

# 8 Reasons Why Buyers Avoid IT Salespeople Like The Plague... And What To Do About It

Tom "Bald Dog" Varjan

**H**ave you thought about why so many people run their cars idle for 5-15 minutes every morning before they drive them?

Far, far back in the last millennium, on very cold, usually subzero, days, it was customary to warm car engines for a few minutes before driving cars.

People would get in their cars, pull the choke full on, start their engines and would let their cars idle for 5-15 minutes. Allegedly it was recommended by car companies.

Maybe, but that recommendation was made at the dawn of the car industry when cars had rather primitive carburettors and chokes.

Over the following years, both carburettors and chokes had gone through a tremendous evolution, until, following dodos, they went completely and utterly extinct.

And one must be a real old, grizzled buzzard to even remotely remember them.

Most of today's cars have electronic fuel injection systems, and a little on-board computer controls fuel intake according to the engine's temperature.

Warming up your engine by letting it idle in your driveway is the most ineffective way of getting the job done. Not to mention that over time, the process overwhelms the car's catalytic converter and it soon goes completely and utterly fubar<sup>1</sup>.

And what happens then? After smoking up their neighbourhoods, people get poor performance and dirty exhaust out of their cars. Then the cars soon kick the bucket once and for all.

And whatever the government, the Church or even the UN Security Council says, that's not an exciting way of ending an otherwise nice day.

I mention this mind-witheringly intoxicating phenomenon because the IT sales terrain has changed quite drastically over the last few years, but many IT companies still use obsolete sales practices, many of them from the heyday of the dodo and woolly mammoth.

One of these obsolete practices is the use of bloated, army-sized sales forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Military: Fucked Up Beyond All Repair

But the problem is that buyers are sick to their back teeth of wasting their precious time and energy on salespeople who are pitching almost identical doodads in almost identical ways.

Buyers are looking for business solutions to their business problems, but salespeople keep pitching technical solutions.

It seems, most IT companies are selling IT for the sake of accumulating more IT stuff on the buyer's premises.

And since buyers can obtain all the technical information they need without meeting salespeople, they avoid salespeople and do their due diligence on the Internet.

Actually, over the years<sup>2</sup>, I've found...

## **Eight Reasons Why Decision-Makers Avoid IT Salespeople Like The Plague**

### **1. Buyers Are Worried About Meeting Hyper-Aggressive, Hard-Nosed, Manipulative, "Don't Take No For An Answer" Salespeople**

According to the IDC Executive Advisory Group's report, *IT Buyers Speak Out*, April 2010...

**"Sales reps are unable to put aside the generic sales pitch to have deeper conversations with their prospects/customers."**

Just take a look at sales career ads, and discover the character traits companies are looking for in salespeople: Aggressive, persistent, able to handle rejections, good hunter, have a bulldog mentality: Never let prospects go, etc.

As long as salespeople's mantra is about "hitting your numbers" and "making quota", buyers will always have a truckload of unease to meet sellers. And they will do their best to avoid salespeople. And even if they meet them, buyers will be on their guards and keep up their defences in various forms, like...

- Withholding vital information from salespeople. What this means is that salespeople have no chance in hell to offer to exactly solve clients' problems because a large part of their work is guessing.
- Disallowing human contact between buyers and sellers. See the dysfunctional RFP process – typically used between low-brow buyers and sellers.
- Evaluating solutions based on cost not on expected ROI.
- Sellers and their solutions are screened by bureaucrats with little or no subject matter

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<sup>2</sup> 16 of them as an engineer, a project manager and a technical buyer. And since 1998 as an IT business development strategist and copywriter.

expertise. Engineering and medicine are clear-cut scientific disciplines. Purchasing is not. Actually most people in purchasing have neither technology nor business education. Realistically they're bureaucrats.

