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Apollo on Sales

Guest was Bob Apollo

[*A Sales Conversation with Bob Apollo*](#)

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Transcription of Interview

Joe Dager: *Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 Podcast. With me today is Bob Apollo. Bob is the Founder and Managing Partner at Inflexion-Point. Inflexion-Point are experts in Value-Based Selling, a selling methodology for complex, high-valued B2B sales environments, rethinking the fundamentals of Modern B2B selling. Bob, I'd like to welcome you, a longtime favorite of your blog and your comments throughout social media.*

Bob Apollo: Well, Joe, I'm equally glad to be part of your program and to have followed what you've been up to over many years. So, it's good to get together.

Joe: *Throughout your work, I see the word process pop up time and time again, and could you explain that to me. Is it a list of sales activities, reactions or how should we look at sales processes?*

Bob: Great question to start with and I'll give you my perspective on it. You see, I think in a sales context, process is best thought of as a series of best practices that when performed enable organizations and individuals to more effectively target, engage and convert more of the right sort of prospects. But, in the sort of world of complex buying

processes that my clients typically work in, it's really important to think of these things as flexible frameworks, not rigid or prescriptive scripts, a skeleton, not a cage. I'm very uncomfortable with the idea that sales processes of its nature rigid. The art of selling, I think, in part is the ability to certainly approach a customer in a well-defined, structured, thoughtful way. But then, to be able to react, to adapt, to listen and to change tact according to what you discover in the conversation.

Joe: *I've always struggled with the concept of a marketing funnel. I think of it as putting customers inside this funnel and putting your foot in it and trying to stick them through it. I struggle with that concept in sales.*

Bob: Well, and not surprisingly and you should struggle with it. We use metaphors like a pipeline, like a funnel as if the thing was somehow a linear process. The truth of the matter is, of course, the buying journey, and that's really what we're trying to reflect when we talk about the sales process. Sales process really means nothing if it's not thought of in the context of what a buyer does to come to a decision about whether they need to act what they need to change to and whom to change to and those buying process are very rarely linear. They involve multiple stakeholders. They can move backwards as well as forwards. They can take a short or long course. The traditional metaphors of funnel and pipeline aren't really that helpful in illustrating. It's an organic process, not a metaphor for the equivalent of a rigid manufacturing process.

Joe: *Well, I am going to jump into something that you brought that up. I come from the continuous improvement field. How does something like optimization play a role in a sales process? Can I optimize a customer or a sales process?*

Bob: Well, I think and I thought for many years actually that sales is a great deal to learn

from Lean, more from Lean actually than from disciplines like Six Sigma, I'd suggest because I think, in particular, it's this idea of eliminating actions that add no value to either the sales process or the buying decision process. A sense of continuously trying to learn and improve which organizations to target, what issues to target and how to facilitate the buying decision journey, to do things that cause prospects to initiate or move forward in that journey even if not in a linear fashion. But also, to try and eliminate the many things that we could do as marketers or sales people that, you know, that best add no value to the customer's decision making and in many cases, impede it, stand in the way of the customer, making the right decision. I think, you can absolutely optimize, not perfect but optimize many aspects of that process by observing that which serves to positively, you know, help to move the customer's decision process forward and contrasting it with those things that actually act as a barrier or simply add no value at all.

Joe: *The other part of it is you've been talking a lot lately about is 'No Decision' and that part of the sales journey, and that's really like the biggest waste of all, right?*

Bob: Well, it is but it's almost inevitable to some extent depending on the sort of buying decision we're looking at and I'll draw a distinction between I'd call essential decisions and optional decisions. An essential decision might be typified by an organization that is running a factory and needs raw material to feed that factory. If they want to keep the factory going, they really got no option but to buy raw material. They might choose to buy it from different vendors. They might buy it in different specifications. But, deciding to do nothing really isn't an option, in that case, unless the do nothing option is simply to continue purchasing according to the pattern that's already been established.

