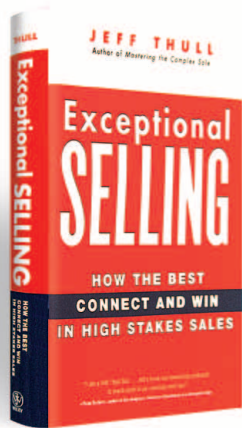




Executive Book Summaries®

FILE: SALES



By Jeff Thull

How the Best Connect and Win in High Stakes Sales

EXCEPTIONAL SELLING

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Exceptional Selling is a practical guide to sales success that shows sales professionals how to avoid the many traps of self-sabotage brought about by pressure and traditional sales approaches. It shows sales professionals how to create a different kind of relationship with the customer and use powerful diagnostic principles to reframe the typical sales conversation into open, honest and straightforward communication.

Even today, with so much sales experience in the world, the marketplace is cluttered with seminars, consultants, trainers and books that espouse antiquated approaches to selling. The goal of this summary is to show you that by replicating the practices of top-performing professionals, you'll learn new, exceptional ways to sell that can set you apart and pull you ahead of the pack. Those of you looking to notch up your skills in order to compete effectively in an ever-evolving market will see that fine-tuning some areas of your approach can have a major impact on your results.

Sales professionals and entrepreneurs will also be warned about the pitfalls that can get them into trouble, such as creating "dangling insults" that can shut down conversations with both customers and best-qualified prospects. Sales conversations are rife with such traps. Exceptional Selling exposes those traps and offers logical and proven alternatives that enhance the clarity, relevancy, credibility and trust that sales professionals are trying to create in conversations with customers.

What you will learn in this summary:

- ✓ *Three root causes of failure that can prevent you from succeeding.*
- ✓ *How ingrained reactions and traditional selling strategies and techniques combine to create an atmosphere of confrontation between salespeople and their customers.*
- ✓ *How preprogrammed behaviors and reactions get both salespeople and their customers into trouble.*
- ✓ *How salespeople consistently overestimate the customer's comprehension of the problem to be solved, the solutions proposed and the customer's readiness to make decisions.*

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EXCEPTIONAL SELLING

by Jeff Thull

— THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

PART I — ‘WHAT WE GOT HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE’

No sales professional in his right mind would sabotage his own efforts; nevertheless, undermining credibility and alienating the very customers and prospects that are counted on for livelihoods happen all too often.

Salespeople can't look to customers to cue them in. Customers aren't going to rationally discuss how they were insulted or alienated. Instead, successful professionals win customer loyalty and trust through respectful, honest and diagnostic-based communications.

The More You Sweat, the Less You Sell

The most common forms of sales sabotage are stylistic. *How* salespeople talk with customers can easily undermine the ability to succeed and win business. If you don't know how to effectively structure and conduct customer conversations, what you talk about doesn't make much difference. How you speak with your customers has an equally powerful impact on your career. When customers are engaged, they learn. When what they learn is compelling enough to make them want to change and take action, they will buy. It might be difficult to accept that you may be sabotaging your own career, but here are three reasons that could be true:

- Most people, and that includes sales, service and support professionals, are not naturally effective communicators.
- The techniques promoted in the majority of sales-training programs exacerbate our innate communication shortcomings.
- When salespeople get emotionally involved in the outcome of a customer engagement and start to try to drag the customer into compliance using outdated techniques, they are confirming the customer's negative assumptions and stereotypes about the sales profession.

The Emotional Mind-Set — The Root of Miscommunication

Your emotional mind-set can either provide the foundation on which all successful communications are built or it can be the primary instrument sabotaging your credibility.

One effective way to recognize the sources and effects of mind-set in conversation and relationships is by looking at patterns of adopted beliefs and observed behaviors, like that of parent and child. A very common scenario occurs when salespeople unwittingly play the parent with customers and alienate them at the very beginning of the sale. Many customers hear a parent or superior insinuating that they don't know their own business.

Once the parent and the child manifest themselves in a business conversation, old patterns of reacting often kick in, and what's left of your connection and credibility with the customer quickly deteriorates.

