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The New Sales Conversation

Guest was Linda Richardson

[New Sales Conversation: Connect, Collaborate, Close](#)

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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 Linda Richardson. She's a consultant, author, Wharton Grad school instructor, and a recognized Sales Thought Leader dating back to the consultative sales movement. Now with her new book, Changing the Sales Conversation, takes selling to a new elevation and brings sales results along with it. Linda, I would like to welcome you and congratulate you on your book. It was a great read and one of the few sales books that I read lately that gets value right, in my humble opinion. So before we dive into value, could you introduce yourself and then tell me what the connection between consultative selling and the new selling is?*



Linda Richardson: Yes. First of all, thank you very much for the interview and I am a fan. There's a deep connection between consultative selling and what I write about in Changing the Sales Conversation. I don't have a name for the new selling. In many ways to me, I look at it as I-selling – internet influenced selling – because the internet has had such a profound impact. But consultative selling remains completely relevant. It's approach to selling. It has tenants back to spin, to solution selling. The whole idea is that the client needs to become the focus. That always will be the focus, and that's the focus of the new

sales conversation. But what the client needs from a salesperson today has changed. It's dramatically changed. The connection between consultative selling and the new selling is you need the basis of, "How are you probing? How are you positioning? How are you customizing? How are you preparing?" and you take all of that to the next level.

In the past, the primary focus of the sales conversation – and I'm just saying primarily, obviously there are other things – was the superiority of the product. Why is my product a better fit for you than somebody else's product? But there are certain factors that have happened. First of all the competitive situation has really clustered a lot of the competitors very closely together, so there's not that much differentiation in the actual technical products. But even more importantly, clients now have such resources to find out about the product, and the last place they're going is to the salesperson. The client is going to the internet immediately, to their own teams, to their peers, to social networks, to find out everything they know. By the time they're talking to the salesperson, the salesperson's previous job of really introducing that product and talking about it is not of interest. That isn't to say that the client knows everything they need to know. But many times they think they do, and usually they have a lot of information. So in the new selling the real challenge is, "What can the salesperson bring to the table that adds to what the client knows? How does the salesperson find out what that client knows? And really what is the quality of what they know?" without having to try to get the client to back up in their sales process, which the client usually is not going to be willing to do.

Joe Dager: *One of my world's is Lean world where on the operational side we think bigger, better, faster, as you say in your book is the key to selling and is that product dominant type of thinking. But you're saying it's not much of a differentiator anymore?*

Linda Richardson: I think when you look at bigger, better, faster, there are a lot of companies out there that are striving and working and are at white boards day and night and pushing their teams to be bigger, better, and faster. If you're going to be looking for your differentiation there with a very knowledgeable client, that's not going to impress as much as if you can figure out and bring something to add to what the client already knows. That's beyond product knowledge, and that's where this whole concept of insights, to bring insights to clients, to prepare in a way that was actually never possible before.

Joe Dager: *Well to get those insights, but where does the salesman need to be? Can he get that through product training and the type of training he gets within a company? Or does he need to be trained on the customer's product? How do you get these insights?*

Linda Richardson: That's right. These insights aren't the result of just knowing your product. That is a big part of it and especially if you've worked with other clients, and you can appropriate an idea from one client and bring it to another and really add value. But the job of the salesperson is really much tougher. The need for expertise and business acumen is vital right now, much, much so than ever. I talk about something I call futuring – you not only have to know what the client needs now, you need a lot of information so you can anticipate what the client will need. I talk about readiness in the book. Salespeople need to be industry ready, not just company ready. Company ready is very important,

Stakeholder ready, very important, industry ready. If you really had industry knowledge and company knowledge and stakeholder knowledge, and you know your products, out of that hopefully can come insights.