I'd contrast that with let's think of that same factory, maybe running an ERP software solution that's maybe a few years old. Now, it's an optional consideration. The decision

team in that factory might think “It’s about time that we evaluated a more effective, a higher performer to more flexible ERP solution.” They already have a way of managing the factory. So, that is an optional as opposed to a mandatory purchase and it’s those decisions, those optional decisions, we could just stick with the status quo, or we could decide to change where so often the decision process actually ends up in the decision hate. We’ve evaluated our options with a various degree of seriousness, and we’ve concluded that the decision we feel most comfortable with is to stick with the status quo. I think no decision is really more about sticking with the status quo than not making a decision at all. Yeah, it’s the decision either to change or to stick with the environment you’ve got.

Joe: *So, sometimes it’s safe to assume when you stop getting callbacks that maybe nobody won, right? You didn’t get beat out or something.*

Bob: Well, if you think of it from a competitive perspective, yes. And, it’s not just the lack of callbacks. I’d suggest the lack of progress because if this is a substantial decision involving significant expenditure requiring the sign off of multiple people, the decision-making group however they’re formed are effectively making a balance of risk assessment. They’re trying to judge whether there’s a higher risk. Sticking with the status quo or whether there’s actually less risk and a greater reward in deciding to break away from what they’ve been doing and do something and do something different. Those signals are not just about lack of callbacks, it’s about often a sense of a lack of momentum in the prospect’s decision-making process or being overtaken by events.

We’ve all got to acknowledge that even if we’re trying to sell something to a prospect that we regard as extremely important to them, they have other priorities. It’s entirely possible that a project will get stalled simply because something else is perceived to be more important. It’s not the competition that won. It’s a decision to use the resources, the

assets, the energies of the buying organization to some other purpose.

Joe: *I've been there when it's been 'no decision' and I've been on both sides. I think we all have. When I first look back, if I'm the sales guy, my first inclination is I really did something wrong, or I didn't really sell the product that I needed to sell. I didn't point out the right benefits to them. I didn't recognize what was going on. Also, when I take into my Sales Manager, I'm going to say, "Oh, they decided not to make a decision." My Sales Manager's going to say, "Well, go back out there then." Right? How do we handle that within our organizations?*

Bob: You're certainly talking a great deal about did we position our product or our solution here wrongly or in an ineffective way? In the case of a decision to do nothing, that's actually very rarely the problem. The problem there often starts with the salesperson being actually too impatient to present their solution. Failing to invest the time early on in the discussion with the prospect to really determine whether there's a real appetite for change. Whether that appetite for change already exists or whether that appetite for change could be created by helping the customer to recognize the cost and consequences of sticking with the status quo.

That's got very little, perhaps nothing to do with the specific functionality of your solution or how you've chosen to present or solve it. It's a heck of a lot to do with, was the problem really compelling enough in the first place? And, could I and should I have qualified out if I couldn't identify early on in my discussion with the prospect that there is truly a compelling case for change.

This is something that I see even pretty smart sales people miss. They're in such a rush when they hear the prospect talking about an issue that they know their product can solve,

that they can't resist the itch to pitch. When instead, what they could and should be doing and by the way, what I see the top performers doing is invest early on in talking about the problem, not about the solution and about the consequences of the problem and determining whether there really is that appetite for change. That's, I think, at the heart of a lot of the 'no decision' problems. They're pitching too early.

Joe: *It's been said over and over again that in the B2B sales, that often times they're not invited 'til 60% of the sales cycle is over and I'm not going to argue that or whether it's not true isn't the point to my conversation here but a 'no decision' sort of confirms that there's non-agreement within a customer's organization even when 60% of that sales cycle might be over. Is that true?*

Bob: Okay, I can't resist, firstly, commenting on the 60% and you've seen people quote 57%, 60, 70, all manner of figures. The truth of this though is that it's awfully easy to fall back on statistics. Heaven knows I've done it often enough but that, in particular, is a false and misleading statistic and if you dig into some of the underlying research, what you find is there's actually a polarity between straightforward transactional price and material type buying decisions where I think it's entirely plausible that the prospects decision process is very immature before they bring a vendor and want to talk to a salesperson.

