

Increasing Sales Productivity for B2B Sales Organizations



Julie Thomas
President & CEO

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About ValueSelling Associates

ValueSelling Associates is the creator of the ValueSelling Framework®, a sales methodology that works with your existing method or independently. Since 1991, it has helped thousands of sales professionals increase their sales productivity. It offers customized training to FORTUNE 1000, mid-sized and start-up companies. Its proprietary sales training tools and consulting services deliver measurable results.

Interview conducted by:

Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. Thomas, what is the concept behind ValueSelling Associates?

Ms. Thomas: ValueSelling Associates is a company that helps business to business sales organizations transform their sales process from pushing products to selling the value of their solutions. We provide skills, tools and a framework for a sales organization to engage their prospects and customers differently.

CEOCFO: How do you engage with a client so that they understand they should be selling solutions and not products?

Ms. Thomas: It is interesting. It is simple, but it is often not easy. We approach it from a couple of perspectives. Our core product is a sales methodology, so we go in and train the sales people on a different way to engage their prospects. It involves skills, giving them some tools to enable them to be more effective in their approach with customers, and then giving them an overall process to think about how they manage a sales cycle differently today than they may have in the past. We also focus on the management process because everything that a sales rep

has to do has to be managed by the leadership in that company. Layered above that is an overall change management framework that we work with clients on how to really drive the behavioral changes in their organization. You cannot just train people and assume that they are going to go off and do it. You need to help them, you need to enable them, you need to coach them and you need to incent them. You need to reward them, and you need to make sure that they have all of the tools necessary so there are no barriers to their success that you might not have anticipated.

CEOCFO: *How do you change behavior?*

Ms. Thomas: Certainly one component is making sure they know what to do, but just knowing what to do is not always sufficient. You can look at everyday situations in our lives. I know that I should eat fruits and vegetables if I want to lose 10 pounds, yet there are times when I still choose the bagel. Just knowing is not always sufficient, but it starts with having to know what to do, and then you have to know how to do it. That is where our training and some of our approach to training comes in. We have designed our programs to try to maximize the retention of that knowledge and the “what and how” someone should behave to obtain the greatest impact. We have really developed those programs for that perspective, but instructional design alone will not be sufficient. Our clients really have to drive the overall management focus. Sales is a tricky situation, because sometimes sales people are rewarded for doing the wrong thing. Sometimes they do not do the best in class behaviors or approach the sales cycle the way we want them to, but the customer buys anyways, so they get a reward for the wrong behavior. That creates a conundrum in some cases for managers. We not only focus on the reps and the people who are out there doing the work, we really focus on this comprehensive management process and making sure that we can integrate these behaviors into everything they are doing. The last thing we want to hear from a sales rep who leaves our program is that they go about doing everything in their day to day world that they know they need to do to be successful, and then ValueSelling is something in addition to that. If that is how they approach it, they are probably not going to be as successful with ValueSelling as those who embrace it fully. If we can integrate ValueSelling into their best practices, ValueSelling becomes the way they do it, we tend to see much greater success.

CEOCFO: *What types of companies tend to come to you? At what point in time might they reach out?*

Ms. Thomas: There is a common thread. Our sweet spot is the business to business sales team that is selling some sort of a complex product or service that has two kinds of attributes. Number one, it may be difficult to differentiate that product or service or offering from competitive alternatives today, and number two, it is something that typically involves some sort of a business decision and therefore a business executive to be involved in the purchase. We do not tend to work with companies that are selling purely commoditized offerings where they only live and breathe in the procurement office. Many of our clients are technology companies and manufacturing organizations, whether it is process manufacturing or discrete manufacturing. We also work with telecommunications companies and many business service companies that are selling big-ticket items that make an impact to the results that their customers are trying to generate.

CEOCFO: *How do you attract clients and how would a company find ValueSelling if they are looking?*

Ms. Thomas: Companies would find us in a few places. Our website is valueselling.com. We also have had a long-standing presence with some

of the trade organizations in our industry, whether it is trainingindustry.com or Selling Power Magazine, who analyze various companies in our space and have given us recognition as being one of the top providers in our space for years. A lot of people find us from word of mouth. We have had clients calling on their prospects, and their prospects have said they wish their sales people would engage their customers the way they are engaging them, and they ask who trained them, which is always a great endorsement for us. We have had quite a track record of success with a number of clients, so there is a buzz out there on ValueSelling. We have a global organization of associates that have relationships with a number of clients and are always out there actively doing business development as well.

