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## **Meet the MasterMinds: Jeff Thull on *Mastering the Complex Sale***

For more than two decades, Jeff Thull, CEO and founder of Prime Resource Group, has taught cutting-edge marketing strategies to professionals. He's a sought-after speaker and the author of *Mastering the Complex Sale: How to Compete and Win When the Stakes Are High!*

MCNews got Thull's take on the state of selling professional services and gleaned some practical tips on how consultants can develop a winning sales process.

### **MCNews: Do you think the process of selling services has changed over the years?**

**Thull:** The process hasn't changed much for the top performing professionals because they have always approached selling the way it should be done. The results obtained by people in the top 5% are often written off as exceptions or freaks of the business—their colleagues can't figure out how they do it, but they always seem to rack up the sales.

**The book presents a model to explain that what looks unusual for the top salespeople is actually based on common sense—there's a method to their madness.** Their method may have been refined over the years, but it hasn't changed significantly.

### **MCNews: What about for the rest of us?**

**Thull:** For the rest of the people who sell, the picture has changed quite a bit. John Sullivan, who wrote the foreword to the book, researched how the process has changed through three "eras" of selling.

First was the era of the presentation, which started in the early 1950's and continued through mid-1970. That was when we began to approach and teach selling in a formal way, including presenting and closing skills and handling objections. To sell, often you just had to show up, present, convince and away you went.

The second era, which began in the 1970's, was the era of the needs analysis. The idea was to start listening to clients, understand their problems and develop solutions. I would say that consultants led that charge and differentiated themselves from others because they were asking questions and actually listening to their clients.

In the current, or third era, the role of the consultant or salesperson is that of a business analyst. The selling process of era three debunks many of the assumptions of traditional selling, for example, that buying is a pleasurable experience, that the purchase of your services won't disrupt a client's operation, and that clients have a good decision process for selecting consultants.

**MCNews: How would you characterize the decision process used by those who buy consulting services?**

**Thull:** The reality is that a high quality process for making such decisions does not exist for many clients. Let's say you meet with a client's CFO to talk about a consulting project to revamp the company's financial systems. The CFO may never have bought that service before and certainly does not buy it every day.

**The company probably has a buying script for other business needs and will try to fit the decision on consulting services to that script.** That is, I will buy consulting services the same way I buy computer hardware or staples. The essence of that client's buying system is this: tell me all about you and your company, the product or service you offer, give me your lowest possible price, and I will get back to you.

Clients have learned to distrust salespeople. Therefore, the reaction is, "We don't want you here helping with this; just give us the data and get out of here. We will sort through it."

**A key point is that, in the absence of a quality decision process, the decision will degenerate to the lowest common denominator, which is price.** A client may be talking to three consulting firms who have the relevant expertise and feel they can't really go wrong with any one of the three. So it's a low-risk decision to go with the one that brings in the lowest price.

Salespeople frequently mistake a client's approval process for a decision process. The approval process is about "whom shall we buy this from?" The decision process is about "why should we change, what do we want things to be like after we change, and how do we get there?" The majority of salespeople don't recognize this distinction; they assume the client has made those underlying decisions, and so they focus on winning the approval contest.

**MCNews: How well prepared do you think most consultants are to sell in that environment?**

**Thull:** Not well prepared at all from what I have seen. I would temper that by pointing out that those who call us for help are having problems. But even in conversations with potential clients who are getting good results, a ticking time bomb is evident. They are approaching sales in the old style and the world hasn't caught up with their little niche yet.

**MCNews: So what can consultants do to sell more effectively in this era?**

**Thull:** If you consider the old, standard process—target, qualify, propose, and overcome objections—consultants can start by improving how they target and qualify clients.

A potential client has both an external and an internal profile. The external profile is what the prospects looks like from the outside—what you can see and learn without formal interaction with them. Too often, the traditional selling process stops right there.

Let's say a potential client is a manufacturing company that does not use just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing and that's your consulting expertise. For you to consider that company a qualified target just because they don't have what you offer would be like saying any 55-year old male is a good candidate for open-heart surgery.

You have to dig deeper into the internal profile. Does the client have the symptoms of the absence of JIT? What does the client think about the symptoms you see? There could be interest in your capabilities and solutions, but that doesn't mean the client is experiencing enough pain to hire you and make the required changes.

**Prospective clients might gladly sit and listen for an hour or two while you talk about an interesting area of the business, and have no intention whatsoever of taking any action.**

You have to separate what we call the intellectually curious from the economically serious. And if you don't do that, we call it "unpaid consulting."

**MCNews: How do you make that bridge between the external and the internal?**

**Thull:** Well, take what you consider to be the value outcome, or benefit, of your service and reverse-engineer it by asking yourself, "What would be the physical manifestation of the absence of my solution?"

Focus on that manifestation can quickly turn the conversation with the prospect to, "Have you noticed a downward trend with labor productivity? What are your thoughts on that trend?" Right away you are talking about a real issue that could drive a decision to hire you.

