science-backed strategies to win your most critical sales conversations
You know who Malcolm Gladwell is, but have you ever heard of Morton Grodzins?

If not, you're not alone. And that's the point of the story.

In 1957, Grodzins, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, wrote an article for the Scientific American that explored how large metropolitan areas tended to self-segregate based on race. Grodzins wanted to determine the point at which neighborhoods' racial/ethnic compositions began to change. He hypothesized that whites' exodus to the suburbs occurred when the number of non-white families moving into certain neighborhoods hit a critical mass, or what he called a "Tipping Point."

Sound familiar? That's because Malcolm Gladwell wrote a highly successful book based on the same premise!

Morton Grodzins did the research, published the findings, and coined the phrase "Tipping Point" 40 years before Malcolm Gladwell's book. But Gladwell made millions of dollars, wrote five more books, and now commands six figures for a one-hour speech—all on the back of a 40-year-old, unoriginal idea.

Poor Grodzins toiled and died in academic obscurity. Malcolm Gladwell's career exploded. What made the difference?

People remember Gladwell and not Grodzins because Gladwell told a better story. He took a compelling core idea and developed it into a broader narrative that was more engaging, more consumable, and more relevant to the buying public.

Despite Grodzins' 40-year head start, almost no one knows him as the father of the Tipping Point.

Here's the lesson for sellers: The best story always wins. Having the best solution doesn't guarantee that people will buy it. The better story, told best, will win.

In this e-book, you'll learn how to have memorable sales conversations across the entire customer lifecycle to ensure your stories perform more like Gladwell (and less like Grodzins).
the customer **deciding journey**

It’s tempting to believe that prospects and customers will all follow a set of repeatable steps that eventually lead them to choose you. But in reality, your buyers are asking weighty questions that are specific to their current situation. Together, we call this series of situationally-specific questions the Customer Deciding Journey.

The Customer Deciding Journey includes four Value Conversations—pivotal moments for both you and your buyers. In each of these conversations, your buyers are asking difficult questions that you must answer to win their business.

Create Value™ – Tell a compelling story to disrupt your prospect’s status quo, drive the need for change, and create a buying vision that favors you over your competition.

Elevate Value™ – Build a meaningful business case that passes muster with executive decision-makers and justifies releasing budget based on your proposal.

Capture Value™ – Manage tense negotiations to increase the size of your deals, avoid unnecessary discounting, protect your pricing, and maximize your profits.

Expand Value™ – Keep and grow business with existing customers by reinforcing your value and actively defending the relationship against your competition.

The Customer Deciding Journey reflects what’s happening in your buyers’ minds—how they think and behave while they’re deciding whether to buy from you. When you understand their underlying motivations and behaviors in each conversation, you can tailor your approach to match the situation and win.
win the four value conversations

One-size-fits-all messages and skills won’t hold up across the range of buying decisions you need to influence in the Customer Deciding Journey. Your buyers’ questions, behaviors, and motivations change from one moment to the next.

To win all four Value Conversations, you need to master a diverse set of messages and skills, sharpened with the situational awareness to know when and how to adapt to each situation.

› CREATE VALUE
› ELEVATE VALUE
› CAPTURE VALUE
› EXPAND VALUE
Selling to new prospects is more about change management than sales. As the outsider, you’re fighting inertia—your buyer’s natural tendency to stay with their current situation. To persuade them to change and choose you, you need to disrupt your prospect’s status quo, drive the need for change, and create a unique buying vision that differentiates you from your competition.

**Create Value**

| Break the status quo and differentiate your solutions | win the four value conversations |

Selling to new prospects is more about change management than sales. As the outsider, you’re fighting inertia—your buyer’s natural tendency to stay with their current situation. To persuade them to change and choose you, you need to disrupt your prospect’s status quo, drive the need for change, and create a unique buying vision that differentiates you from your competition.
When acquiring new customers, many salespeople assume their prospects will ultimately decide between two choices: their solution or a competitor’s solution.

But the truth is, 60–80 percent of deals end in “no decision.” Prospects don’t see a compelling enough reason to change from their current situation, so they decide to do nothing at all.