The Amazing Old Brain

Another hidden element of an emotional mind-set that negatively impacts salespeople resides in what scientists define as the *Old Brain*. Think about how quickly a customer's gesture or tone of voice can trigger a negative perception, or worse, a negative reaction in you. There is a good chance you are seeing the Old Brain and the adaptive unconscious at work in these situations.

Stress can also close salespeople down. They start thinking about the consequences of not closing this sale,
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The More You Sweat, the Less You Sell

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worrying about how they are going to salvage it and what they are going to say next. They are so involved in their own problems that they aren't paying attention to the customer and they stop listening.

Presentations Commoditize Solutions

The solutions salespeople sell are often more confusing to customers than the problems that are solved. First, they transform salespeople into professors giving lectures, one of the least effective ways to transmit knowledge. The second flaw is the concept of the salesperson as persuader. The problem here is that we rarely stop to think about how customers perceive the tactics of persuasion that salespeople are taught and encouraged to use. Suddenly, the meeting between salesperson and customer has turned

Salespeople Play 'Child' Role, Too

In the dialogue that follows, you'll see that salespeople often respond as the child to their customer-parents:

Prospect: Our company is planning to purchase an integrated CRM software package for our marketing, sales and service staff. We would like you to demonstrate your solution to our management team by the end of the month.

Salesperson: First, I need to get a better understanding of your company's needs and budget. I'd like to meet with several of the executives at your company.

Prospect: We'd rather not take the time for that. We'd like to start with an overview first and if things look good, we can progress from there.

Salesperson: It's very difficult to present such a complex solution without understanding more about your situation and budget constraints.

Prospect: We don't have time to waste on meetings. Do you want to work with us or not?

Salesperson: Certainly, when would be the most convenient time for the demo?

What happened here was driven by emotion. The customer says he wants a product demonstration, a normal and often costly part of the complex sales process. The salesperson responds as an adult and seeks to ensure that a demonstration of his product can be tailored and is appropriate for the customer and his own company. The customer responds like a parent; it's going to be his way or the highway. The salesperson, overly anxious to please and scared to lose the sale, responds like a child by complying and, in doing so, commits to an expensive course of action that may very well have no chance of yielding a sale.

into a debate, or worse, an outright argument.

Customer Expectations – Snake Oil and the Hard Sell

Just as it takes two to tango, salespeople and customers enter conversations with preconceived perceptions and expectations and distinct mind-sets. Customers tend to paint all salespeople with the same brush. To them, salespeople — no matter whether they sell advanced avionics or used cars — all come out of the same mold. And customers' negative perception of salespeople is often based on direct experience.

Solving the Style Challenge

To break these patterns and establish credibility and trust with customers:

- Salespeople need to be professionally involved and emotionally detached in conversations with customers.
- Salespeople must retrain themselves and learn new conversational processes and skills.
- Salespeople have to confront their conditioning and establish themselves as valued business advisers. ■

Nobody Buys a Value Proposition

The overwhelming abundance of information in today's world secures the issue of substance as the second major challenge in credible conversations. What is the one and only thing your customers really want to know? Value.

Commoditization of the Value Proposition

Companies create value propositions to articulate the value they plan to offer customers. These statements become the basis and guiding force of the collateral materials that marketers develop for the sales organization: sales messaging, brochures, PowerPoint decks and so on. The sales force dutifully takes all of this collateral and presents it to the prospect. However, the salesperson has no idea if the value has relevance with the customer. Often, the customer doesn't either.

This problem is magnified when value propositions are poorly conceived. When you communicate value with words like "rapid response" and "limited breakdowns," you are using the same words that all of your competitors are using. Customers don't buy them, rightly or wrongly; they dismiss value propositions as empty words.

At the same time, salespeople usually act mystified by customer pressure on price. They don't understand why their customer doesn't "get it."

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Nobody Buys a Value Proposition

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The Burden of Proof

You can't count on customers to recognize on their own the value you bring to the table, to calculate what it's worth or accurately determine if they should pay its price. You must help the customer connect the dots. The customer is the judge and jury in the sale, but you are the expert, the guide. The value proposition is nothing more than a capability, and your primary responsibility is to make it relevant. Once you know how to translate value, you are on your way to regular and predictable success in sales. When a value translation is done properly, the pieces of the customer's puzzle come together and you get the credit.