The job of insights shouldn't only rest on the shoulders of a salesperson. It's up to the marketing department with all of the data that they have, I believe, to provide insights, at least conceptually generic insights that salespeople can tailor and apply to their clients. It really takes a village to sell today. To just ask that salesperson to just go out there and do it is really tying both hands behind their back. What we need to do is support operations, and marketing, sales leadership, sales coaching. All of those are major, major pieces that are needed to sell in this new challenging world of sales, and it is a new world.

Joe Dager: *You're saying that we need an engagement team per se of people out there. Would it be fair to say that it's got to be just not directed to customers, but you already have to be, and I use this metaphor, playing in the customer's playground and his market to understand the opportunities out there?*

Linda Richardson: Absolutely. The clients, today, won't talk to you unless they know you know their world. You have to show that you know your world. That's the value of bringing insights into the client because if you can start a conversation and not go too far into the conversation because that's a big dilemma that's created. You can go in with a lot of information today that you didn't have in the past. The salesperson has tremendous resources. Yes, the client has tremendous resources but so does the salesperson. They can do research in a matter of 20 minutes that would've taken, if possible, days in the past. So

the idea is if you can bring insights and use those insights to engage relevant insights to clients and then use that as a jumping off point to engage in a dialogue and the kind of specific information you do need from the client.

Joe Dager: *Going back to the relational selling and consultative selling; the salesmen still has to create an opportunity and eventually close. Has that changed? Is it still that basic or is there a difference now?*

Linda Richardson: Yes it is still that basic. To find the opportunity and not just find opportunities that exist, but to create opportunities because the more knowledge they have they can look at a client situation and the client may be very happy with the status quo. But if there's a genuine way that they can improve the status quo, they can actually generate an opportunity and then you have much more time and advantage to selling as opposed to waiting for a client that is – the CED tells us this – 60% are already through the buying cycle before the client talks to a salesperson. So absolutely you want to be able to create opportunities and respond to opportunities and then to leverage those opportunities and close.

What it takes to close today is even more challenging than in the past. If you had a solution in the past to make it visual, and that solution weighed one pound, well today it's gotta weigh five pounds because clients are risk adverse; they're delaying decisions. Even the clients that have budgets are very, very careful with spending them. They're making decisions by consensus. We have to know what the new buyer is looking for. The new buyer is not looking for a product story. The new buyer is looking for business outcomes,

proof of value, ideas and competence that you know their business and that this initiative will succeed.

Joe Dager: *I think risk is an important part of what you address, and you just touched upon it. But you address it in the book as risk aversion. I go back to 'someone never got fired for buying an IBM.' Why is that important today?*

Linda Richardson: Certainly our clients are very, very concerned about making a mistake and investing funds that could be invested somewhere else. So part of the solution has to be proof of value in financial terms. So you really have to find out, "What's the status quo? What's it costing them? What will it cost them to go forward with that status quo?" The solution you're providing, "How does that cost compare? How will that work out over the long run?" You really need to bring financial data. And salespeople that aren't accustomed to doing that really need to go to their finance department and tap into the financial people and say, "Look this is the information I got, can you help me chart this? Can you give me something that I can show the client where the client can really see the nirvana that could be achieved? This is the status quo, but this is where I think we could bring them." That solution has to have that kind of strength to it.

Joe Dager: *So the spreadsheet's not a bad thing in a sales conversation?*

Linda Richardson: If it's not just a spreadsheet.

Joe Dager: *Right.*

Linda Richardson: If it's not just a bunch of numbers. Maybe a graph to show it or just the numbers. But we need to show, "This is the status quo. This is what it's costing you. This is what you're dealing with in using the status quo and if you continue to use. And here is the kind of bliss situation – and I use that term in quotes – that we can achieve by doing x, by taking this initiative."

Joe Dager: *The big buzzword out there is innovation, and it seems like we're to innovate our way to success now. How does the new way of selling go along with that?*

Linda Richardson: Well innovation in the true, true sense of the word, something that has never existed before, is extremely rare. And that's not what we're talking about. You can innovate by doing something less expensively for the client. You can innovate by making it more simple procedure. You can innovate by taking an idea from another client and bringing it to your client. So innovation I think as it's used in sales, it's really dealing with change. How do you help change the status quo and create a significant advantage? I think in sales the idea that you have to bring something that was never thought of before is unrealistic. I think we have to look at innovation the way, in the old days; Bell Labs looked at it. "Now how do we make something better?" It's not, "How do we do something that never existed?"