If you're in this sort of optionally considered purchase, do we need to change it all or not? Actually, there's tremendous value and a great need for giving the prospect a reason to want to engage you early and in fact, there's some work by Forrester that really does resonate with the experience I've seen and what they found is that in complex sales, 3 quarters of the deals went to the company, the sales organization that helped the prospect create a vision of a solution, didn't wait or didn't, you know, were only called in at the point at which the prospects created their RFP. I think there's abundant evidence to suggest that

if the first time you hear about an opportunity, never mind all this talk about the more educated buyer and so on. The first time you hear about an opportunity is when an RFP lands on your desk, at least, one other salesman's been in there before, has managed to convince and persuade the prospect that it's worth having a conversation on the grounds that the prospect's going to learn something of value from that interaction.

I think the other aspect of your question is, you talked about agreement within the customer's organization. In high-value complex sales, variously at least 5 or 6 significant players, stakeholders if you like, are involved in the buying decisions. Sometimes, it's, you know, 10 or more and if either you or the change agent within the prospect can't align all or, at least, enough of those stakeholders besides, one, a decision to change, two, a consensus about what to change to and three, which vendor to choose to establish that change. Again, chances are it's too hard to do anything other than sticking with the status quo. So, getting the stakeholders all aligned is I think a particular and growing challenge. I'm not sure this sort of 60% really correlates with 'no decision'. It's certainly, I think, you can correlate with the difficulty of orchestrating multiple significant stakeholders inside the prospect around the multiple decisions that need to be made before change can happen.

Joe: *But, that certainly relates back to what you said previously then is that we really need to concentrate on the problem.*

Bob: There's no question about it and who else is impacted by the problem and what the consequences of the problem are, not just on the individual that you're speaking to right now but in their peer group, their colleagues. And actually, I found it a very interesting and valuable indicator. If the person you're talking to finds it hard to articulate who else is affected, if they find it hard to put themselves in the shoes of their other colleagues who sooner or later will have to approve their decision to change, then you probably haven't,

you're probably not talking to somebody who's really capable of mobilizing the rest of their colleagues around the need to change and that's talking to weak mobilizers or people who aren't mobilizers, right, they appear to want to talk to you, to have interest, they may even give the appearance of having a certain amount of authority. But, if they're not capable of taking their colleagues with them in the decision-making process, then they're unlikely to be able to truly act as your champion, no matter what you might hope.

Joe: *What opportunities does a 'no decision' then give us? Are there opportunities to be seen when I hear 'Oh, we're not going to make a decision'?*

Bob: Well, firstly, it tells us that if we thought, by the way, that this was a well-qualified opportunity, that something, somewhere has not gone quite to plan or very simply that circumstances have changed. I think the sort of things we need to understand when it becomes very obvious to us that what we had thought was a well-qualified prospect is unlikely to make a decision now, is we need to dig underneath and try and establish whether they do have the issue, it's just that they're not ready to deal with it right now. They haven't yet been able to establish the internal consensus or some other corporate priority or initiative had moved up the rankings, yeah, in terms of importance.

I think, we have to understand, if we hear or we believe that what we thought was a well-qualified prospect has come to a decision to stick with the status quo, we need to work out whether the underlying issue that we thought existed is still there. If we're smart, the sort of things we want to do is to nurture, not just our initial contact but the other people that hopefully we've been able to introduce ourselves to, to over time help them to acknowledge that actually the impact of that issue is more profound, it's more damaging if it's left unresolved than they had previously thought. You can certainly resurrect opportunities which initially end in a decision to stick with the status quo. If you've got a

truly deep understanding of the issue, its consequences and it actually can help illuminate for members of the buying group, perhaps some consequences they weren't aware of.