In other words, your biggest enemy is not your competitors—it’s the status quo.

Over the years, psychological studies have shown that people have an innate aversion to doing something different than what they’re doing today. This cognitive bias is known as Status Quo Bias, and it causes a level of subconscious inertia that you need to overcome in your acquisition conversations.

Know why your prospect’s status quo is always lurking, ready to put the kibosh on your deals no matter how compelling your presentations? Because the status quo hasn’t killed them yet. Dissatisfied as they might be, your prospects have adapted to the best of their abilities and forged ahead in the face of gaps and deficiencies.

Inertia is powerful. To overcome it, you need to tell a powerful, disruptive story that makes your prospect’s current situation seem unsafe and unsustainable. And you do it by introducing what we call “Unconsidered Needs.”
it’s what they don’t see coming

If you base your approach on what your prospects tell you their needs are, whether through voice of the customer research or discovery questions, you’re inclined to connect your solution’s specific capabilities to those identified needs.

The problem is, your competitors are responding to those same inputs from their prospects and customers. So, you end up delivering commodity messages that won’t differentiate you.

When buyers hear very similar messages from you and your competitors, they see no contrast between their choices. There’s no compelling reason or urgency to change, so the buyer opts to stick with the status quo.

To disrupt your prospect’s natural preference for the status quo, you need to venture beyond known problems and stated needs and introduce them to their Unconsidered Needs.

Unconsidered Needs are potent tools to disrupt and defeat the status quo. But where do they fit into a Why Change story?

To convince new prospects to change from their status quo, you need to tell a powerful, disruptive story that makes their current situation seem unsafe and unsustainable.

Learn more in this video:
In the beginning, your prospects are asking, "Why should I change?" To answer that question, challenge their status quo with the Why Change message.

Now, your prospect has a reason to care about your solution’s strengths and capabilities—they go from not adding any value to being invaluable! You’ve set the stage for a differentiated Why You story.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral expert Dr. Zakary Tormala, this Why Change message significantly outperforms other sales pitches.

B2B decision-makers perceived the pitch as 41 percent more unique and 11 percent higher quality. Participants were also 10 percent more likely to purchase, compared to other groups in the study.

1. Disrupt the status quo by introducing unconsidered, unmet, or underappreciated gaps and opportunities within their business.

2. Highlight the cost and risk of sticking with their current solution versus changing to a new solution.

3. Create urgency to change by showing a stark contrast between their current approach and the improved new way of doing things.

Now, your prospect has a reason to care about your solution’s strengths and capabilities—they go from not adding any value to being invaluable! You’ve set the stage for a differentiated Why You story.
deliver the
Why You
message

While the Why Change story is about offering a distinct point of view, the Why You story is more of a traditional value proposition.

Even though you want to highlight your capabilities with the Why You message, don’t be too quick to launch into a feature dump. You first need to put those capabilities into the context of your customer’s business problems and then describe what they need to do about those problems.

1. Identify business problems you can solve in a unique or advantaged way.

2. Get them to see what they need to do differently than what they’re doing today to accomplish their desired outcomes.

3. Illustrate what it means to their success if they make the change.

4. Describe what you offer in a unique or advantaged way to help them make the change and realize the value.

By following this choreography, you make your buyer the hero of their own story, instead of immediately swooping in to save the day for them.

It’s not about you. It’s about your buyer!

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral scientist Dr. Nick Lee, changing the pronoun from “we” to “you” in your pitch can add urgency and make your prospect feel more personally responsible for solving the problem.

Felt personally responsible to solve problem

Dr. Nick Lee
Behavioral Scientist

Read the full research study here
How do you justify the value of your solution to executive decision-makers? In these conversations, your goal is to create the urgency for change by highlighting the risks affecting their situation, introducing previously Unconsidered Needs, and providing a solution that will have a positive and tangible impact on their business.
overcome your fear of heights

Research from DecisionLabs found that most companies aren’t satisfied with their ability to tell an executive-level story.

• 67 percent say they’re underperforming at getting executive-level prospects to buy now rather than later.
• Only 39 percent are confident in their ability to build a meaningful business and financial case to justify a decision.