## **2. Buyers Can Obtain All The Information They Ever Need**

Buyers don't need to speak to salespeople any more. All they have to do is to go to Google, search for the service they're seeking, select the company that is perceived to be the best, and initiate contact.

Read it again...

The buyer seeks out the seller with the intention of doing business.

Is it fair to say that this is a more powerful dynamic than when sellers seek out buyers and grovel for purchase orders? Well, just a tiny bit.

The harder salespeople force the appointment, the more buyer resistance and resentment they create for themselves. And they make a mess of the company's reputation by being pushy.

Just think of some industries and their pushy salespeople like multilevel marketing, car salespeople and financial services.

## **3. Buyers' Plates Are Already Full Of Mission-Critical Initiatives<sup>3</sup>**

Buyers are already working on mission-critical issues and are already pretty busy. Actually the average buyer has 59 hours of "urgent" work on her desk at any one time. If you add to this that a typical B2B sale over \$10,000 involves 22 decision-makers on the buyer's side alone, you can see what sort of proverbial concrete wall companies banging their heads against by practising cold prospecting.

And add some more interesting, well, rather scary facts.

A typical B2B sale over **\$35,000** takes **5.12** sales calls to close. That's great, but the problem is that, on a weekly basis, a typical B2B buyer takes **4.61** telephone calls and grants **1.81** in-person meetings with salespeople.

Can you imagine how many of your competitors are vying to get one of those 4.61 phone calls and one of those 1.81 meetings?

One a weekly basis, a typical buyer receives over 50 sales calls, and each caller tries to push the buyer into a nasty dark corner and pin her down for an appointment. So, buyers have become pretty apathetic towards sellers.

And you may have dozens of competitors targeting the same buyers, so as a result of the barrage of peddlers, buyers do anything to protect their time and sanity. In the best case, they redirect

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<sup>3</sup> According to the International Association of Professional Organisers, the typical B2B buyer has some 59 hours of urgent work on her desk, desperately waiting for her attention.

sellers to purchasing agents and other peddler foddors or simply ignore messages altogether and delete them.

Buyers that are worth accepting as clients always have some vital initiatives going on to improve their businesses. They are working on what they perceive as the “next breakthrough” thing, and they are very protective of the little time they have available.

So, when peddlers manage to infiltrate buyer’s defences (bypassing the dreaded purchasing departments or gatekeepers), buyers are very careful to sacrifice their time to spend it in the company of an unknown person, well another bloody peddler who is likely to pitch what 10 other peddlers have already tried to pitch during the same week.

### **4. Buyers Are Sick And Tired Of Sales Presentations**

In spite of its gross ineffectiveness, most high-tech companies still base their sales success on almost identical dog-and-pony show type presentation.

The presenter steps up on the stage, grabs the microphone, the remote control for the projector for his 101 PowerPoint slides, gets the spotlights on himself and starts preaching to the audience. In 10 minutes audience members are bored out of their skulls and plain courtesy is the only thing that holds them back from walking out and sending the presenter home. So, they courteously nod and yawn through the presentation in case there are some good points which they can take to the current or the already selected consulting firm.

At the end of the presentations our presenters receives some encouragement from the audience members and is sent on his way home with the instructions, “Don’t call us. We’ll call you”.

But of course, the call never comes.

A few weeks later our presenter musters up some courage and makes the call. And a reluctant, cynical, apathetic voice on the other end of the line tells him, “We’ve already selected a firm for this engagement, but we’ll keep you in mind for upcoming opportunities.”

Remember, while real buyers are bone honest (in most cases), flunkies tend to be courteously deceptive, and consider a bit of lying here and there as part of their jobs.

Let’s face it, due to its “sell => solve => implement” nature, most IT services can’t be presented.

Can you imagine going to your doctor, yelling her that your leg hurts and then she sits you down and gives you a PowerPoint presentation on the physiology of the human leg and her favourite remedy for painful legs: Amputation.

And all that based on your statement that your leg hurts.

How fast and how far would you run from that clinic?