Joe Dager: *There are a lot of clients out there, and I would venture to say, the majority of them are risk adverse. They don't want to be on the cutting edge. The first question usually out of most of my clients is, "Can you show me what you did before?"*

Linda Richardson: Absolutely. Few salespeople are ready with a success story. Probably the most powerful thing that a salesperson can bring into a presentation is a relevant success story and to tell it in a way that it arcs. "This is a serious problem that our client faced. This was the innovation we did, and this was the outcome of that innovation." And then part three of that success story is, "And this is how this could apply to you."

Joe Dager: *I think that's great and tying customer outcomes to your value proposition, telling them stories on how it works. But give me a hint, and this is a little bit outside of your book maybe even, how does a salesperson or an organization learn to create and modify stories at the tip of the hat like you just talked about?*

Linda Richardson: It never can be at the tip of the hat. They have to be prepared. That has to be a part of every presentation. Every salesperson that goes out, you're not going to think of that innovation, you're not going to think of that insight. You're certainly not going to think of that success story by just snapping your fingers on the spot. Each of those takes planning. But I wouldn't go into a sales call, particularly a final presentation, without a really strong success story. If I never sold a product before then, you're really talking about piloting. You're trying to make a comparison with something else to show some kind of a parallel comparison. But yes, clients need to know this is a safe thing for me to do. As you said, nobody is going to get fired for buying IBM. We don't all sell IBM. Even selling IBM, today, has its challenges. So we need to go in totally prepared, really fully, fully prepared. Part of that preparation I think is a success story and some other examples.

Joe Dager: *I would like to have you explain the book bit more. You talk about five strategies in the book, can you give a quick overview on it?*

Linda Richardson: There actually five conversation changers that I think exist and how the conversation is different. Usually, I use very simple straightforward language. But I've used less obvious language because salespeople too often say, "I know that. Sure I can do that." So the first strategy, I call futuring. And futuring really is a kind of Meta, beyond preparation. And that's where I talk about all the resources salespeople have and really how they have to learn about the industry, about the company, about the stakeholders. They have to really utilize the tools that are out there – the sales tools are tremendous – that give them a great, great advantage. That's what I cover in the first part. So it's this meta-preparation.

In the second piece, I talk about heat mapping, and I use that term. What I'm really talking about there is a need dialogue and just like a heat map raises the visibility of an issue. If you look at a political map in two seconds, you can see the Republic or the Democrat states, the red or blue, and you get that picture very, very quickly. If salespeople can bring in insights, they can raise issues that are important to the client. If they had done their homework, and they know in the paper industry, X is an issue, and they can bring an insight. Now, if it's an insight the client doesn't know, then it's a great advantage. But if it's an insight they're sharing that the customer is aware of to a certain extent, they're still showing they know their world. You use those insights to establish credibility, to add value, and then to open up a need dialogue where you now start asking, not discovery questions that you can discover in your meta-preparation, but really

informed insight-like questions. I really try to teach people how to use informed and insight-like questions so that they can really add value and differentiate themselves.

Then the third conversation changer is value tracking, and that's where you put the solution together. That's where I said the solution has to have a lot more in it today, and I talk about what needs to be in a solution and how to structure it because the structure is very important. To boil that down as quickly as I can I think this structure is three parts – the status quo and why it's important to change it, and then what the world looks like with the change, and then the commitment and call to action. If you can get that across and use that kind of as a model you can really help clients see the benefits they're going to reap and help clients have the confidence to actually pull the trigger because I think the bane of salespeople's existence for the past year was the delayed or the no-decision, and you miss quarters, and the fears, and so forth.

