

Who's Making the Buying Decision?

By Cheryl Crumb

A person walks into your establishment and immediately starts asking you questions about an advertised piece of equipment. You automatically assume this individual is the decision-maker.

You might be right... but you might be wrong. Unless that individual lives alone in a cave, it's likely that others are involved in the buying decision. Years ago, Robert Miller and Steve Heiman wrote a book about corporate sales called "Strategic Selling", which outlines the complexities of the buying process, and the various roles that exist in all sales situations. Each role has a separate interest area, and a differing effect on the buying decision. To improve the likelihood of a successful sale, it's the salesperson's responsibility to identify which role(s) the customer is assuming and sell to each role.

A key point from the book is that there is seldom one person who makes the decision. Why? People live together, big expenditures are long term and major, and families are becoming more consensual than autocratic. So, let's modify Miller and Heiman's terms to our family purchase situation. First of all, everything revolves around the actual purchase objective.

In big-ticket sales, one of the buying roles is the Final Approver. This is the person who is taking the long-term view and who controls the purse strings. Interestingly enough, while the economics of the purchase are important, this person usually doesn't quibble over price. Why? This individual is playing more of the captain's role, looking at the horizon and gauging the long-range effects on the family's future. So, a penny here or there is not the key point. This person will be asking questions like, "How will this purchase affect us two years from now?" or "How will this affect other aspects of our family's life together?" Since this person has the final voice, it's obviously important that we identify who this individual is. They have the power to veto everybody else.

Another buying role is the User. These are the people (and there may be many of them) who will be playing with the system on a frequent basis. Their interest lies in how well it works and they will judge its performance.

Issues concerning them include the ease of use, appearance, sound, and reliability. These are the individuals who will be living with the purchase on a daily basis, so they will be delighted when all is well, and they will feel the pain when it's not working.

A third buying role is the Techie. These are the people who will set standards and specifications like 3-2 pull down, AC3, THX, and 1080i. Once these people have determined the criteria they believe are necessary to the purchase, they will screen out all those who don't fit the bill. (However, remember, they can be overruled by the Final Approver). Often these individuals are buzzword gurus, but they can also represent areas like finance or legal or the environment. ("No way will we buy any product made by ABC Co, because of ... insert reason here....") Because these people have the power to eliminate you, it's important to find out what their criteria are and why those criteria are key considerations.

Finally, if we're lucky, we have someone whose buying role is the Advocate. These are people who want YOU to be chosen as the supplier. For an Advocate to have influence, they have to have credibility within the buying family, and you, the retailer, must have credibility with them. For whatever reason (past experience usually being the key reason), they're willing to push for your product or solution.

It can be even more complicated. Any person can fulfill more than one of these buying roles. So, if you have a family of two (a husband and wife team), you will still have a Final Approver role, a User Role, the Techie Role... and possibly an Advocate role. Let's say the wife is the Approver, and the User and your Advocate. The husband is also a User and a Techie. So, how do you sell to this schizophrenic lot? Well, we first have to remember that although there are only two people, there are four roles represented. That means we have to address issues in our questioning and presenting that are long-term, as well as technical, as well as performance-oriented.

It also means, if only one person is coming into your shop, beware! It's important

that we, at best, get the others to visit the store, or at worst case, ask questions to seek out the views of the missing members. The sale is always in jeopardy if the Final Approver is not present. Remember, this is the person who has the ultimate veto power. This is the person who decides if the sound system will actually be bought, or if the money will be spent on re-decking the back garden. You might be having a wonderful sales encounter with two of the User buyers, but if your competitor down the street is talking to the Final Approver, you could be in trouble.

Let's take an example. The Wilson Family, wife, husband and two teenagers, is looking for a big screen television. Assume that Ms. W is the Final Approver and an occasional User. She's concerned about her family staying close-knit and she wants the kids' friends to join the Wilsons', rather than hang at the local mall. Freddie W, the 15-year old, is a walking catalogue of techno talk. Sally W is 13 and a devoted environmentalist. Mr. W finds TV a distraction except for sports. Each family member is important and needs to be "sold to" differently.

If Sally and Freddie shop parentless, we'll learn by asking astute questions that we're dealing with two Users and Techies. For the latter role, we should find out their buying conditions and offer products that meet those specifications. We should also offer information that appeals to the User in each of them...how it's easy/fast/loud/soft/durable/sexy/etc. We should ask to contact the parents so that we can provide info appropriate to each of their concerns. Mr. W's affinity for big screen sports isn't really a tough sale, but engaging Mrs. W in a conversation about bringing the family back as a unit might be a winning strategy. If she sees that the product preferred by her kids is one that offers a fit with the other Wilson "toys", and if she believes that this big-ticket item has more immediate value to her family than that deck, you might have a new customer on your books.

Remember, the complexity of the purchase decision next time a family enters your store. Involve all of them...you never know which one will be the most influential!