### **5. Buyers Are Missing The Peer-Level Match**

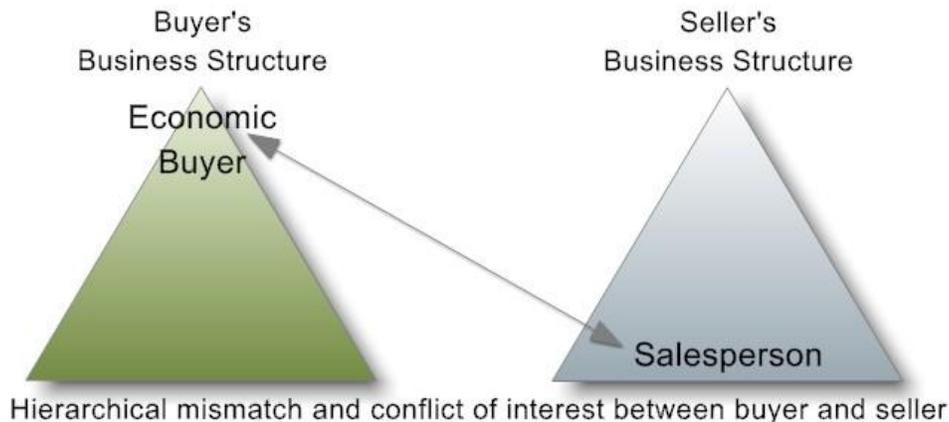
Buyers, most often high-level, highly trusted and respected and reliable folks, don’t have peer-

level relationships with the seller company's lowest level, least trusted, least respected and most rapidly coming and going people: The sales force.

And here is another discrepancy. Executives are watching out for the long-term success of their companies. Salespeople are looking for the next sale as quickly as humanly possible. Since they're on commissions, they need quick money to make the next mortgage and car payment.

Tom Stevenson and Sam Barcus write in *The Relationship Advantage: Become a Trusted Advisor and Create Clients for Life...*

An IBM area sales vice president from Dallas was sitting in the audience at one of our sessions a few years ago. When we offered our description of how partnerships conduct the Perform-Manage-Sell model, he approached the front of the room, turned our flip chart of the Pyramid upside down, and then returned to his seat. Stunned, I asked him why he did that. Pointing at the upside down chart, he replied:



"That's us! The first thing we ask new employees in my organization to do when we hire them is to sell! We delegate the responsibility of acquiring relationships to these people, and our top managers assume very little accountability for executive relationships. We have no objective way to measure the quality of relationships they build. We only measure their quota performance. If they make quota for a few short years, we promote them and let them manage. I can see now why we are so overmatched when we encounter consultants in our accounts.

Here are some considerations when sellers of high-tech consulting services met buyers...

- Prospects want to meet respected experts, not glib, glad-handed salespeople
- Prospects want to assess chemistry with experts before hiring them
- Prospects expect to have a rough idea of what engagements cost
- Prospects have questions and need real answers not vague manipulative guesses from salespeople

When IT companies ignore the above five reasons why buyers don't want to meet sellers and choose the old-fashioned perseverance-based "try harder" sales approach, they usually bump their heads into the nasty concrete wall of competitive bidding.

So, how should we define strategic business development as something different from forceful peddling?

In my opinion it's a process of guiding self-qualified prospects through their buying cycles and helping them to make two decisions...

1. Whether or not to go ahead with a planned initiative to seize an opportunity or eliminate a problem.
2. If going ahead, whether going ahead with us or someone else.

### **6. Buyers Have Lots Of Questions, But They Know They Can't Get Honest Answers From Salespeople**

Buyers have lots of questions to ask, but they also know that, instead of honest answers, salespeople twist their answers so that they can make quick sales, even if buyers don't need or want their products/services.

