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Meet the MasterMinds: Jeffrey Thull Has *The Prime Solution*

MCNews welcomes back consultant and author, Jeff Thull, whose books include [Mastering the Complex Sale](#) and his most recent, [The Prime Solution](#). Thull is President and CEO of Prime Resources, and is well known for his work in helping clients master the complex sale.

We asked Thull how consultants can close what he calls the “value gap,” which he defines as the high-cost disconnect between the value *promised* to clients and the value *achieved*.

MCNews: What causes a “value gap” for clients?

Thull: A value gap occurs both before and after a sale. Before the sale, consultants think they are offering value to clients, but fail to recognize that the clients don't understand it. That's because consultants often communicate the value of their solutions in terms of what the solutions do, rather than focusing on what is lacking for the client.

The second source of the value gap is unfulfilled client expectations. Clients expect to receive the value you promised, but in the end don't think they got what they paid for. So the value gap is created in the delivery as well as the front-end marketing and selling.

MCNews: How do you know if you're creating a value gap for clients?

Thull: You'll probably hear clients say that they don't want to pay for your offering. Or, they might try to beat down the price. If you have created a value gap, you'll either lose the sale or end up with clients who are not happy with results.

All too often, consultants point the finger at clients, accusing them of failing to appreciate the value they've received. In fact, consultants do a poor job of helping clients recognize and understand that value.

Most consultants present their solutions and expect clients to “get it” on their own. But if the client doesn't comprehend the nature of the problem, which is often the case, your elegant explanation of solutions just flies over the client's head.

“Most consultants present their solutions and expect clients to “get it” on their own.”

A medical analogy would be for a surgeon to tell you about the latest technical breakthroughs in performing open heart surgery. Not only would that be a difficult conversation for the layperson to follow, but it would be nearly impossible for you to know if you needed the procedure.

MCNews: So how does a consultant close the gap?

Thull: Most importantly, you have to identify the physical manifestations of the *absence* of the value you are proposing to provide to the client. If you are offering value that the client needs, you should be able to point to physical evidence that the value in question is not present in the client's current environment.

MCNews: Could you give an example?

Thull: Well, maybe you have a piece of software that allows clients to give faster, more accurate information to customers calling in for service. The standard approach is to ask the client questions like, "Do your service technicians have access to the best information quickly?"

Now, the client could be thinking, "We've put a lot of work into customer service, and we're actually answering those calls 40% faster than we were last year, so I don't think you can help us. Your solution may be good for companies that have not made the improvements we have, but we're doing better than ever."

Consultants must know the indicators that point to problems they can help solve. For instance, what's the norm for service call response time in this industry? When a call comes into the client's service center, what's a typical resolution time? Does the call need to be transferred more than once? Does the client have an escalation policy? And what's the typical impact our solution has had on these indicators?

Those are physical observations—based on facts— as opposed to opinions. The traditional sales approach is opinion-based and requires the client to be capable of self-diagnosis. Asking your client if service technicians have fast access to the best information is asking the client to self-diagnose. With one simple question, you've begun to create a value gap.

"The traditional sales approach is opinion-based and requires the client to be capable of self-diagnosis."

Sellers assume that clients come to the table with a clear recognition of the absence of value—a dangerous assumption that leads to a value gap. I don't think most people are even conscious that they're selling this way. It's part of the historic, presentation-oriented sales approach.

MCNews: Are you saying that consultants should not differentiate themselves based on their solutions?

Thull: Here's what I'm saying: The solution approach to differentiation is very ineffective because we can all use the same words to describe our solutions. And the more complex it gets, the more likely you can do that. If I read five brochures about similar products, I'll probably find solution-based language which sounds the same in all of them.

Words like quality and responsiveness can apply to everyone and everything. And describing the problem you solve is just as inadequate as presenting your solution. To use the medical analogy again, I might describe heart blockage to you and say that we resolve the blockage this way versus that way. But I'm still assuming you have the capability to know if you have a blockage.

By contrast, the diagnostic approach assumes that clients don't fully understand they have blockage or what kind it is. So you diagnose based on the physical symptoms. And you differentiate yourself through the diagnosis.

The result of a successful diagnosis could be either that the client does or doesn't have the problem. Let's say you determine that the client does have the problem. At that point, the client knows precisely what the problem is and what the symptoms are. If the symptoms aren't

desirable or acceptable, the consultant who did the diagnosis has an intimate understanding of the client's situation and is uniquely positioned to address it with credibility.

MCNews: Does the diagnostic approach put more of a burden on consultants to develop deep knowledge of the industries they're selling into, their clients, and their problems?

Thull: Well, yeah. But the advantage is that today there's an amazing clutter of people explaining solutions and very few clarifying the absence of their solutions.

