with the right attention paid to creative processes, personal skills and corporate culture you'll find yourself with a competitive advantage in a marketplace that increasingly demands innovative solutions delivering tangible business results. 

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