Joe: *It seems that sales have to spend a lot of time dealing with a lot of influencers within a target, within a certain organization. He has to penetrate and go deeper into sales with a given account anymore. Is that true?*

Bob: It would be nice if that were always possible. It's actually impractical very often because you can't always get access to the various players. Some of the players are invisible, deliberately so in the decision process. That's why it becomes ever more important that you make a really informed judgment about whether the primary contact through whom you're interacting is capable of, one, aligning their colleagues around the need for change. Two, if you successfully persuade them, that your approach is the one that's best most likely to help the organization as a whole resolve this issue. That your primary contact or contacts are capable of evangelizing and articulating that view through the rest of their organization.

There's a very interesting and I think thoughtful book based on some pretty good research that has hit the streets a couple of months ago called *The Challenger Customer*, that really looks at the internal dynamics of the decision making process within the prospects to whom we're trying to sell and what it really illuminates is that, you know, the buying process is at its heart an exercise in change management and that if it is to be successful, it needs to be driven by a change agent within the organization. Now, they don't necessarily have to be the ultimate most senior, ultimate decision maker but they do need to be somebody who's respected internally within the prospect as a reliable implementer of change programs. Somebody that's trusted internally. That becomes really fundamental.

Joe: *It's understanding who the influencer is within that organization.*

Bob: And, trying to assess whether your contact and of course what they say and what they do can be 2 different things but trying to assess and then formed in a structured way, whether the person or the people that you're currently talking to have that ability to carry the rest of their organization with them and if not, what their willingness is to work collaboratively with you to build that sort of coalition of the willing within the prospect organization. That judgment becomes very important. Am I really talking, am I working with somebody who has this ability to act as a change agent within their own organization.

Joe: *Has your opinion changed much between *The Challenger Salesperson* and *The Challenger Customer*, between the 2 books, do you think they coincide together or is there have been conflicting things there?*

Bob: Well, I don't know about conflicting, certainly it takes a different perspective and, of course, that 57% statistic came from the original *Challenger Sale's* book and here I am arguing against it. But, I think what moved on and what I found compelling and it really resonated with the experiences that I hear from the top performing sales people, the thoughtful ones, the good listeners, the empathetic ones, the creative ones is that whether they're consciously or unconsciously competent at this, they've tended to develop a sense pretty early on of whether their prime contact has some of these qualities. They might not have given it a name. So, I think, yeah, the world of selling has clearly moved on. I think the *Challenger Customer* just takes a welcome perspective by putting ourselves in the shoes of the change process within customers.

By the way, that book isn't the first one to talk to that point. Sharon Drew Morgen, some 10 or 15 years ago, was talking about facilitating the buying decision process. In many

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respects, her thinking was somewhat pioneering. I think it's becoming much more widely accepted and understood. The sales process is about facilitating the buying process, and the buying process is fundamentally about making change happened within the prospect organization and facilitating it.

Joe: *You really did hit a nail on the head with me because the facilitation part of it is such a strong point of how I feel sales roles out now is that having that experience behind you and having that way to facilitate a conversation is some of the strongest sales tools you can have right now.*

Bob: We're in an age now where the qualities of a successful B2B sales person and not the ones that the man in the street typically associates with classic sales behavior. The top performers today have that empathy, that ability to facilitate, the capacity to listen, to synthesize ideas, to bring fresh thinking to the prospect, to leave the prospect at the end of and I think this is a very good goal and actually this loops back to the 'are we really creating value for the customer'. That, at the end of every conversation, of every interaction that we leave the customer thinking that they've learned something valuable and that this was a good use of their time. The statistics, by the way, about how often buyers think that the sales conversation they've just had was a horrible use of their time is frightening. Somewhere between 8 and 9 out of 10 sales conversations, fit into the category of the buyer really wishes they could've spent that last hour doing something else.

Joe: *That's why we're always going to voicemail now, right?*

Bob: Yeah, it's one of the defensive maneuvers. I mean I think that at very micro level is, yeah, part of what value, about optimizing, about Lean is about. Let's leave the customer.