Sources and Uses of Value

Sources of value encompass the ability of the elements of your solution (their features and functions) to create value for customers or enable customers to create value for themselves.

Value can be delivered anywhere along a spectrum — at the product level, the process level and the performance level. Knowing where and how to position your offering on the value spectrum has a lot to do with the job responsibilities and concerns of each person you are talking with. When salespeople neglect the customer's perspective, they put both their credibility and relevancy at risk. ■

You've Got to Get Your Mind Right

In studies of exceptional sales professionals, the number-one characteristic they have in common is that they think differently than their less successful colleagues. Their thought processes have far more in common with successful professionals in other disciplines who depend on credible communication than they do with other salespeople. They run a close parallel with the qualities of top leaders: creativity, insight, change management, integrity and respect.

Awareness is the first step in the process of selling. For example, the compulsion to have an immediate answer for everything creates a significant barrier to listening and understanding customers' situations. The more effective we become as a decision-process guide, the more likely customers are to reveal the privileged information we need to execute successfully.

Diagnosis: The Mind-Set of Success

The Diagnostic mind-set is the antithesis of a presentation mind-set. Diagnosis is more effective than presentation because:

- It is always focused on the customer.
- It is about the observable symptoms of problems and the parameters of solution, not blame.
- It engages the customer as a collaborative partner.
- It promotes ownership.
- It differentiates you from your competition.
- Diagnosis is something you do *with* your customer; selling is something you do *to* your customer.

The mind-set that supports value diagnosis is characterized by five traits and capabilities:

- Value relevancy
- Change leadership
- Mutual self-esteem
- Mutual self-interest
- Emotional maturity

Creating value with customers is like helping them work a connect-the-dots puzzle. The more value elements you can help your customers understand and connect, the more linked you and your solutions become to the customers' organization. When you think about sales from this perspective, it immediately becomes clear that successful selling is also about managing the customer's emotional acceptance of change.

Mutual Self-Esteem

Successful sales professionals maintain and protect their self-esteem and their customer's self-esteem at all times. What does self-esteem have to do with sales? When salespeople inadvertently damage their customer's self-esteem, they risk losing the cooperation and participation that are so important to the sales process.

Some salespeople ask the customer questions like: "What's keeping you awake at night?" and "What types of pain are you feeling in your manufacturing process?" The danger is you are insinuating that the customer doesn't know what he is doing. If you "get to the pain" without being sensitive to self-esteem, you can easily alienate the customer and destroy the relationship.

Mutual Self-Interest

Mutual self-interest, the next quality of the Diagnostic mind-set, flows naturally from mutual self-esteem. It enables us to reconcile and serve the dual responsibilities that every sales professional eventually struggles with, that is, the simultaneous responsibility to serve your customer and your employer while looking out for yourself.

Cool, Calm, Collected

The final element of the Diagnostic mind-set is emotional maturity. A sales engagement is not the right place to get our emotional needs met or give our emotions free rein. Salespeople should be professionally involved, but emotionally detached. ■

PART II – TAKING IT TO THE STREET

The sequence and phrasing of credible conversations are determined by your system or process. We know three things about this system:

- It must be your system.
- It can't be the traditional prospect-qualify-present-close system.
- It must support the twin imperatives of conversational substance and style.

The salesperson's goals are: Discover, Diagnose, Design and Deliver. This is called The Prime Process. This process provides a much needed structure and synchronization for our sales conversations. Too often, salespeople approach conversations with customers in a scripted manner that is closer to presentation than conversation. The results are usually disastrous.

Earning the Keys to the Elevator

The initial contact with a prospective customer is the most critical and no doubt the least forgiving stage of the sale. You are considered guilty until proven innocent and you must strike the relevancy and credibility chords simultaneously and instantly (within 15 seconds) out of the box. In many cases, the real problem is the sales process, not the salesperson.

The Research Conversation

Effective preparation and credible initial conversations lead to successful sales and they start with symptoms, not solutions. The best way to sound like everyone else is to start your sales process by talking about your solutions. That's a prescription for a suboptimal sales engagement. The first conversations we should be having with customers are not sales conversations, they are *discovery* conversations.

