

# everything success-story writers should know about sales

*When marketing-communications writers take into account the sales process, the collateral they produce will not only get used by sales – it can also help improve close rates and boost revenues.*

*by Bill Lee*



**U**p to 90 percent of marketing collateral is never used by sales, according to the American Marketing Association’s Customer Messaging Management Forum. Success stories in particular are probably no exception. (See my article, [Success Stories: The Top 5 Mistakes](#), showing that most stories, even by great firms, leave out information critical to sales.) One reason for this is that marcom writers often lack the information they need on how the sales process works, so they can’t work it into the pieces they write. This brief article provides them with the essentials.

The key to writing “sales-ready” collateral is for writers to keep in mind what it takes to improve sales close rates. Fortunately, our understanding of this has greatly increased in the last couple of decades based on some very good studies of the sales process.

## **How to improve sales close rates**

Probably the best were studies conducted over a dozen years, mostly in North America and Europe, by the Huthwaite Corporation. They uncovered some of the most valuable information available on sales effectiveness and how to increase it. Indeed, the results or close variations – under such names as “solution selling,” “consultative selling,” “SPIN selling” and the like – have since worked their way into the best companies in the world,



**Tips for writing success stories  
that sell**

>Describing the Buyer's NEED and its  
IMPLICATIONS.

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**Success story example:** The customer needed to back up their sales data more often and with greater efficiency.

**Grade:** Poor. Although it identifies a need, it is too generic.

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**Success story example:** "We needed to protect critical sales data like prospect lists and certain information needed for up-selling and cross selling."

**Grade:** Better. It provides a specific need and quotes the customer for greater credibility. But it fails to describe the business implications of the need.

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**Success story example:** "If that data were ever lost late in the month, before backups, it would cut off our sales pipeline for weeks. Plus, monthly backups with our old system required four technicians a full two days to complete – taking them away from development work for our customers."

**Grade:** Best: Such information is pure gold to a sales person trying to engage a similarly situated buyer – particularly one who does not realize he has a similar need, or if he does, hasn't thought through the implications. Helping buyers think through the business implications of their needs is the essence of great sales. Providing sales people the background information they need to do so is the essence of great marcom writing.

including GE, Microsoft, IBM, FedEx, Hewlett Packard, Bank of America and many others. (See Neil Rackham's classic, *SPIN Selling*, McGraw-Hill, 1988. Also see Bosworth, *Solution Selling*, McGraw-Hill, 1995 and Heiman, et. al., *The New Strategic Selling*, Warner, 1998.) Very likely, the information uncovered by Huthwaite has worked its way into your sales force too.

Huthwaite found that the most critical factors for sales success are:

- **Needs:** *The ability of the sales person to identify explicit needs of the buyer that your offerings can meet.* Many buyers aren't aware of their own needs and a skillful, *well informed* sales person can probe for and help uncover them. Obviously, collateral such as success stories and case studies are often key to keeping sales people so informed.
- **Implications:** *The ability to help the buyer see the business implications of his needs.* Just because he realizes he has a problem with slow backup times or growing data demands, for example, doesn't mean the buyer is ready to purchase your storage solution. The sales person needs to help him think through the *implications* – in terms of excessive costs, reduced productivity, lost Web site sales and the like. Otherwise, the buyer will regard slow backups or a growing database as just one of many problems he already has and wonder why he should bother to fix this one. Result: no sale.
- **Benefits:** *The ability of the sales person to explain how your solution meets those needs and the tangible benefits that will result, quantified as much as possible.* Note that the term "benefits" does not mean generalized advantages to the buyer. The sales person needs to show how your offering can meet his specific needs – and the resulting impact on his operations and on his company's overall business.

How important are these factors to sales success? Extremely. No other factor, including closing techniques, objection handling, use of open-ended

## Tips for writing success stories that sell, con't

>Describing your Solution's BENEFITS

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**Success story example:** "Our new solution automatically backs up our data daily, and the snapshot technology provides continuous backup of all changes during the day."

**Grade:** Poor. The emphasis is on features and technology, not benefits to the customer's business. Plus, nothing is quantified.

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**Success story example:** "Your solution fully protects our critical sales data with real time, redundant backup. In addition:

- In the event of a system crash, no prospect or client information would be lost and backup systems would be running within minutes. Most users would never notice the system had gone down.
- Maintenance of the new system requires just one non-tech administrator working less than two hours per month versus four techs working 16 hours each.
- Those four techs are now devoting those hours to billable customer development projects, increasing our top line revenue by \$76,000 per year.
- ROI: Diverting tech time from administration to billable hours, by itself, will pay for your solution in 18 months."

**Grade:** Excellent. This emphasizes value to the customer's business, with quantified results wherever possible. ROI claims are always powerful, particularly when they are plausibly linked, as here, to solution benefits.

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questions and other methods once thought critical to sales success, comes close.

In one extensive study of 5,000 sales calls by companies in Europe and North America, for example, Huthwaite researchers found that in successful sales calls (where the seller either closed the deal or at least advanced the sales process), the sellers spent more than twice as much time discussing buyer needs/ implications and solution benefits than did the sales people in the calls that failed. (Rackham, p. 107)

In another study of new product sales for a medical equipment company, sales people who focused on needs/ implications/ benefits closed 54% more sales than those who touted features or "advantages" (generalized statements about how the product can help that aren't tied to any explicit customer need). (Rackham, p. 112) Indeed, in study after study at companies like Motorola, Eastman Kodak and others, Huthwaite found repeatedly that sales people who focus on needs/ implications / benefits dramatically improve their performance – by 30% to 70%.

*The lesson for writers is clear.* To boost sales dramatically, improve the ability of your sales people to (1) Focus on buyers' needs; (2) Uncover their business implications; and (3) Show how your solutions can meet those needs and the benefits that will result, quantified as much as possible.

### Writing that improves sales close rates

The problem with most marketing collateral, even from top firms, is that it fails to uncover and discuss these issues. Instead, it focuses on such things as product features, technology breakthroughs and services expertise. (See [Success Stories: The Top 5 Mistakes](#).) And that fails to properly prepare sales people to uncover and discuss the right topics with prospects.

The result is a missed opportunity to improve sales close rates. Particularly where sales people are new, or where they're unfamiliar with the product or

solution, or with the buyer's business or industry – they will likely have to rely on marketing collateral to properly prepare them for sales calls. That was precisely the situation in the Huthwaite medical products study, mentioned above. The product in that study was new and sales people relied on collateral for the information they needed to sell it, but the collateral furnished by marketing focused on its features. Huthwaite, however, took a small group of sales people and provided them with information on what specific customer needs it might solve and the benefits that would result. And that was the group that outperformed their less well informed peers by 54 percent. That has profound implications for the ability of collateral to impact sales and revenue. (See my article, [Anticipating ROI for Marketing Collateral.](#))

Of course, since the product was new, Huthwaite and the company's product development and marketing people had to use their imaginations a bit. Imagine how much more effective it would be to provide such information from actual customers in success stories.

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