At the end of every interaction feeling that that was a really valuable use of their time, rather than being a terminally boring product pitch. I think if we get, you know, the customer believing that if they got to speak with us the next time, they're also going to learn something incremental, something new, something valuable we'd have way better sales conversations.

Joe: *Bob, is there anything you'd like to add to this conversation that maybe I did not ask?*

Bob: I think the one thing I'd say and I've sort of become very aware of the number of the topics we've discussed in the course of this podcast, the importance of momentum in assessing whether we're in a sales opportunity that's really going the right way, you know, genuine progress with the buyer, they buyer doing what they say they're going to do, that each conversation appears to genuinely build on the previous one. I just think momentum. Some people call it velocity, I prefer to call it momentum, is such an important attribute of a successful sales campaign.

It's very interesting because if you do analytics and, by the way, I think we're emerging into an age where sales analytics properly implement it, properly interpret it, can tell us a fantastic amount of information about whether our behaviors are effective or not. Using those analytics to determine what's the velocity. Successful sales typically through, whether we want to call it a pipeline or a funnel or what have you, the stages in the buying process, more than twice as quickly as opportunities that end up going nowhere. It's a very sobering thing; the longer a deal hangs about at this stage and let's call it the buyer's decision process, the less likely it is that something will happen.

Not just that we get a sale but that the customer does anything. And so, again back to Lean if you like, as sales people, it's really important that we can do with all that we can to

facilitate momentum and avoid doing stupid dumb, unnecessary things that have the effect of slowing the prospect's momentum.

Joe: *I always look at Lean as a knowledge building exercise. That's what PDCA is all about. And so, I look at the way that you could use that in sales is really is to create those knowledge building exercises. I think we coincide just saying it a little different way. You call it momentum, I call it Lean, okay.*

Bob: Yeah.

Joe: *What's on the horizon for Bob and Inflexion-Point?*

Bob: I think over the next year, we're likely to expand internationally. We have some plans in the course of the next 12 months to build out a network of associates or acolytes and also to continue to add to our service portfolio. I mean I think we're going to be very focused as we are today in the B2B complex sales process. But, looking at how technology also can act as an invaluable enabler, Of course, it's only good if you've got your thinking right in the first place.

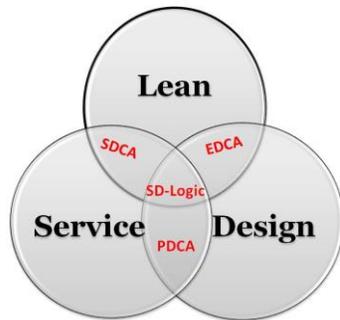
I think one of the areas of expansion for us is going to be leveraging emerging technologies like sales analytics already made reference to that but also sales playbooks so that we make it easier for salespeople to access all of this accumulated knowledge and as we continuously improve our understanding, that learning is propagated, is made very accessible to everybody in the sales team. Here's the funny thing, that learning is going to come as much from the edge as it does from the center, from the accumulated experiences of what works and what doesn't of all of the sales people who are actively engaged right and I think technology has got a very important facilitating role to play there.

Joe: *Well, I think there are a wealth of resources on your website. Please mention the name of it and what's the best way for someone to contact you?*

Bob: Yeah, I'd be happy to, Joe. So, the website is www.Inflexion-Point.com, and that's spelled INFLEXION-POINT.COM and there're a Resources Section and a Blog Section there where I hope that our listeners might find some things that help them understand and appreciate some of the approaches that can be so effective in modern B2B Selling. If anybody would like to get in touch and hear anymore, there's a prominent Contact button there on the website. I'm based here in the UK, and if you prefer to reach out directly by e-mail, I can be reached at Bob.Apollo@inflexion-point.com.

Joe: *Okay. Well, Bob, I'd like to thank you very much, as I'd mentioned, I encourage people to go over to Inflexion-Point.com, a great resource for sales and for sales people and Sales Managers. Thanks again, Bob. This podcast will be available the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site.*

Bob: Joe, I've really enjoyed being part of the broadcast.



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Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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