Reading job ads for salespeople, we can see that most IT companies hire people in these positions who are chiefly motivated by money. And since these salespeople want to make their money quickly, they tailor their answers to their buyers so buyers buy. So, instead of honest answers, they give such answers that are likely to trigger quick sales.

And by the time this technique backfires to the company, salespeople are long gone and turn their tricks far far away.

### **7. Buyers And Sellers Have Opposing Agendas**

There is a clear conflict in objectives. Sellers want to make quick and easy sales and swiftly move on to other prospects and flog something to them too. And since their commissions are calculated on the percentage of revenues, in order to make the sale, they drop the price as low as they still make money, although for the company the project might yield zero profits.

But what do buyers want?

First, buyers want to make intelligent decisions about their issues. They want salespeople to guide them through the maze of decision-making. Buyers want to get lasting solutions to their problems.

What buyers don't need is pressure, although that's most of what they get.

So, some buyers gut it out, and make a compromised purchase from sellers, but many just get rid of salespeople and find other companies to buy from. Clients are not seeking perfection from salespeople. They just expect salespeople to help them to find the best possible solution.

## 8. Buyers Don't Want To Partner With Sellers

Sellers love partnering. But buyers aren't idiots, and they know that for sellers partnering really means cutting their claws into buyers and never letting them go. So, buyers are super sensitive to the "P" word. They know that a purchase of a product or service doesn't create partners.

Why are salespeople obsessed with the partnering? Because in many cases they have nothing better to offer.

### So, What Can IT Sellers Do To Overcome These Eight Obstacles?

The bad news is that those obstacles do exist.

The good news is that it's dysfunctional sales practices that have created those obstacles, and better sales practices can demolish them.

The two main dysfunctional sales practices that have created those obstacles are interruption-based marketing and sales presentations. Sellers need two major shifts in their sales approaches. One is related to generating and nurturing sales leads and the other is to meeting buyers.

From lead generation, sellers have to remove the interruption part. Yes, sellers have to approach buyers somehow, but that approach shouldn't be a personal visit or phone call. The interruption part is the presence of a human being in the process.

Imagine you are doing some hard-core focused work and all of a sudden your phone rings or someone knocks on your office door. That's interruption.

But how much interruption do you feel when, unbeknownst to you, the postman puts a letter in your company's mail box?

So, when you pick up the phone or answer the door, you feel agitated because of the interruption. And now the salesperson starts pitching this already pretty pissed off buyer.

This is the problem.

Take out the human being and that takes out the interruption.

The approach should be such that pieces of valuable content, as opposed to brochures, sales letters or other self-centred chest-beating collaterals, appear on buyers' doorsteps, and they can "consume" that content in their own time and at their own pace without salespeople's breathing down their necks. And they can decide whether or not they want to respond to the call to action in those documents.

If they respond, the lead nurturing process starts, and it may or may not result in a sale. The key is that sellers have plenty of these lead nurturing conversations, so they don't have to arm-twist buyers to buy anything.

And what happens when eventually buyers want to meet sellers face-to-face?

They meet, but instead of idiotic sales presentations, sellers, collaboratively with buyers, perform diagnostics on the buyers' businesses and their current situations.

As Jeff Thull outlines in his book, *Mastering The Complex Sale*, salespeople should use three role models in their behaviours: The Doctor, the best friend and the detective.

Doctors are great role models because their operation is based on the "Do no harm" mantra. Good doctors insist on diagnosing patients' symptoms in search of root causes, and don't blindly accept patients' self-diagnosis.

Best friends are great role models because they care about us enough to tell the unvarnished truth about the mistakes we make. While society in general is polite to you even in dishonest ways, best friends are honest to you even in impolite ways. Honesty outweighs politeness.

Detectives are great role models because they apply their smarts to solve mysteries in an unassuming way without getting emotionally entangled in their cases. Just think of Detective Columbo, Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot. Detectives observe situations and come to logical conclusions supported by plenty of evidence.

And this takes us to a closer look at the...