Then the fourth part is what I call phasing. That's all about sales process and how important it is to understand the process and align it with the client's buying process. What I do which I think is interesting there which I like, and I've gotten some really nice feedback, for every stage of the sales process I give questions to ask yourself, or for coaches to ask their salespeople, to find out whether or not they're really in that stage because sometimes a salesperson can think they're moving along just famously but the customer is still back in phase one or phase two, and this thing is not going to close for a quarter or maybe not close at all.

Then the final chapter is linking. It's actually my favorite chapter. It's about connecting emotionally, and this is maybe the hardest one because salespeople are people-people – we've heard that – and they think they all do that and I'm sure they do. But in here I really talk about selling with heart, selling to really build trust. I talk about vulnerability. It's actually my favorite chapter. Does that give you an overview?

Joe Dager: *That was fine. I'm really very intrigued by it because all my listeners know how much I talk about value in use and value is co-created with the customer. What you're explaining fits very closely.*

Linda Richardson: Yes. It really is collaborative. You're not going in as some kind of expert telling the client I know more than you do. The client wants to be taught. Yes, the client wants to be taught but they want to be a part of the lesson. So it really is a collaborative process. I don't believe that the new selling is insight selling. I believe the new selling if anything is teaching. I think you'll agree; the best teaching is collaborative teaching where there's input, and you're on a journey together.

Joe Dager: *I term it another way sometimes. It's just you have to know when to step back and leave the customer be your teacher.*

Linda Richardson: It's mutual. Absolutely. If you walk out of a sales call and you haven't learned anything, it's not a great call. The clients have a lot to add, a lot to give, particularly today. And if you walk out and they haven't learned anything, you haven't had a good call. So yes I agree with you completely.

Joe Dager: *Where can I learn more? The book is published by McGraw-Hill, so I'm sure it's available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and all the regular book stores.*

Linda Richardson: Yes, it's on Amazon, and it's in the Kindle version and the hardback.

Joe Dager: *Where can someone contact you? Can they find you on LinkedIn or if they have other questions?*

Linda Richardson: That would be great. Certainly LinkedIn, I would appreciate anyone who would like to connect on LinkedIn. I have a website, and its linda@richardson.com. If your listeners have any questions or ideas or thoughts they'd like to share, I'd be very excited to hear them and certainly to engage with them.

Joe Dager: *I would like to mention to everyone that the book was very well done. It was like a high level read. But along with the appendix and a few other areas of the book it gave you very practical applications to put to use. Usually books take on a character of one or the other, but this is a nice blend and very well done Linda.*

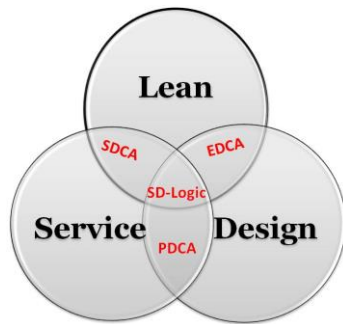
Linda Richardson: Thank you. I tried to keep it short. I know salespeople don't have a lot of time. I tried to put tools in there they can use. So thank you.

Joe Dager: *I can't let you go without asking this question is that, you intrigue me so much about reading the book that to learn more, to go deeper, should I read Perfect Selling, I think was your previous book? Is that book still applicable?*

Linda Richardson: I think Perfect Selling is a great book particularly great for newer salespeople. And then this is the overlay. This doesn't replace it. It's an overlay, and it really says, "This is what you need to have a good, solid, engaged conversation with your customer." Now it says, "But things have changed, so now that you've learned all that, and that's the foundation, how do you bring it up a notch?" That's what Changing the Sales Conversation does, my new book does. The new book ties to my coaching book. I have a book on sales coaching. So most of my books actually link together.

Joe Dager: *I would like to thank you very much Linda for your time today, and I look forward to hearing some comments about the podcast and also about your new book, Changing the Sales Conversation. So thanks again.*

Linda Richardson: Thank you so much Joe. Take care.



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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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