CEOCFO: *Would you give us a concrete example of how someone would call on a customer with your focus as opposed to a normal focus?*

Ms. Thomas: Three things are often aha moments or enlightening to many of our clients. Number one, the sales people we work with are typically pretty sophisticated senior sales people. They are selling these big-ticket items, and in turn are calling on corporations and their top executive level. They are very savvy in their product and educated on the technical capabilities that they can bring to the table. They are also very good at talking about their technology or their technical requirements regardless of what they sell, but they are not always as good at translating that and connecting that in the customer's mind to what is going on in their business. Our belief is that in order to compete on value, you need to have the ability to link your product or service's technical capabilities to the business objectives and issues in your prospect's organization. Selling value is one of the key things we teach and is the first concept that our clients often focus on with ValueSelling. Number two; we teach sales people the need to understand the context in which their customer operates. It is not about pitching, it is about engaging. Prospect engagement is the foundation of the ValueSelling Framework[®], it is a questioning process to manage the dialogue and learn from the customer so that you understand the context and you understand where you may need to change their thinking; that is, educate them to expand their perspective or persuade them to see something a different way. We do that in our questioning process as opposed to just showing off and telling them how good our stuff is and asking when they want to get started. The third area that I think is a very subtle difference within the ValueSelling Framework is that we delve into and train the concept that people make emotional buying decisions for logical reasons. We not only have to have the skills to be able to help build the business case and justify the purchases we are asking our clients to make, we need to align with the individual personal motivation of the decision makers we are talking to. We call this understanding personal value, and when we understand their value and their motivation, we are in a better position to create urgency and to drive a decision sooner rather than later.

CEOCFO: *How is business these days?*

Ms. Thomas: Business these days is phenomenal. We are seeing tremendous growth both within our existing clients who are really focused on driving adoption and looking beyond just the training events to implementing this overall process that we are talking about. That includes the technology components and accelerating their enablement that they give to their sales people and really align the entire sales cycle around this framework. We are also seeing a number of new companies come to us because although they have hired senior sales people or industry experts to represent them with the premise that they do not need to be trained, they are finding that in today's economy the buying

process has changed. Customers buy differently today than they did three or four years ago. Different people are involved, there is a lot more rigor in the decision making process, and a lot of the buying process can be done without a sales person because of the plethora of information and availability to weed out different suppliers before you may even know that somebody is making a decision. Because of some of those changes, they realize that they need to get much more deliberate at consistent approaches even if they have senior people. We are seeing a lot of companies come into our process as a result of some of those things.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us a bit about the role of technology-how you keep up with changes and how you decide what might be right for a specific client?*

Ms. Thomas: There are two aspects of technology that I think about all the time. The first is how technology changes how we deliver learning and content to our customers. When I initially came into the corporate world and there was training involved, you were flown to a conference room or hotel room somewhere and you sat there. Somebody who was a subject matter expert in whatever the topic was, spent some time and tried to transfer that knowledge to you. While we still do quite a bit of that, the training world has changed because of online learning and social learning. ValueSelling has made significant investments into on-demand learning and e-learning and assessment so that we can deliver just-in-time learning. This is one component, and certainly the millennials and the younger generations in our workforce embrace learning that way. They want to be able to learn and engage in content online. Online training used to be only on a desktop, and more and more now it is mobile. How do I get consumable bits of learning delivered in a mobile platform to those captive audiences and still have the content be engaging and relevant so that is embraced in the same way as in person training? We spend a lot of time thinking about that here at ValueSelling. The second area of technology that I constantly address is recognizing that the people we train live in a technology-enabled world. How do we make sure that the ValueSelling Framework and the programs that we want them to use, whether virtual or physical, are integrated into the tools that they use every day when they leave that classroom and go back to work? We actually have the ability to integrate the tools that we want them to use into the CRM platform of our client's choice. This way, the ValueSelling language, the tools, and the look and feel of how we want them to engage is all integrated with where they are expected to do their work - the customer-facing output that helps our clients better communicate with their prospects. Because of this integration, we can now provide management reporting and dashboards on adoption that go beyond the anecdotal conversations that we have with the sales reps.