These discovery conversations are not sales calls. You need to learn about this company's reality — its internal characteristics, what it is they are experiencing, the potential consequences and the customer's viewpoint on those consequences. Think like a lawyer during the discovery phase of a case. This same purpose should be reflected in the questions you ask and don't ask during these calls. You should be solely focused on the existence of the symptoms of the absence of your value. You shouldn't be asking about who buys your offerings or who might be interested in learning more about them.

Invoke the 20-Second Rule

It's common for customers to ask questions as they become involved in the engagement conversation or throughout the entire process. You must answer these

questions, particularly early in the sales engagement. Honest, open, straightforward — that's the mind-set. If you refuse, customers will see you as a stereotypical salesperson. When you answer, invoke the 20-second rule — answer the question succinctly and follow it immediately with a continuation of the diagnostic conversation with your next diagnostic question. ■

Diagnosis Trumps Presentation Every Time

When you give your customer a presentation/proposal, being optimistic, you are expecting him to make a decision. A customer's awareness that he might have a problem is a state of mind that can earn a salesperson the keys to the elevator, but it is not compelling enough to create a decision to change/buy.

There is a major risk here. When the sales engagement is focused mainly on your solution — *solution bias* — most customers are not going to be able to find enough compelling reasons to undertake the degree of change that the sale represents. How do you move a customer to the crisis stage? You must focus on the customer's present situation, not your solutions or the future state the customer will be able to attain with the help of these solutions.

Diagnosis Requires an Expert

When salespeople ask customers to define their own problems, they fall prey to the implicit and erroneous assumption that customers understand the scope and severity of all their problems and all the opportunities they are not acting on. The irony is that customers very likely do recognize the merits of your solution, so there are no objections to handle. This is the danger of encouraging and accepting self-diagnosis.

The Diagnostic Conversation

There is one fundamental format for the diagnostic conversation. It's a dialogue with the customer that progresses from *job responsibility to indicator to cause to priority*. This dialogue is driven by questions. Questions are the levers for change. Every time the diagnostic conversation begins with a new cast member, relevancy must be established and credibility must be built once again.

There are five important parts to this process:

- Focus the field of inquiry on a job process the manager is responsible for.
- Have the customer begin a review of the process.
- Describe the optimal outcome of the process.

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Diagnosis Trumps Presentation Every Time

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- Protect the customer's self-esteem by acknowledging his achievements.
- Harvest the thought process you have just guided your customer through. It is the springboard into an in-depth Diagnosis.

Probing the Symptoms

When you and your customer have reached the level of process where the detailed symptoms of the absence of value exist, it's time to begin asking *indicator questions* to check the customer's experience and/or knowledge of problem symptoms. They enable you to drill down into an issue to confirm that symptoms exist and determine their causes, consequences and priorities.

Ask a series of indicator questions, such as:

- Could you tell me more about ...?
- Could you tell me more about the behaviors you are looking for?
- Could you give me an example of ...?
- When did you first notice ...?
- What seems to be the key contributing factors to ...?
- How has this affected ...?
- Have you had a chance to look at what this might be costing the business in terms of ...? ■

For additional information on how to avoid solution bias, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

Cutting Through the Smoke and Mirrors

Customers face a new and equally daunting challenge when they must decide on the solution that will best resolve their situation. As sales professionals, our job becomes one that is best characterized as orchestrating the design of that solution. It's ironic. Salespeople tend to depend too heavily on the customer's view when it comes to problem diagnosis and not enough when it comes to solution design. The best way to prepare customers to purchase your solution is to work with customers to define a solution that can best solve their problem.

There are important advantages to this strategy, including:

- Customers can provide important insights regarding the optimal solution.
- Design parameters supply customers with the questions that need to be asked in order to cut through

competitive smoke and mirrors.

- Salespeople capture an unparalleled opportunity to set themselves apart from their competitors and gain an inside track to winning the sale by taking a leading role in the creation of rules on which the solution decision will be made.
- Focus on parameters, not features and benefits.

The Design Conversation

The design conversation enables customers to achieve a positive future by:

- Clarifying expected outcomes.
- Choosing the optimal solution alternative.
- Identifying the resources required to implement the solution and achieve its value.
- Establishing the time frame in which the outcomes will be achieved.