These are significant issues, considering that 80 percent of deals will require a VP or higher-level signoff. Without executive buy-in, your deals stall, you lose momentum, and your close rates plummet.

Stalled proposals and lost deals are symptoms of a value communication problem. When you’re sitting across from a CXO, you only get one shot to pique their interest. If you don’t come to the table with enough confidence, knowledge, and insight, they’ll shut you down without a second thought, and you won’t get another opportunity.

When sellers lack the competence and the confidence to elevate the conversation, create enough urgency, and show enough business impact, executive buyers won’t take action.

To overcome your “fear of heights” when selling to executives, you need to understand what motivates them to make decisions and how to get them to decide now, instead of later.
It’s not just a numbers game

Loss Aversion, a behavioral concept coined by Nobel Prize-winning researchers Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, refers to the idea that losses loom larger (psychologically speaking) than gains. Even when losses and gains are of equal magnitude (losing $100 versus winning $100), people tend to weigh the loss more heavily than the gain.

Kahneman later conducted research exploring what he called “risk-seeking”—when people actively seek risk instead of avoiding it. The findings of that research validate those from his Loss Aversion study: People are far more willing to seek risk to mitigate a loss than achieve a gain. Together, the concepts of Loss Aversion and risk-seeking are known as Prospect Theory.

What does Prospect Theory have to do with executive-level selling?

One damaging myth about executive buyers is that they’re strictly rational decision-makers, relying solely on math and analytical calculations to inform how they buy. But research from DecisionLabs shows that’s not the case at all.

Adding an emotional element to your message will sway executive buyers into making risky choices—even when the math is the same. Don’t tell them what they stand to gain by switching to you—show them what they stand to lose if they don’t.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral expert Dr. Zakary Tormala, executives chose between two recovery plans after an economic downturn. The messages were mathematically identical but they framed the status quo as either a gain or a loss.

- **Gain frame message**: This plan has a one-third probability of saving all three plants and all 6,000 jobs but has a two-thirds probability of saving no plants and no jobs.

- **Loss frame message**: This plan has a two-thirds probability of resulting in the loss of all three plants and all 6,000 jobs but has a one-third probability of losing no plants and no jobs.

Executives were more likely to choose a risky option when the status quo was framed as a loss to be avoided.

• Gain frame message: Executives chose gain vs. loss messages

Executives who chose gain vs. loss messages

+70%
**deliver the Why Now message**

Even at an executive level, people make decisions subconsciously before the brain’s rational and analytical part takes over to justify the decision. The Why Now message choreography introduces risk, illustrates the need to change, and provides financial proof to underpin that buying vision.

1. Identify external factors in the industry and connect those trends to major strategic initiatives of the company.

5. Justify the business impact of the decision by telling a customer story with contrast and quantifiable results.

Risk is one of the few subjects that doesn’t get delegated down. When you introduce risk and then create a buying vision for the executive to solve that risk, you light up their brain to think and act more urgently.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral scientist Dr. Nick Lee, this message drives more urgency to act than other sales pitches. Executive decision-makers viewed the Why Now pitch as **four percent more important to their future success** and were **nine percent more likely to purchase now**, compared to other groups in the study.

> Read the full research study here
One of the critical aspects of the Why Now conversation is your ability to communicate business impact.

Economic justification isn’t just about numbers. When building a business case for executive buyers, use Hard Returns, Strategic Returns, and Soft Returns.

- **Hard Returns** are the direct benefits that your buyer acknowledges and quantifies. To come up with projected Hard Returns, follow the flow of money and identify as many impact areas as you can. Then you can take these insights to your buyer and be ready to defend the numbers with references.

- **Strategic Returns** are based on the decisions that companies need to make for regulatory or compliance reasons. They might also be decisions the company makes in favor of strategic directions it wants to pursue, even though money may be at risk.

- **Soft Returns** are more nebulous. They might include customer satisfaction, better communication, and better data security. They’re valuable, but Soft Returns are difficult to translate directly into financial impact.
As deals advance, it becomes harder to handle pricing pressures and avoid unnecessary discounting. In tough negotiations, you need the know-how to deal with that pressure, protect your margins, and close deals profitably. In complex selling scenarios, you also need to learn how to guide conversations through multi-party buying committees and avoid any “last mile” challenges to reach an agreement.