You want to verify the existence of the physical symptoms to know that the client really has the disease. Once that is confirmed, the next step is to determine how severe the impact is on their business. That's the cost of the problem. You look at the list of elements on each side of the equation, and if the cost of the problem is greater than the cost of the solution, change will take place.

**MCNews: Is it your experience that most clients will sit still for that kind of collaborative sales process?**

**Thull:** A prospect might say, "I really don't have time to answer those questions. It's quite straightforward. We are looking for someone who can help us institute a new XYZ system and you have come highly recommended. I would like to understand more about your practice and your areas of expertise."

That's where you have to draw the line. You are either going to hold firm to your process, or you are going to drop into presentation mode. If you go along, you get stuck in the client's program, which is, "Tell me about your offerings." And then you run the risk of becoming a commodity, which, again, means competing primarily on price.

Instead of talking about how you will solve the problem, walk the client through the decision process you will use and show how it will help them make a high quality decision. You'll find that the client's interest quickly shifts to your diagnostic capabilities.

**MCNews: Some consultants are quick to agree to write a proposal as soon as a prospective client asks. When do you think a consultant should write a proposal?**

**Thull:** Now, this might sound like a flippant answer, but **I believe you should write a proposal after the client has decided to go ahead with the project.**

These days, you should collaborate with the client through the diagnosis of the problem and reach mutual agreement on each critical element. You verify symptoms, to what degree they exist, how much it's costing the client to live with the problem, and agree on the need to take action.

Then, you move into the design phase, which is another collaboration on what both parties want the outcomes to be, how they should go about achieving those outcomes, investment and timing. That leads to a discussion document, which is like a pencil sketch that an architect might draw after initial discussions about what a client wants in a home. It's in pencil, so you can erase and make changes as necessary.

When the discussion document is completed, there is essential agreement. Then you write the proposal—the ink drawing. Using this collaborative, diagnostic approach the decision to take action and the decision to buy happen during the diagnosis, prior to any presentation of the solution.

**MCNews: When you help a client diagnose a problem, there is a fine line between trying to sell the project and the free consulting you mentioned earlier. How do you know if you have crossed that line?**

**Thull:** That's a critical issue and we spend a lot of time working with professionals specifically on where the line is between proper diagnosis and unpaid consulting.

In the 1960's and 1970's, you sat down with a client, got an understanding of their problem, and you literally laid out the solution. There was a high probability that the client would say, "This is great, let's go ahead with the project."

Over the years, that has changed. Now if you do free consulting up front it certainly doesn't guarantee you are going to win the work.

**The point is that doing some free work wasn't a bad strategy when we first started doing it, but it has grown progressively weaker.** So where's the line and how do you know when you have crossed it? The obvious answer is that if you are explaining anything about the solution, you are doing unpaid consulting.

I'd advise consultants to do a preliminary diagnosis to verify symptoms. I use the doctor-patient analogy: we just did this quick blood test and the results indicate that you have a potential impact in this range. We have to do some more sophisticated tests to determine the appropriate treatment, and here is the fee for that. In other words, if the complete diagnosis, identification and clarification provide real value to the client in terms of getting the problem solved, you need to charge for that.

Another interesting point here is that, **if you are charging for something that someone else isn't, there is a fundamental belief that it's better than the free thing.** Of course, you may also encounter clients who don't agree with that, but it's best to begin on a paying basis with the client, rather than working for free.

**MCNews: When you work with consultants to help them improve sales, what's the most common area that you see for improvement?**

**Thull:** I try to get consultants to think about what their clients tend to overlook or oversimplify when they try to self-diagnose, design or implement a solution by themselves. That analysis helps consultants build a high quality decision process for their industry, their specialty and their clients. Also, you have to introduce that process in a way that is not insulting or threatening to the client.

To return to the doctor-patient analogy, when you go in for your annual physical, you expect the doctor to have a process to guide you through decisions and support you during treatment. Your verbal input and physical data are vital to the process, and you will take ownership of the outcome because you controlled the input. In the same way, clients should be able to trust the logical creditability of the decision process you present to them.

**As the consultant guides a client through that process, the attitude should be that a quality decision could mean my firm is not the best fit for you.** Walk the client through the process and let the chips fall where they may. That's a shift in mind-set that consultants and other salespeople need to make, and both clients and consultants have to buy into that concept.

**MCNews: Last question—if you were to give consultants just one piece of advice to improve their sales process or their ability to win work what would it be?**

**Thull:** At the risk of repeating myself, you have to bring your system or methodology to the table for guiding your clients through a quality decision process. The real key is having the mind-set and the discipline to stick to your system and not fall back into another mode of selling.

Too often, salespeople, and particularly consultants, emphasize that it's all about how good I am and what a miserable failure you, the client, are because you don't have my expertise. You have to get over that ego thing and shift your attention to the client and the diagnosis.

**MCNews: Thanks for your insights.**

Find out more about Jeff Thull, his book and the services of the Prime Resource Group at <http://www.primeresource.com/management-consulting.htm>.