



They say that the world divides into those who, when they hear a strange sound from under the hood of the car, turn the radio down and those who turn the radio up. Which of these two, obviously diverse, reactions is right? You certainly shouldn't react to every little rattle, but there is a price to be paid if a small rattle turns into a bigger problem and cost.

When *your* sales results “rattle” do you react to the symptoms - or do you turn down the volume and take the time to understand what's really going on so that you can effectively address the root causes?

It can be very costly when the car abruptly screeches to a halt - or when sales fail to reach expected targets at quarter end!

From the work I've done over the decades with various sales organizations, I've observed a tendency to address the symptoms of underlying issues, rather than to take the time to get to the root causes. Some strive to really understand what's going on and others metaphorically reach to turn up the volume on the radio. I believe, however, that reacting to symptoms, rather than addressing the root causes, is rarely a decision that is made consciously. It is a strong bias for action, plus the illusion that the rattle has gone away due to the louder volume of the radio, that reinforces the belief in a quick fix alternative. Of course the rattle is not addressed by the sound of the music from the radio. And, the root causes of issues impacting our sales results are seldom solved with these “quick fix” alternatives.



One of the biggest challenges we face in trying to increase sales productivity is that these quick fixes make little or no sustained difference. This challenge is compounded by the fact that, at least to start with, these quick fixes may appear to be addressing the situation. However, somewhere down the road, the truth gets out, when the car screeches to a rather expensive halt. In our world, the orders fail to come in, often resulting in embarrassingly missed forecasts and the inevitable organizational changes. In the severe cases, these situations are terminal.

So, why do organizations turn to these quick fixes? We live in a world, especially in the sales environment, where no one wants to waste any time and there is a very large bias for action. Stretching my metaphor a little: at the sound of a rattle, we don't want to pull over to the side of the road and undertake a full diagnosis, while sacrificing further progress towards our destination. Herein lies the *good news* - I would never propose that we stop, or even slow down, the action while taking the time to understand what is really happening. Instead, I propose that we keep forward motion while we ask some critical questions to gain real insight before committing ourselves to any path of action. Interestingly enough - and this is *really good news* - it rarely takes significantly longer, or requires much more investment to take this course of action. The results associated with addressing the root causes, rather than the symptoms, can be very significant.

One of my own favorite sources of new insight into what is happening in the sales environment is an organization's own customer. Organizations often assume that they know what their customers and prospects are thinking, how they are making their purchase decisions, and how they view their products and services. From the work we have undertaken, we often see a gap between what the organization *thinks* drives its customer's behaviors and what *really does*. For example, we recently worked with a technology consulting organization that believed that customers bought their services due to their low pricing strategy. As it turns out, when we talked to their customers, price was rarely a primary decision criteria. Rather, the organization had developed a reputation for being able to deliver projects on time/on budget - highly valued attributes. Imagine the impact of this bad assumption on their sales and marketing efforts, including their unrealized ability to increase pricing.

"The results associated with addressing the root causes, rather than the symptoms, can be astounding".



Another personal favorite of mine is the tendency to meet competitive pressures by sending a sales force away on a two or three day solution selling course. A classical quick fix alternative, often leading to limited results. In these cases it is often believed that the sales force should simply “call higher” and “sell solutions”, as a result of which pricing pressures would be alleviated and the organization would be differentiated in the marketplace. Maybe this would happen. More often the truth of the matter is that the organization’s offering has, indeed, commoditized. In these situations prospects see little difference between one company’s offerings and another. This is often a tough observation for companies to accept. In these cases, the prospects are more knowledgeable about the offering and believe that they no longer need to engage in a consultative style of selling. They know what they want - simply the products and services at the right price¹. The result of the quick fix of a solution selling style of sales training course will likely be little more than a frustrated sales force.

I’m proposing that when our sales force starts to rattle, we should turn the radio off and take the time to understand what’s going on, rather than mask the issue, or address the symptoms. Although it may seem that this will require more time and/or more resource; in actuality the difference is not significant. In any event, addressing the root causes gets results; quick fix alternatives rarely make any significant or sustained difference to the organization.

To illustrate this point I have summarized some of the common “sales rattles” in the attached table with the associated all-to-often quick fix alternative. For example, in the first scenario, the quick fix would be to blame presentation skills and either send the entire sales force to a presentations course, or drill and equip the sales force to expertly deliver the standard “company pitch”. In the first column I list what the rattle may sound like – that is, the *observable symptoms* of an underlying issue. Then, in the second column, there are a series of questions you can ask to determine the underlying cause of the symptoms you are witnessing. It is rarely these quick fix areas that are the real issue, however, by asking these questions you can start to determine the underlying root causes.

I hasten to add that, without taking the time to understand what’s really going on, perhaps the right action *is* to turn the radio up. However, I encourage you to turn the radio down, listen, diagnose, understand and, in the words immortalized by Marvin Gaye, take the time to discover *what’s going on*.

“In any event, addressing the root causes gets results; quick fix alternatives rarely make any significant or sustained difference to the organization”.

¹ (See “Solving Solution Selling” http://market-partners.com/documents/solving_solution_selling.pdf for more on this topic).



Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #1 - <i>Presentation Skills</i>	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Prospects don't seem to understand your offers ◆ Sales people do not use a consistent company or product "pitch" ◆ A perception that the sales force is weak at positioning the company and its products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Is the sales force presenting the right message to the right person, at the right time? ◆ Does the sales force take the time to understand the prospect prior to delivering the pitch? ◆ Are sales presentations meaningful to the prospect? ◆ Are sales presentations about the prospect and in their language? ◆ Even if a prospect heard a "perfect" company/product pitch, would it really make a difference in the overall sales process?

Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #2 - <i>Solution Selling</i>	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Price pressures ◆ High degree of competition ◆ Sales people are pitching products ◆ Rarely selling more than one or two products/services ◆ Less differentiation from competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Are customers simply more knowledgeable, and they know what they want? ◆ Has the market commoditized, with other companies offering similar products and/or services to your own? ◆ Are customers willing to engage in buying a solution? i.e. <i>all</i> of the following must be true: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They have a real business need 2. They believe they lack the ability to "solve" that need in-house 3. They will place a priority on solving this business need 4. They are willing to let an outside organization solve this problem for them 5. They see you as unbiased, trustworthy, credible, and having the expertise required to recommend the appropriate solution for their needs ◆ Can you live with the longer sales cycles typically found with selling solutions? ◆ Will the market pay a higher price so that the cost of a more complex and time-consuming solution sales process can be recovered?



Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #3 - Closing	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Sales cycles are getting longer ◆ Fewer prospects are converting ◆ More proposals end up not going anywhere ◆ Greater discounts are being offered to close the business ◆ Forecast accuracy is anything but accurate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Is the sales process in step with the purchase process, i.e. do the prospects think that they are about to buy, when the sales person thinks they are about to buy? ◆ Is there a good understanding of the prospect's buying and purchasing process? ◆ Has the value of the proposed offering been well articulated, and do prospects believe it? ◆ Is there knowledge of why a prospect would buy in these time frames? ◆ Is there simply an attempt, by the sales force, or their management, to try to close business early, perhaps through discounted price or other incentives? ◆ Is the sales force confusing a prospect's interest with an imagined commitment? (There is a big difference between these two). ◆ Is there more competition? ◆ Is your offer at the top of the prospect's "to do" list? (Remember, there are many other sales people at every prospect's door with an equally compelling offer).

Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #4 - Negotiation	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We are giving more away to secure the business ◆ Greater price pressures than before ◆ We are dealing with our prospect's purchasing departments to a far greater degree ◆ Prospects want to negotiate far more than before ◆ Average selling price is decreasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Is there more real competition than before? ◆ Is the pricing competitive in the market place? ◆ Has our product/service commoditized? ◆ Do prospects see the offering as providing true value that is unique in the marketplace? (Ask them, you may be surprised). ◆ Is there a good understanding of the prospect's business needs? ◆ Has the value that the offering delivers been articulated to the prospect and, more importantly, do they accept this "statement of anticipated value?" ◆ Were proper expectations set early in the sales cycle regarding the investment required, and return expected? ◆ Have the right people been involved from the prospect's organization?



Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #5 - Team Selling	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ A more complex sales process demands the sales person coordinating more people on the selling team◆ Domain experts are required to bring expertise into the sales cycle◆ Sales people are not adequately utilizing resources◆ Team members sometimes feel “shut out” of selling situations◆ Sales people only bring in others when it’s too late◆ Sales people waste resources by using them in unqualified sales opportunities◆ It seems as if every sales call has become a four-legged sales call, with the sales person depending on others to be on <i>every</i> sales call◆ Uncoordinated selling activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Are there clear roles and responsibilities for each team member for each step of the sales process?◆ Do the team members know who’s “on first?”◆ Is there a developed and bought into selling approach and strategy?◆ Do all resources follow this selling approach and strategy?◆ Do team members respect each other’s positions?◆ Do team members always follow through on their commitments in a timely manner?◆ Is the sales person ever left to clean up after others in the organization have left the prospect “hanging?”◆ Do team members follow through on their commitments to the sales person in a complete and timely manner?◆ Is there a clear sales process that delineates how a prospect should be qualified at each step and when team members should be introduced into the selling strategy?◆ Is there a clear approach to prioritizing and scheduling required specialist resources into sales opportunities?



Apparent Quick Fix Alternative #6- Executive Level Selling	
Symptoms	Questions to Consider before resorting to the Quick Fix
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Sales people call at a level in the prospect's organization that is perceived to be too low◆ Few executive level contacts or relationships exist with a prospect or customer◆ Sales people rarely utilize their own executives effectively in their selling situations◆ Sales people are viewed as lacking in the ability to meaningfully engage at the executive level	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ If you were to secure an appointment at an executive level, would you have something to say that is of interest to them?◆ Is there a clear and valid reason why an executive should dedicate their all-too-little available time to meet with you? (Remember, there are literally dozens of other organizations lobbying for executive time, each with what they consider to be a worthy value proposition).◆ How key are the executives in the overall buying process? (In today's more empowered and networked organizations, decisions are often delegated below the senior executive level).◆ Is there a good understanding of when, in the overall sales process, would be the most effective time for executive contact?◆ When your own executives are involved in a sales opportunity, do they respect the overall sales strategy? Do they know the difference between being <i>involved</i> in the selling situation and <i>taking it over</i>?