Capture Value
Maximize the profitability of every deal
buyers have **all the power**

Traditional sales negotiation training teaches salespeople to “power up” or seize the upper hand in a negotiation. But that approach isn’t as effective as it used to be.

Your buyers now have all the power. They approach negotiations armed with the confidence to demand discounts—and walk away when they don’t get them. So, how can you leverage your low-power position and protect your value during tough negotiations?

One way to reframe your buyers’ perception of your value is to introduce Unconsidered Needs.

If your buyer believes they already know their needs and your capabilities, there’s no differentiation between you and other providers in their minds. You end up trapped in a commodity conversation competing on price—their *price*, based on their presumption of your value.

To break out of that commodity conversation, you need to introduce Unconsidered Needs (remember those?) and create price uncertainty by disrupting their perceived value of your solution. You increase your value in your buyer’s mind by bringing to light insights and opportunities that they didn’t know were important to them.

Creating price uncertainty is the first step. But what happens when buyers start making demands and asking for discounts as negotiations drag on? How can you embrace the natural tension of the moment and *exchange* value, rather than give it away?
As deals get increasingly complex, late-stage negotiating tactics become increasingly irrelevant.

Now more than ever, your ability to create profitable outcomes depends on how deftly you navigate crucial moments of the sales process—moments that have the potential to change the nature of your opportunity and recast the buyer’s perception of your influence.

You have a clear goal in mind: close the deal. You probably have a well-defined structure of key steps to follow to achieve that goal. But your buyers have their own wants and needs that you need to respond to along the way. And if you’re not careful, you could begin to make concessions that erode your margins and give away your value.

To avoid value leaks and protect your pricing throughout the buying cycle, consider the concept of "Pivotal Agreements."
manage

the tension

When the decision-making process involves multiple stakeholders, there’s bound to be tension. During critical negotiations, there are two kinds of tension at play:

• **Competitive tension**, caused by your self-interest and the buyer’s self-interest.

• **Collaborative tension**, driven by the desire to create or preserve the relationship.

In these situations, you may be tempted to avoid tension. But **tension can be a positive force during negotiations**. When you find the balance between protecting your self-interest and building the relationship, you move the conversation toward a creative breakthrough.

Tension is a powerful tool for driving negotiations forward. And it’s essential for maximizing your profitability.

When you learn to use the natural tension of negotiations as a force for good, you’ll be able to guide the conversation and break through to a creative resolution.

▸ Learn more in this video:
When your prospect becomes a customer, you become their status quo. And you won’t win these conversations by using the same disruptive approach you use to win new business—customer retention and expansion require entirely different messages, content, and skills.

To keep and grow business with existing customers, you need to reinforce your value early and often, and actively defend and protect the relationship against your competition.

Expand Value

Keep and grow existing customer revenue
defend your insider status

According to analysts, as much as 70–80 percent of the average company’s revenue comes from existing customers.

Yet, most sales and marketing leaders (nearly 60 percent) see no need to take a different approach between customer acquisition and customer expansion. More than half believe the same provocative messages they use when communicating with new prospects are still applicable in a renewal scenario.

Despite this pervasive belief, DecisionLabs research shows that customer retention and expansion conversations require entirely different messages and skills.

When you’re the outsider, engaging new prospects, it makes sense to use a provocative, challenging approach that introduces Unconsidered Needs, disrupts their status quo, and persuades them to choose you.

But when you’re the insider, defending your incumbent position with existing customers, you need to reinforce your value and highlight the reasons why you’re still the safest choice.

Because you’re now the status quo, your customers are naturally more inclined to stay with you than change to a new solution. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make every effort to defend your Incumbent Advantage.
leverage your incumbent advantage

Every customer-vendor relationship boils down to value over time. After your customer signs the deal, they should start receiving some initial value in terms of business impact and results. That’s progress that your customer should be loath to give up by making a change at the wrong time.

