

Visual Engagement Helps Transform Solution Selling

JIM HAUDAN



As sales strategies have evolved from products to solutions, engagement has never been more important. Successful organizations find ways for sales forces to test-drive strategic concepts so they understand them, and then use those techniques to engage customers. The sales process has evolved from rigorous preparation of presentations into the capability to co-create solutions. A sales force can't succeed unless they clearly know what this means. Salespeople must have a mental model of key variables that they can configure to meet customer needs – like toy Transformers. The key is to engage customers in the construction of the final Transformer so the solution is co-built and therefore co-owned. As sales forces are increasingly asked to respond to

the ever-changing complexities of the marketplace, more and more variables enter into the process. This often causes a conversation with customers to include familiar words that don't always mean the same thing to both the salesperson and the customer.

One way we have found to bridge this gap of meaning is to use a visual metaphor that allows a salesperson and a customer to work together to combine the variables to meet their needs. Why visualization? Visualization forces us to think more simply. You can't draw a crisp picture of something that hasn't been thought through in great detail, whether that picture is in your head or on paper. Visualization acts as a mirror for our thinking, revealing just how complete our ideas are...or aren't. If a sales solution isn't clear enough to visualize, it's not clear enough to engage a customer.

We have found that the use of visuals, dialogue, and interactivity between a salesperson and a customer draws out the opinions,

beliefs, attitudes, and conclusions of both parties so they can be challenged and morphed together to create the best solution. This works so well because, in most solutions, there are differences between what people say and what they mean, often with a perceived lack of connections between the problem and the solution.

Here's a practical example. A well-known technology company that was taking hardware, software, and service solutions to the marketplace was struggling to get its salespeople to engage customers on how to best combine various components of a solution into the best overall customized choice. A visual of a drafting table was created. Behind the drafting table were the three offerings – hardware, software, and services. In front of the table were the various internal and external channels – face-to-face, electronic, retail, etc. At the end of the channels were the actual markets, and in the markets were the various buyers, all segmented based on their unique needs.

The visual enabled every salesperson to see all the variables together and also to see the advantages of engaging customers in assembling the best combinations for their solutions. For example, certain hardware solutions didn't match certain end-user markets as well as others, and certain channels responded differently to service solutions. The ability to talk about the options visually and tangibly allowed the customer and salesperson to have a "mental practice field" so they could be sure they were not only talking about the same things, but working together to combine the variables in the best possible way.

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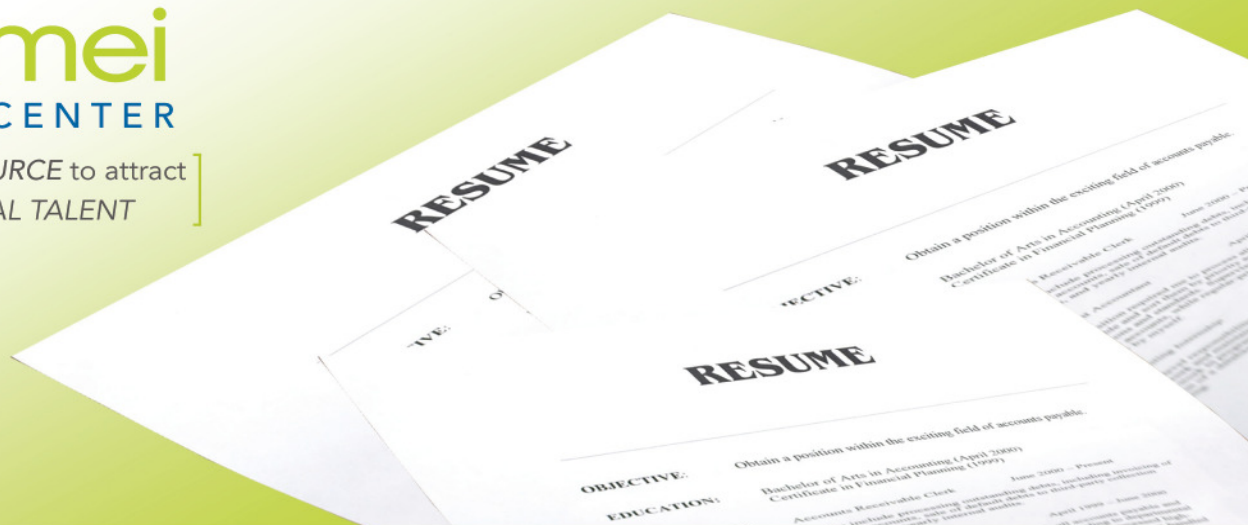
Jim Haudan is CEO of Root Learning, a business consultancy headquartered in Sylvania, Ohio. His book, *The Art of Engagement: Bridging the Gap Between People and Possibilities*, was recently published by McGraw-Hill.



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