CEOCFO: *What is the ongoing relationship after the training and after you have implemented? Do you do much follow up to see if it is working?*

Ms. Thomas: We have a very good track record of maintaining multi-year client relationships, so most of our clients do not look at us as a one and done. Part of that is our ability to partner with our clients to understand how to incorporate the ValueSelling methodology into a culture of continuous improvement. Sometimes that partnership is creating custom programs for our clients that build on the programs they might already have. For some of our clients, the reality is that they are growing, and are hiring people or acquiring other companies; so we often live in their new-hire onboarding process and run programs to help them ramp up new hires as quickly as possible. Another area that we really spend a lot of time on with our clients is adoption and management reinforcement. We want to focus on the managers to make sure they are

continually reinforcing and driving the adoption of ValueSelling. In many of the companies we work with, the first line sales managers have a very difficult job. They are managing teams, they are involved in the day to day with many customers, and they are running around with their hair on fire half the time. We really try to make sure we provide programs and ongoing support for those first line managers.

CEOCFO: *When you are working with a new client, how do you understand what the real value is?*

Ms. Thomas: There are a couple of things. Number one, the point of contact for almost every new client that we work with, tends to be the sales leader or the business owner or a general manager who has a revenue responsibility for their organization. They have a problem, or they would not be looking to do something differently. They usually start the conversation about that problem with, "I do not think we are going to be able to make our number this year or next year." The first thing we do is try to diagnose with them what the root cause of that problem is. Are their sales people calling on the wrong people? Are they not selling the breadth of their product line? Are they discounting too high to win and therefore hurting top line or bottom line results? Is there a new competitor that is just kicking them in the butt in the marketplace? We really go through a detailed diagnostic on what the root cause of that problem is because if we do not fully understand that root cause, we cannot design the best training program to solve it. We tailor all of our programs to each of our customers differently. And something unique to ValueSelling is that our entire team of associates are former sales executives themselves. They are not trainer-only professionals who have never either sold or led a sales organization, and because of their extensive sales experience, we come at designing each training program from an extremely pragmatic and practical approach. There are many training programs out there that are really sexy and have a lot of sizzle on them in the marketplace, but the problem is that once the trainer leaves, the program is so complicated that no sales rep can implement it. No sales rep wants to sit in front of their customers and do something that they are not confident with and risk looking like an idiot. So instead, we really focus on that practicality of what we can do differently to solve that problem and get results. How we measure that value for every customer is different. The good news is that sales organizations tend to be very data driven. We usually know what our average sales size is, how long it takes us to close it, what our win rate is, etcetera. We can look at those diagnostics and draw baseline metrics. If we turn the dial and improve our win rate, reduce our discount rate or upsell or cross sell more services with each deal that we are selling, we measure that against the original benchmark right? It is usually pretty easy for the sales organization because again, they tend to be data driven to begin with.

CEOCFO: *Put it all together for our readers. Why ValueSelling Associates?*

Ms. Thomas: Three reasons. Number one, the simplicity and elegance of our program. The key to adoption is making sure that sales reps not only develop competence in the methodology but also the confidence that they can do it. It is that simplicity of our framework that they love, and they realize we are not trying to get them to do something that is a completely unnatural accident. Number two, it is our team. Any associate on our team who is going to engage with a sales organization is a world-class sales executive in his or her own right. It is that credibility and our ability to bring the program to life with clients that is huge. We not only talk the talk, we walk the walk, and we can role model and demonstrate our programs both when we sell ValueSelling and when we install ValueSelling. Number three, is our focus on implementation and results,

and really understanding that training is the means to the end, it is not the end in and of itself. It is taking a programmed approach with our clients to drive adoption of ValueSelling. The goal is not to get butts in seats and start the ValueSelling process, the goal is to get our clients to achieve the value that they expect to achieve and drive the measureable revenue results that they expect to receive. We customize and implement the ValueSelling training all around that goal.

BIO: Julie Thomas is a noted speaker, author and consultant. In a career spanning more than 28 years, she credits her mastery of the ValueSelling Framework® for her own meteoric rise through the ranks of sales, sales management and corporate leadership positions.

In 2003, Julie acquired ValueSelling Associates. Since then, she has led the company to become an industry leader in competency- and process-based training for escalating sales performance.

Julie has personally consulted and trained in a wide variety of industries and corporations, including Primepay, NCR, and Rosetta Stone.

She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