Your customer invested time, money, and political capital to implement your solution. In their mind, these are sunk costs—investments they’ve made that they’ll never have to make again, provided they stick with you.

So, when a competitor shows up promising additional value, it’s only potential value. Your competitor’s solution is still unproven, the cost and impact are both unknown, and change comes at the risk of losing the initial progress, as well as any future value from your solution.

That’s a lot of uncertainty compared with your documented value and the customer’s sunk cost. And that uncertainty is what gives you the Incumbent Advantage.

what is the incumbent advantage?

Just like in politics, it can be very challenging to displace an incumbent because of all the advantages they have.

Because you’re now the status quo, you can leverage your incumbent status when selling to existing customers.

Learn more in this video:
show them what you're worth

After the deal is signed, most companies start tracking success using metrics like utilization, adoption, etc. But while you’re reporting on usage metrics and project status, that same customer’s name is moving through your competitors’ sales funnels.

Your competitors are actively trying to disrupt your customer’s status quo (you!) and woo them away with new strategic insights. And when your relationship is under siege, you won’t win with project-level metrics because they aren’t what decision-makers care about.

Your customer (and all the decision-makers involved in the deal) approved the expense of working with you because they believed you would make a meaningful contribution toward their strategic business goals. And to protect and defend the relationship, you need to maintain executive-level altitude when you’re reporting results.

Your ability to document results by connecting project-level metrics to executive-level strategic outcomes is a cornerstone of every commercial conversation you’ll have with your customers.

The Triple Metric is a useful framework to connect your project-level metrics to strategic outcomes that decision-makers care about.

Learn more in this video:
When you’re trying to persuade existing customers to renew, the Why Stay message shows them the progress they’ve made with your solution while reinforcing your value as the status quo.

1. Highlight points of progress toward their strategic goals as a result of your partnership.
2. Review how much effort went into their decision and validate the success of that decision.
3. Underscore the risks of losing momentum in the event of a change.
4. Mention the potential costs of bringing in another vendor—costs they avoid by staying with your solution.
5. Show how you’ve kept their solution up to date with any advances in the market.

Notice the difference between the Why Stay message and Why Change. Instead of disrupting the buyer’s current situation, renewal conversations require an approach that reinforces your position as the customer’s status quo.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral expert Dr. Zakary Tormala, this Why Stay message that reinforces the status quo led to a **13 percent boost in intention to renew**, and people were **10 percent less likely to switch or shop around**, compared to more provocative messages.
anchor your price increase

According to a DecisionLabs market survey, **69 percent of companies describe their price increase conversations as “50-50” or worse** in terms of how well they go over with customers.

It’s not surprising that most price increases aren’t received too well. After all, no one enjoys spending more money just to stay with the same solution. But for companies with aggressive growth goals, this is an essential conversation.

How do you persuade customers to pay more without disrupting the relationship so much that they start to shop around? The Why Pay More message follows the Why Stay framework with one important difference: a sixth step that broaches the price increase by anchoring a higher price before introducing a loyalty discount.

6. Provide a high anchor for the price increase before offering a justification-based discount.

This approach works because of a cognitive bias known as the “anchoring effect.” When people face a decision that involves uncertainty, they’ll anchor on a reference point and ascribe value based on that. By setting the anchor as a reference for your customer, you’re better able to influence their perception of your price increase.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral scientist Dr. Nick Lee, participants who heard this Why Pay More message were **15.5 percent more likely to renew** and felt **19 percent more favorable attitudes**, compared to a disruptive price increase message.

> Read the full research study here
create

new opportunities

Persuading customers to keep buying the same solution from you is one thing. But sooner or later, you’re going to want to sell them something new.

Convincing customers to buy more should, theoretically, be easier than selling to brand-new prospects. Existing customers know you. You have a history together. They’re more likely to pay attention to your marketing and meet with you to hear about new offerings.

But this conversation can go sideways without warning, surfacing hidden challenges and complexities that could scuttle any chance to forge that higher-value relationship. It could even set the relationship back.

If you succeed, you lay the groundwork for stronger, longer-lasting relationships. If you stumble, these relationships stagnate. And plateauing revenues aren’t your only problem.