We've been doing some research over the last month, and the overwhelming symptom I see is the high percentage of sales opportunities, or proposals, that end in no decision. The client doesn't buy from you or from a competitor—does nothing about the problem.

At a recent program, I asked 225 sales executives to come to a consensus about the percentage of their proposals that end in no decision. It ranged from a low of 40% to a high of 75%. Increasingly, 60% of proposals are resulting in no decision.

Think about it: 60% of your cost of sales is heading down a no-result path. If the competition isn't beating you, what is going on? I attribute the lack of decisions to the inability or failure of the seller to perform an *internal* profile qualification of the prospect.

Getting back to our heart patient, you have external qualifications: the subject is a male, 52 years old, overweight, and he smokes. He looks like a heart attack waiting to happen. But his internal profile reveals very low cholesterol, blood pressure right where it's supposed to be, and no artery blockage. Therefore, we aren't going to propose heart surgery to him.

My experience is that most consultants qualify clients based solely on their external profiles: You look like, sound like, and talk like a client that could use my solution, so I'm going to present and propose it to you.

MCNews: The high rate of indecision can't be because clients don't really have the problems in question.

Thull: I think those clients probably do have the problem, but they are either solving it some other way or living with it. It's also possible that some clients don't believe that the situation is bad enough to justify the hard work it will take to change.

These are risk elements for the buyer that sellers are not helping manage. So a no decision is the safe response for the buyer, who might think, "I didn't have this fix yesterday and I'll be okay not having it tomorrow. And, I have three other issues I do understand more completely that I can take action on."

MCNews: Do many executives look at all the potential projects they could do and make decisions based on what they think will provide the best risk/reward profile?

Thull: Yes. And I'm saying that the overwhelming number of sales professionals put that burden on the client and only accept responsibility for explaining the solution. That approach can lead a client to make poor choices when deciding which problems to work on. A seller who helps a client diagnose the problem also helps the client make a rational, well-informed decision.

MCNews: Your book is called *The Prime Solution*. How do you define the prime solution?

Thull: There are three main components of a prime solution. The first is decision acuity—bringing to clients a high quality decision process that identifies and quantifies the absence of value so clients are able to judge whether your solution will, in fact, deliver value that they need.

The second component is the change management process. It's likely that to fully optimize the value potential of your solution, the client has to go through a considerable amount of change. You need to guide and support that change process for the client.

And then the third component is the ability to maximize the value inherently present in the solution. The solution is capable of delivering value, and we package with the solution the implementation support to assure that the client does achieve that value.

MCNews: Why do solution failures occur in the delivery process?

Thull: Let's say, for example, that you are offering a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to a client because the client doesn't have a current sales process in place. History should tell you that the client is not likely to succeed with your solution because the client's salespeople don't even use a sales process consistently.

But, if you're a typical seller, you don't bring that up. That's not your problem. You're offering a functioning CRM product. But then the client ends up with a value gap on the delivery side. The client says the system is not working. The seller argues that the system is working—what's not working is that your people aren't putting data into it. That's not my fault.

I pick on salespeople and CRM because I'm familiar with them. But you see quite similar failures with other systems, like Enterprise Resource Planning. Often, the value isn't captured because of delivery issues, and a value gap is created. That's why what I call "implementation optimization" is so important.

MCNews: How are the best companies optimizing implementation? What strategies and tactics are working?

Thull: The global solutions group at Shell Oil noted that 60-70% of the value promised on initiatives is at risk without the proper sequencing of initiatives. It's not just the implementation of a particular initiative, but how various initiatives interact and how they're sequenced that makes a difference. Consultants must recognize the need to prepare the client before implementation.

But companies keep buying stuff thinking it's going to work. They blame the tool for the failure of a project, rather than the underlying process. I've seen companies fall victim to serial failures to solve the same problem. In more than one case, a company has purchased multiple software products from different vendors in the hope that the newest package will do the trick.

“The flawed assumption is that clients understand their problems and we just need to ask them to explain the problems to us and then show them the solution.”

That behavior indicates that there never was an understanding of the problem to be solved and the mistaken generalization that technology is always the answer.

Plus, the client team responsible for the implementation may not see that there's a process challenge, or if they acknowledge their part in creating something that doesn't work, they'd have to take some responsibility for the failure. That's difficult in many corporate environments.

MCNews: One last question: What one piece of advice would you give to those who are marketing and selling complex solutions?

Thull: Recognize that your clients often don't understand as much about their situations as you think. It's your job to figure out how capable a client is of self-diagnosis. The flawed assumption is that clients understand their problems and we just need to ask them to explain the problems to us and then show them the solution.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Find out more about Jeff Thull, his books and services at www.primeresourcegroup.com.