### **Traditional Business Development Cycle**

Traditional business development is the approach of replaceable vendors. It's based on the idea that buyers buy whenever sellers have a need to sell something, and force their wills on buyers using manipulative sales tricks.

Yes, tricks. During my 16 years of being an engineer, project manager and technical buyer, I had been at the receiving end of some of the most fiendish sales tricks.

Having "digested" over 8,000 pages of proposals and sat through over 1,500 hours of sales presentations, I had seen the good, the bad and the ugly. And the bad and the ugly far outweighs the good.

This type of business development is a 100% manual labour grunt work-based process with very little or no automation at all. The only leverage sellers have is the number of feet on the streets, number of fingers on telephone dialling pads, and the number of hours those poor bastards pump into chasing reluctant suspects.

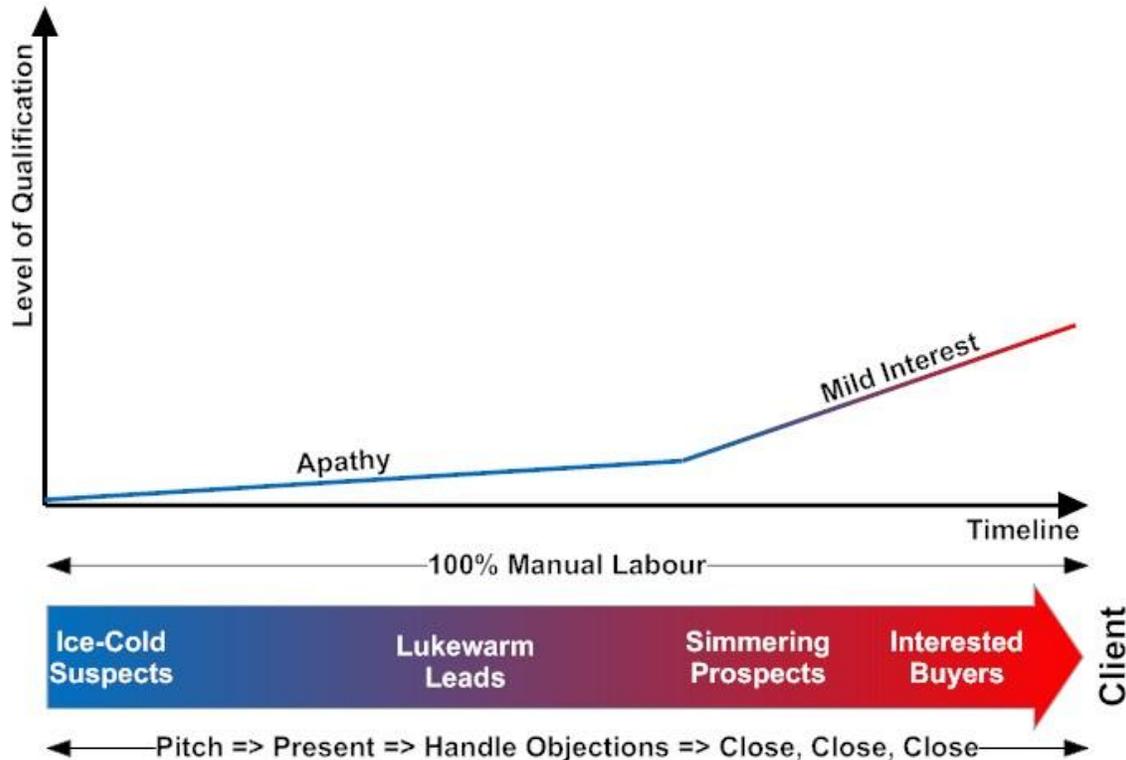
In essence, using demeaning cold prospecting drudgery, salespeople chase after their target markets and try to engage apathetic suspects to listen to their dog-and-pony show sales pitches.