If you aren’t continually supporting your customers with remarkable experiences and relevant solutions, they’re even more vulnerable to your competitors’ disruptive messages. It’s not about merely stalling out—it’s about losing them entirely.

what is the messaging void?

Doug Hutton
SVP of Products

If you’re not bringing new insights and opportunities to your customers regularly, the relationship could get lost in the messaging void.

Learn more in this video:
The goal of the Why Evolve message isn’t to drive a big change, nor is it about getting your customers to renew an existing solution. It’s about getting the customers to evolve—embrace change, but only as a logical progression of the ongoing pursuit of their goals.

This “controlled change” message ensures they won’t stagnate and inspires them to embrace your innovations with confidence and enthusiasm.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral scientist Dr. Nick Lee, this Why Evolve message significantly outperformed other messages when trying to convince existing customers to purchase a new solution.

Why Evolve is essentially a hybrid message that includes elements of a provocative new customer acquisition story (Why Change) and elements of the more protectionist customer renewal story (Why Stay).
When you’re able to point to specific performance gains directly related to your customers’ original goals, it’s much easier to keep and grow the customer relationship.

But what if something goes wrong? And what if you’re the one who screwed things up?

No matter how you phrase it, apologizing for a service failure is never easy. Your customer’s upset, and you need to salvage the relationship (and their business).

If you don’t phrase an apology the right way, you not only risk losing the customer you’ve wronged, but you also risk all future revenue from that relationship. Losing that customer also means losing the opportunity to grow or expand within their account.

No matter what went wrong, both the way you handle that failure and the conversations you have along the way are vital to managing your customer’s feelings about you later in the relationship.

In fact, handling a customer crisis the right way will not only rescue the relationship; it can advance it to an even higher level.

Researchers call this phenomenon the Service Recovery Paradox: a situation in which your customer thinks more highly of you after you’ve corrected a problem than if they’d never had the problem to begin with.

In other words, a service failure is actually an opportunity to increase customer loyalty!
deliver the
Why Forgive
message

The Why Forgive message measurably improves your ability to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, even after a service failure.

1. Describe how you’re going to fix the problem and work toward rebuilding trust with your customer.
2. Demonstrate that you understand your part in the service failure.
3. Promise to not repeat the problem.
4. Explain the reasons for the failure.
5. Express how sorry you are for the problem.

As with all the message frameworks in this e-book, it’s not just what you say—it’s how and when you say it. The research shows that the order in which you present these components makes a big difference in how your message is received.

According to a DecisionLabs study led by behavioral scientist Dr. Nick Lee, decision-makers who received this Why Forgive message were more likely to recommend the vendor and even buy more after a service recovery.

Read the full research study here
"I sell by being a trusted advisor."

You’ve probably heard someone say it. You might have even said it yourself.

It seems like a fine enough selling mantra on the surface. But probe a little deeper, and you’ll discover that when people say this, they mean that they ask their buyer a lot of questions, use those questions to diagnose needs, and then present a solution that fits the criteria.

This approach does you and your buyer a disservice—and it’s the antithesis of what it takes to master sales conversations today.

It’s no longer enough to say, “Tell me what you want; I’ll get it for you.” Buyers want you to tell them what they should want. They don’t want to sift through all the information—they need you to deliver insight into what they’re missing that will improve their performance.

To do that, you need to understand your buyers’ underlying behaviors and motivations, develop scientifically-tested messages, and respond with situationally sharpened skills.

By learning and applying the strategies in this e-book, you’ll have what it takes to win all four Value Conversations.
about Corporate Visions

Corporate Visions, Inc. is the leading provider of science-backed sales, marketing, and customer success training and consulting services. Global B2B companies work with Corporate Visions to articulate value in their customer conversations in three ways:

• **Make Value Situational** by distinguishing between customer acquisition and customer expansion

• **Make Value Specific** by aligning conversations with the Customer Deciding Journey

• **Make Value Systematic** by unifying marketing, sales, and customer success to speak in one voice

Only with Corporate Visions will your revenue teams get science-backed training to articulate value in every critical conversation with prospects and customers.

CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE