



PLAYING FAIR WHILE CREATING AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

Anthony Iannarino

The first time I wrote about competition on my blog,

I received a number of negative comments and a few emails.

The people who reached out to me were unhappy with my describing sales as a “blood sport.” It was hyperbolic, for sure, but I was trying to make a point about the nature of sales, namely that it is a zero sum game (a game where one wins and everyone else loses). In their view, even speaking of competition in terms of winning and losing was enough to cause sales to abandon their integrity and employ a “whatever it takes” approach to selling.

Zero Sum

Believing that the zero sum nature of sale is what causes bad sales behaviors is to misunderstand how one wins clients and what really causes high pressure, hard sell, smarmy, self-oriented, and illegal or immoral tactics.

Client acquisition is where businesses compete in the marketplace, and in B2B sales most of that competition occurs in sales (with marketing being less of a factor than in B2C sales). You never see the accounting managers or the directors of operations for two different companies competing with each other. It's rare that you see anyone out-side of sales sitting in a company's lobby waiting for their competitor to finish their presentation so they can follow them with a presentation designed to ensure they win—and the person whose name sits right above them

on the sign in sheet loses. If you do see an operations person in the client's lobby, there is no doubt they are accompanied by a salesperson.

Almost none of the salespeople who compete for business are willing to put their integrity or their reputation on the line to win a deal. They know that trust is the currency in which they trade, and that once lost, it may be gone forever. This is why salespeople prefer to lose than to lie to a client. There are, however, a small minority of who operate outside the boundaries of fair play.

Almost none of the salespeople who compete for business are willing to put their integrity or their reputation on the line to win a deal. They know that trust is the currency in which they trade, and that once lost, it may be gone forever.

Low Moral Intelligence

The small minority of salespeople who behave badly do so because they have a low moral intelligence, or what we call MQ. When people believe competition means they need to do “whatever it takes,” their low moral intelligence is what cause them to do things like lie to clients about other companies, lie about their own capabilities, offering kickbacks, hiding terms and conditions, and using high pressure techniques. Competition is no more responsible for the bad behavior of the salespeople than it is the bad behavior of CEOs, CFOs, or the athlete that cheats to win a game. Competition is built on fair play, not cheating.

Playing Fair While Creating an Unfair Advantage

For most of us in sales, winning new business often means taking that business away from a competitor. The euphemism we use to describe stealing a client from a competitor is called “a competitive displacement,” which sounds a lot nicer than “eating their lunch.” However, if this sounds harsh, know that while you are trying to take clients from your competitors, they are trying to steal your clients from you.

Like other forms of competition, selling requires a sense of fairness, a set of ethics, ground rules, if you will. Certain behaviors are off limits, like lying about your competitor, talking bad about them, providing kickbacks, or misleading people into believing something that isn’t true as it pertains to about how you can better serve them. These dirty tricks are off limits, and they aren’t how you gain a real advantage. That said, there are ways you can create an unfair advantage and position yourself to win new clients that are presently being served by your competition.

Value Creation

The first thing that one might do to begin the process of displacing their competitor is to understand the need to create greater value. There are four levels of value that one might create:

1. Product

2. Experience

3. Outcomes

4. Strategic Outcomes (what we call Level 4 Value).

Because most salespeople and sale organizations sell “solutions,” some combination of product, experience, and tangible results, an advantage is gained by creating greater value.

When you enter into a conversation with your dream client with the intention of creating an opportunity to become their new partner, you start with strategic outcomes. To do this, you have to start by helping your prospective client with strategic insights, ideas, and results.

One way to think about this is through the role of trusted advisor. You only need two things to be a trusted advisor: Trust and Advice. Your product, experience, or solution is not advice. Advice is advice, and good counsel is often of greater value than anything else you have to offer, building your unfair advantage.

Capturing Mindshare

Your dream client has a particular view of their business. They look through the lens of their experience, their knowledge of their business and industry, their understanding of your industry, and what they know about where their business rubs against the external world. This lens shapes their thinking about what they should be doing, how they should be doing it, and whom they need as a partner.

To create an unfair advantage, you have to swap out your client's existing lens and provide them with a new, sharper lens, one that offers a clearer view of their current state and the risks and implications of not making changes now. To change out their lens, you have to start by providing ideas and insights around the trends and changes that are going to come with new challenges and provide new opportunities.

The professional pursuit of your dream clients is a longer-term project in which you have to continually nurture relationships by providing insights, ideas, information, and implications.

You only need two things to be a trusted advisor: Trust and Advice. Good counsel is often of greater value than anything else you have to offer.

You capture mindshare and position yourself as a trusted advisor by helping them think differently about their business.

You can wait for an event to occur, your competitor's failing or the changing of a key stakeholder, but that is passive and reactive. You create an unfair advantage when you start capturing mindshare and building the case for change, creating the event yourself.

Wiring the Building

It isn't easy to fire someone you have worked with for years—or maybe even decades. All of us in sales are grateful that this is true. All things being equal, relationships win. When all things are unequal, relationships still win. Your job in sales is to make all things unequal.

One of the keys to creating an unfair advantage is to wire the building, which is to say, develop the relationships with the people who need your help in creating a better future. One of the reasons so many salespeople their organizations fail to displace a competitor is their tendency to be single-threaded (which means they try to accomplish a displacement with a single stakeholder on the client's side).

Your competitor has support within the company they are serving—even if they are struggling to produce good results. Taking their client from them means you need greater support than what exists for your competition. Even though they have support, they also have detractors, people who are unhappy with the status quo and who want change. The key here is spending time with the people you will be working with in the future, learning from them how things are going to need to be done, understanding their preferences, and building a map of the stakeholders so you can build the support you need.

Eating Their Lunch

Taking a client away from your competition is no mean feat. You have to create greater value, capture hearts and minds, and provide your dream client with a compelling reason to change. It isn't easy to do, but there is no other way to grow at 10% in a market that is growing at 2.7%. Play fair and create an unfair advantage by becoming the best to play the game.

Pay Attention to What Lasts

There is deafening silence where there was a cacophony of shrill voices shouting down cold calling and singing the praises of what they called “social selling.”

Notice that no one serious about helping people improve their sales results is willing to remove the phone as a medium anymore. Even those who were very late to the party have given up the ghost. At the very worst, they hedge, suggesting that the phone works, but that you should also consider using the social tools—even though the main tools once praised are no longer mentioned (like Twitter, Facebook, and the odd idea that Snapchat would somehow be a significant B2B play). Social selling is down to LinkedIn, and that is turning out to be a mess (and exactly the opposite of what “social selling” suggested).

Have you recognized how little and how uncommon it is to now see the words “social selling” on social posts, where it was once part of every second or third post? The two words, “social” and “selling” are almost never seen together anymore, apparently having lost their mojo over the last couple of years. Like all fashions, over time, they are displaced by a newer fashion, while the core fundamentals go from season to season, never going out of style.

Content Marketing, however, is still having a very good run of things.

The reason this deserves your attention now is because the best way to make decision about the future is to look to the past. Things that stand the test of time only do so because they continue to be valuable.

Honesty and integrity are never going to go out of fashion. If you are going to build a reputation and a career, your character is the foundation on which you erect that structure.

The advice that makes one a trusted advisor is so fundamental and so critical to creating a preference to work with you that it's as old as any story humans tell, even before stories of the Oracles the Greeks relied upon when making life and death decisions.

Relationships and caring are always going to win when it comes to producing results through and with other human beings. If you read history, you are going to find a record of relationships, as will you were you to pick up any biography (which are only written about those who lived lives worth such an accounting).

A lot of what you see that looks like something substantial lacks the foundation to stand the test of time. **If you want success, pay attention to what lasts and not what's now.** 📖



Info



Ready to dig deeper into this idea? Buy a copy of [Eat Their Lunch](#).

Want copies for your organization or for an event?

We can help: customerservice@800ceoread.com 800-236-7323

About the author

Anthony Iannarino is an international speaker, sales leader, and the author of *The Only Sales Guide You'll Ever Need* and *The Lost Art of Closing*. His acclaimed blog draws an average of 50,000 readers every month. He leads a high-performing sales team, speaks to sales organizations nationwide, and teaches part time at Capital University's Capital School of Management and Leadership. He lives with his family in Westerville, Ohio.



Powered by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest developments in business books and ideas at 800ceoread.com

This document was created on November 14, 2018 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover image from Adobe Stock.

Share this

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.



Subscribe

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