Right from their first contacts, sellers' objective is to hammer buyers with sales pitches, hoping to sufficiently "tenderise" them and sell them something that buyers often don't want or need.

Some prospects are real decision-makers, but most of them are opinion-makers and other self-glorified flunkies with exalted titles and alphabet soups behind their names. And those titles can

often fool sellers into believing they are talking to real buyers.

After some brain-picking meetings, sellers volunteer to write and submit their proposals to apathetic or mildly interested opinion-makers.



And fake buyers will use those proposals to pick ideas from either for internal implementation or hiring the lowest bidder to implement it.

Sellers, even if their proposals are accepted, find that those engagements are based on “master-slave” relationships and fees and prices get haggled almost down to the point when sellers lose money.

This type of cold prospecting leads to low quality clients, low profit margins and very little repeat and referral business. And we haven’t even talked about diminished respect for you as an expert.

In contrast to conventional wisdom, let’s look at...

## High-Leverage Business Development

You invest your resources in in-person diagnostics, not presentation, if and only if there is a 99% chance that the prospect becomes a client. The synergy of education and automated disqualification qualify buyers even before in-person time and effort are invested.

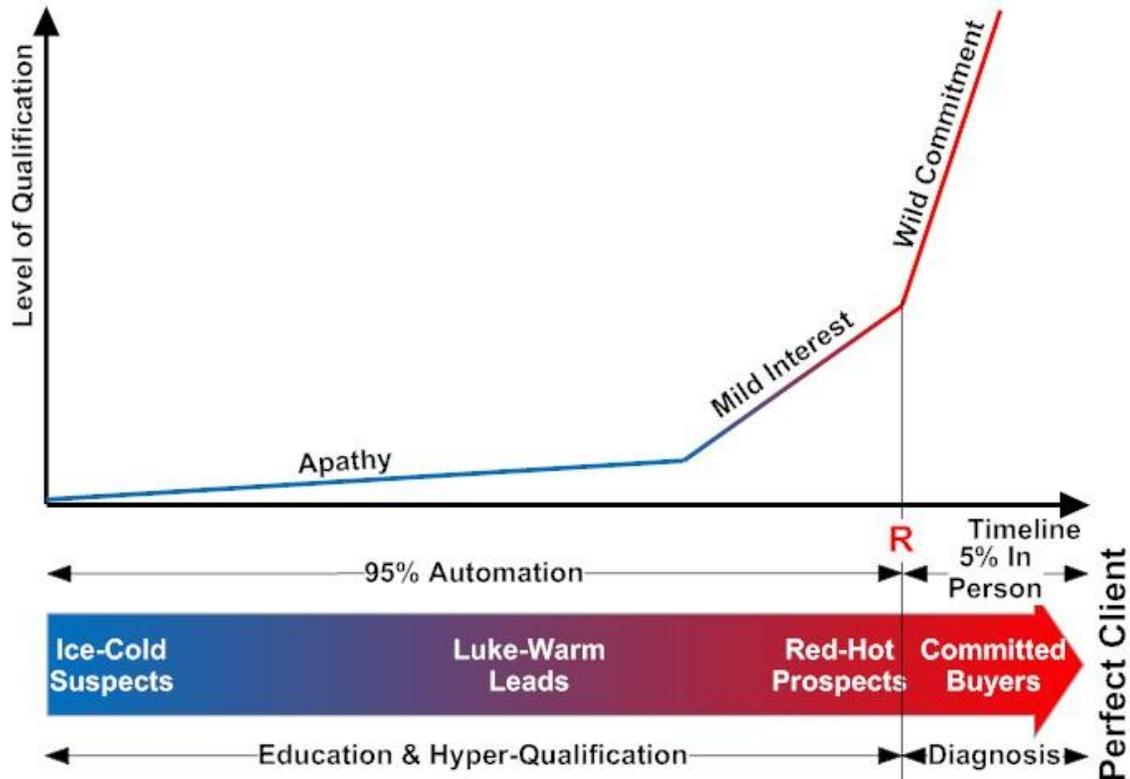
Education is also a pre-selling process. It’s the equivalent of the warm-up session of a physical

workout in the gym or the foreplay part of a red-hot hyper-passionate lovemaking session.