Great Expectations Aren't Always Realistic

One of the more common complaints from salespeople is that they have a difficult time managing their customers' expectations. The simple reason this problem occurs so often is that the conventional sales process mistakes needs for expectations. Needs do not equal expectations.

Introduce Critical Outcomes as Necessary

While we should always start by asking customers to define their expectations, we also have to recognize that they may not know enough to cover all outcomes themselves. Then we have to introduce additional outcomes.

We also need to recognize that outcome expectations vary with perspective. When we are working with multiple individuals within the customer organization, we will discover contradictory expectations.

Resources and Timing

Resources and timing are critical issues with regard to winning the sale, successful implementation and the establishment of a positive long-term relationship with the customer. Yet salespeople tend to avoid or underestimate these issues because they are afraid that by acknowledging the often difficult realities of these issues, they might lose the sale. ■

For additional information on learning how and why resources and timing are critical to winning sales, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

It Doesn't Pay to Surprise a Corporation

Closing has long been looked at as the be-all and end-all, the final element in the conventional sales process. It becomes a focus of training because conventional

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It Doesn't Pay to Surprise a Corporation

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selling quickly moves to the presentation/proposal stage and positions the proposal as a document for consideration. This misguided focus insists that salespeople first propose solutions for the customer's *consideration* and then deal with the ensuing questions and objections. There are only two reasons why customers don't buy:

1. They don't believe they have a problem, so they don't have incentive to change.
2. They don't believe the solution proposed will work.

We should be managing these issues. Our process should be front-loaded in terms of customer consideration. The last thing we would want to do now is surprise the customer with previously unconsidered issues. Business customers do not look kindly on surprises.

We also need to adopt a broader perspective and a sales process that can support multiple goals. These include short-term goals, such as winning the sale and ensuring the value that the customer is expecting is actually delivered, and long-term goals, such as creating new value delivery opportunities and positioning yourself to enlarge the customer relationship.

Proposals and Presentations

A sales proposal shouldn't be a document of consideration, but a document of confirmation, to document the series of decisions that have already been made. Here are some guidelines for creating and delivering your proposal:

1. No surprises.
2. Use the customer's fingerprints.

3. Solicit feedback.
4. Customers should continue to take an active role in the process.
5. Anchor the larger solution in the presentation.

When Things Go Wrong

Today's high-stakes sales environment requires that salespeople remain accountable to the customer after the sale is concluded and during the solution implementation. It's tempting to sidestep potential problems, but you will save yourself an awful lot of grief by being straightforward with the customer. One valuable dividend of the proactive discussion of potential problems is that it can often become an expectation that sets you apart from the competition.

Confirming and Communicating Value Delivery

Many traditional salespeople use feedback as a thinly veiled excuse for up-selling. So customers usually try to avoid feedback conversations. But there are several important reasons for having them:

- Ensuring customer awareness of the "value delivered."
- Protecting the customer relationship from competitive threats.
- Expanding the customer relationship.
- Gaining new customers.

At the end of the feedback conversation, now's the time to ask one or both of two questions: "Is there anyone else in the organization who is experiencing similar symptoms to what you had?" and "Is there anyone you know from other companies who may be experiencing these same symptoms?" ■

PART III – BREAKING AWAY WITH EXCEPTIONAL CREDIBILITY

Most salespeople are meeting the standard of *expected* credibility, but that's only the table stakes in the world of sales. If you want to earn exceptional credibility and exceptional results, you must master financial conversations and executive conversations.

Show Me the Money

In business, money talks. But just as customers typically do not have a quality decision process, they even more frequently cannot accurately determine the financial impact of a situation and its proposed resolution.

Barriers to Financial Conversations

The conventional sales paradigm is responsible for a lion's share of the blame for the inability of salespeople to guide customers through effective financial conversations. Other barriers include the mind-set of salespeople and customers who are reluctant to share financial data.

Financial Conversations

Never be afraid or unwilling to tell a customer your price the moment the question is asked. The right question is not whether the price is reasonable or not. The right question is, "Does the customer's situation warrant our level of solution in financial terms?"

The most important financial conversation, providing the basis for all that follows, is the cost of the problem. If you can't establish the cost, you don't have a problem. Ignoring the cost or asking the customer to establish the cost is risky business. If you don't establish a credible cost of the problem, customers are far less likely to buy.

Financial Return on Solution

The second integral financial conversation defines the financial impact that the customer expects from the solution. The best way to counter this situation is the return-on-solution conversation. Customers participate in the

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Show Me the Money

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calculation of return-on-solution and it is built on numbers that they can verify. The return-on-solution conversation tallies the gains (cost savings and/or new revenues) that will be generated by the solution *and* the total cost of the solution in order to estimate the net financial impact of the solution on the customer's business.

It's also important to define the level of investment that the customer can appropriately make to obtain the full value of the solution. The goal of the investment conversation is to establish the threshold at which it makes sense for the customer to buy a solution.

Monetized Results Lead to Executive Conversations

The final issue in financial conversations is reporting the results. We want to begin our engagement with higher-level executives who have financial and operational accountability for the aspects of the business that are most affected by the absence of our solutions. ■

Connecting at the Level of Power and Decision

The nature of high-stakes sales has always required sales professionals to connect with operating managers and functional executives within their customers' organizations. There are two primary trends driving sales professionals up the elevator. The first is the increasing complexity of products and services that are being sold. The second trend is the changing nature of customers' organizations. They are growing leaner as their leaders are driven to increase productivity, cut costs and outsource everything except for core competencies. Salespeople and their managers are quickly discovering that selling up the ladder is a major challenge. This realization hits with full force when sales executives tell their sales forces, "Start selling to the C-suite." Unfortunately, all too many salespeople use this trend to abdicate their responsibility and introduce high-level executives into poorly prepared engagements.

Barriers to Executive Conversations

The systemic barrier to executive conversations is that most salespeople have not been properly trained to deal with the higher levels of the customer's corporate hierarchy. Senior executives simply do not see or, for the most part, care about the lower level implications of solutions. Senior executives are responsible for the big picture, not the details. Typically, salespeople become less and less confident and more and more uncomfortable as they travel up the elevator.

The Executive Conversation — Rules for Engaging Rulers:

1. The issues we propose to address must be relevant in the larger context of the business. When we move up to the customer's executive suites, we can't describe problems in the same terms as we do at the operational level. The rule of relevancy requires that we identify the business issues on the executive's dashboard and translate our value capabilities into those terms.

2. The statement of value assumption must be valid. We must demonstrate to executives that the situation or problems that our solutions address exist.

3. The problem and solution must be attainable. We must address whether and how the customer's situation can be viably resolved.

4. The solution's value must be measurable. The ability to measure and quantify issues, allocate funds accordingly, and track the returns is a constant concern.

5. There must be consensus and alignment around the findings, conclusions and final decision. A working majority of the cast of characters agrees about the relevance, validity, action ability and measurability of the problem and solution before the salesperson arrives at the executive suite.

A Final Word on the Sequence of Executive Conversations

Most often, executives play two roles in high-stakes sales. First, they act as cast members, with their own job responsibilities and personal perspective. At the same time, they act as sponsors. In this role, they are only indirectly involved in the mechanics of the sale; their direct participation is required only at key milestones.

The best way to master these sponsoring-executive conversations is to approach them as if you had accepted a senior staff position for a specific project. If you picture yourself in this new role and mind-set, you can begin to evolve into a trusted adviser and valuable business partner. In response, your executive customers will begin to treat you as a prime resource and your sales success will multiply exponentially. ■



If you liked *Exceptional Selling*, you'll also like:

1. ***Mastering the Complex Sale* by Jeff Thull.** Learn the Prime Process, a diagnostic, customer-centered selling approach that sets you apart from the competition and positions you as a trusted adviser.
2. ***Hardball Selling* by Robert L. Shook.** The author claims that the high-pressure strategies in this book will make an average salesperson a super salesperson.
3. ***The Little Red Book of Selling* by Jeffrey Gitomer.** An analysis and demystification of the reasons customers buy.
4. ***Selling 101* by Zig Ziglar.** Learn to persuade more people more often using advice from this well-known motivational speaker.
5. ***Ask Questions, Get Sales* by Stephan Schiffman.** Discover how to strengthen questioning skills during the sales process in order to get more sales.