Without that warm-up, you can cause some serious damage to your muscles.

And without good foreplay, your wife or girlfriend may have second thoughts about an affair with the postman.

In this case, the damage is done to the relationship with the buyer.



If you neglect to educate your buyers correctly, then they are likely to make buying decisions based on the wrong buying criteria. Buying criteria that may be beneficial to your competitors but detrimental to you. But correct buyer education...

- Eliminates price objections by using “apples to oranges” comparisons.
- Positions you as a recognised expert, while your competitors are regarded as desperate vendors
- Puts you into a “category of one”, and in doing so makes your competitors irrelevant.

And at point “**R**”, the buyer requests the first meeting.

And that first meeting is not a sales presentation done by a salesperson.

Oh, no!

It’s a detailed diagnostics about the buyers’ current situations, afflictions and aspirations, done by a subject matter expert with business savvy.

Subject matter expertise is required, so sellers can answer technical questions from technical buyers. And business savvy is required, so sellers can answer questions about how their technical solutions cause business improvements in buyers' businesses.

Business savvy is the key why executives receive sellers are in boardrooms and discuss business, not IT managers in server rooms discussing technology.

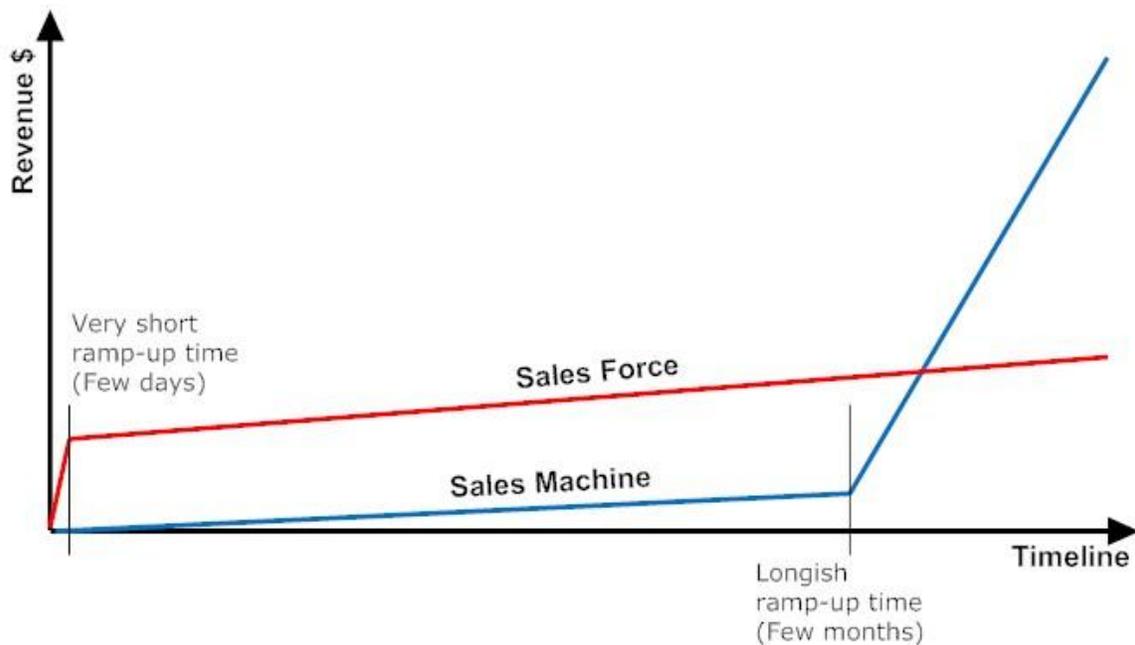
I know some people say it makes no sense to interrupt subject matter experts to see prospects when they are already engaged in projects. It's too expensive to pull them out of projects.

It depends.

But you invest human effort in the lead conversion cycle if and only if prospects have proved through their actions that they are serious about engaging you. Buyers actually demonstrate a conditional commitment to do business with you, if you meet their buying criteria.

### Doing Business Without A Sales Force

I know... Gasp, gulp, gasp.



But relax! It's not as bad as it seems.

In his book, *To Sell Is Human*, Dan Pink mentions two blazingly successful IT companies that operate very very profitably without sales forces.

Atlassian is a \$100 million a year company. Palantir is almost three-times of that. And I have my fair share of clients that I've helped to replace their sales forces with sales machines.

The concept those companies use is the fact that buyers avoid salespeople, but are eager to meet subject matter experts.

And this is a decision time for you too.

Do you choose the sales force or the sales machine approach?

Look at the comparison table below, and decide...

<b>Sales Force</b>	<b>Sales Machine</b>
Weapon of individual conversion: You hire an army of peddlers, put them on straight commission and send them out to pound pavements and dial for dollars to chase after prospects one by one.	Weapon of mass conversion: You design and build a lead generation, lead nurturing and lead conversion system, and automate it to the nth degree.
Very short ramp-up time (Few days)	Longi(sh) ramp-up time (6-9 months)
Zero or low start-up costs	Significant start-up costs
High maintenance and management cost	Low maintenance and management cost
Produces high gross revenue	Produces high net profit per employee/profit per sale
Almost instant, but short-term gratification	Delayed but long-term gratification
Unpredictable, unreliable and inconsistent due to it subjective (human) nature.	Predictable, reliable, and consistent due to its objective (systematic and automated) nature.
Inconsistency undermines brand strength.	Consistency nurtures brand strength
Works 40 hours a week at varying performance	Works 168 hours a week at peak performance
Requires many salespeople (“regular army” approach)	Requires a small cohesive team (“commando” approach)
Salespeople can and usually do “steal” clients	Company “owns” clients
Managing a large sales force is costly and feels like herding cats	Self-directed and self-governed business development team
Targets the mass of market	Targets the cream of the crop (0.5-2%) of market
Competitive(ly low) fees and prices	Premium fees and prices

Sales Force	Sales Machine
Lots of low margin sales	Few high margin sales
Buyers treat sellers as replaceable vendors	Buyers treat sellers as sought-after industrial authorities
The effectiveness of the Flintstone-mobile	The effectiveness of the Bat-mobile
Seller has to jump through the buyer's qualification hoops	Buyer has to jump through the seller's qualification hoops
<b>Analogy:</b> Slot machine or hamster wheel	<b>Analogy:</b> Vending machine or oil well

The reality is that if Formula 1 car racing were business development and team owners shared the characteristics of many sales managers, then at Formula 1 races we would see legions of unskilled and minimum-wage grease monkeys pushing cars around the tracks. Cars without the expensive parts: Drivers and engines.

The key in any business is leverage. That leverage can come either from people or systems. If it comes from people, the costs grow all the time. If it comes from systems, the costs are relatively low.

**In the meantime, don't sell harder. Market smarter and your business will be better off for it.**

## About The Author



Since 1998, after a 16-year industrial stint as an electronics/computer engineer, project manager and technical buyer, Tom "Bald Dog" Varjan has been working with privately held information technology companies and independent IT professionals to market and sell their complex, high-ticket and hard-to-explain IT solutions to high-end, sophisticated clients, using crisp, clear and compelling sales copy, so his clients don't have to rely on the haphazard and unpredictable nature of using armies of salespeople and don't have to use ugly, filthy, mind-numbing cold-prospecting grunt work to acquire clients. For more information, you can visit Tom's website at <http://www.ITBusinessWriter.com>