



WHITE PAPER

RAIN SELLING: KEYS TO LEADING *MASTERFUL* *SALES CONVERSATIONS*

By Mike Schultz and John Doerr

Contents

- 3 RAIN Selling: Keys to Leading Masterful Sales Conversations
- 4 Keys to Leading Masterful Sales Conversations
- 6 **R:** Build Real Rapport with Buyers
- 8 **A:** Uncover Aspirations and Afflictions
- 10 **I:** Make the Impact Clear
- 12 **N:** Paint a Picture of the New Reality
- 13 Balance Advocacy and Inquiry
- 15 Influence and Bring Insight in Your Sales Conversations
- 18 RAIN Is Only the Beginning
- 19 Sales Capability & Execution Assessment
- 20 About RAIN Group



RAIN Selling: Keys to Leading Masterful Sales Conversations

Discover the secret to engaging buyers in powerful conversations and influencing them to buy from you.

Conversations make or break everything in sales. Every conversation presents an opportunity to find new opportunities, win new customers, and increase sales.

Yet so many sellers struggle with creating initial conversations and moving them to the close. They make common mistakes that end up losing them deals.

We've identified six keys to sales conversation success, all encompassed in our RAIN Selling Conversation Framework.

The Most Successful Conversations Are Based on RAIN

RAPPORT

Develop strong rapport with buyers. The entire selling process hinges upon the relationship and trust established between buyer and seller.

ASPIRATIONS & AFFLICTIONS

Dig deep and ask the right questions to uncover a buyer's complete set of afflictions and aspirations.

IMPACT

Provide a detailed explanation to the buyer of the impact of their action or inaction.

NEW REALITY

Paint a compelling picture of what a buyer's situation will look like after they decide to go forward with you.

ADVOCACY & INQUIRY

Find a balance between talking and listening: asking the right questions and influencing without coercing allows the seller to steer the conversation in the right direction.

INFLUENCE

Bring buyers down a path of your choosing and help them decide in your favor.

INSIGHT

Bring insights and ideas that will help buyers solve their afflictions and achieve their aspirations.

Keys to Leading Masterful Sales Conversations

Imagine meeting the CEO of a major company you've been eager to work with. You introduce yourself, and seven months later, you're finalizing a multi-million deal. This scenario isn't just a dream—it's a reality for top-performing sales professionals who master the art of sales conversations.

Research from the RAIN Group Center for Sales Research reveals that Top-Performing Sellers achieve an average win rate of 72% on proposed opportunities compared to just 47% for others.¹ This significant difference underscores the importance sales conversations play in closing deals and driving business growth when you consider that Top Performers are also 62% more likely to be skilled at leading sales conversations.²

The journey from initial introduction to closing a substantial deal involves numerous interactions, each presenting an opportunity to build trust, demonstrate value, and move the relationship forward. While this process may seem daunting, it doesn't have to be. Key principles, when applied consistently, can transform your sales conversations and significantly improve your results.

In this report, we'll explore six essential principles and introduce you to the RAIN Selling™ Conversation Framework. These insights are based on extensive research and real-world experience, designed to help you lead masterful sales conversations that resonate with buyers and drive positive outcomes.

¹ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*, <https://www.rainsalestraining.com/sales-research/the-top-performing-seller>.

² *The Top-Performing Seller*.



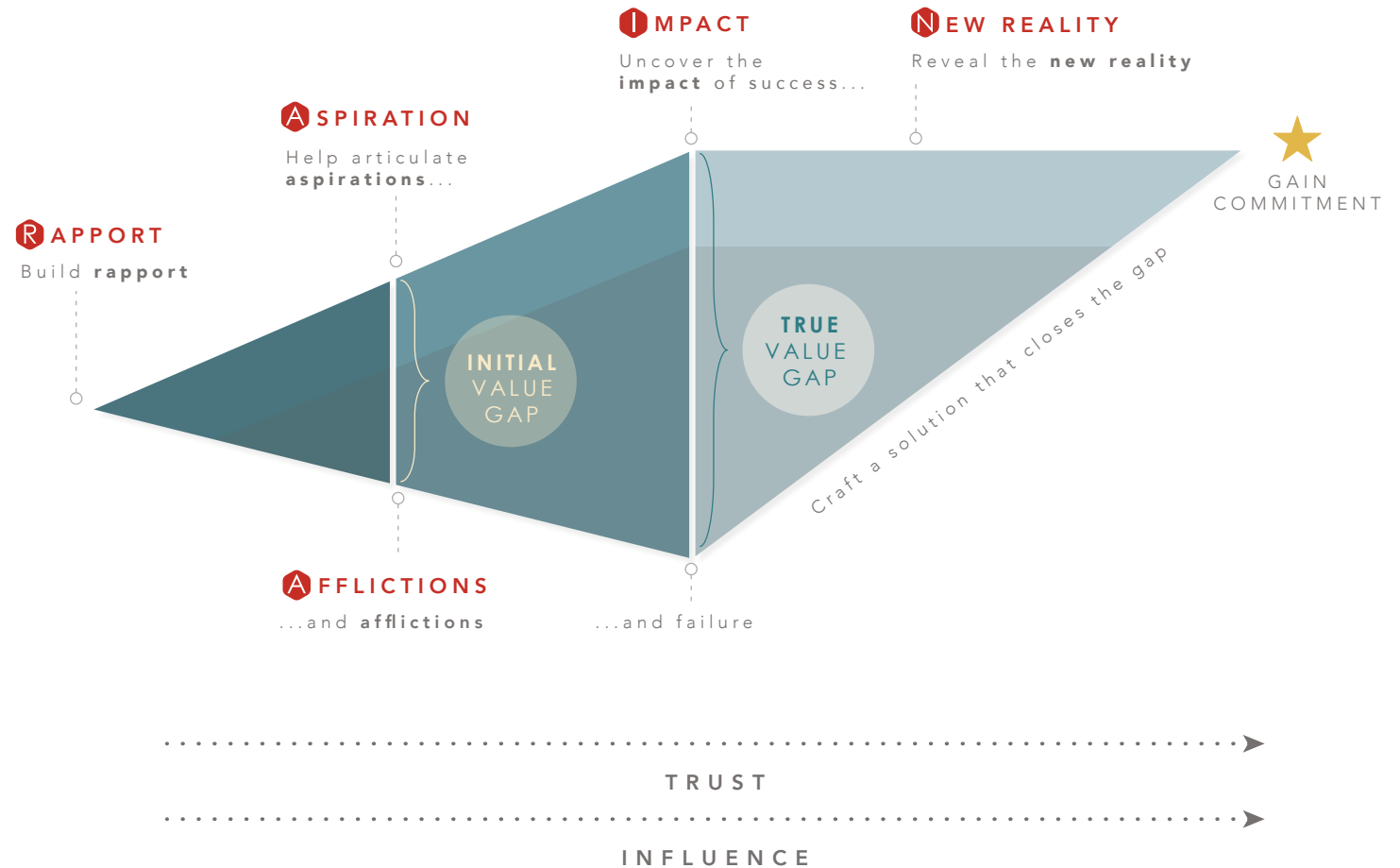
The RAIN Selling Conversation Framework

Two decades ago, the team here at RAIN Group started researching the question: *What happens during the best, most successful sales conversations?* Our work with thousands of clients worldwide, combined with our global research of buyers and sellers, has validated our approach and the RAIN Selling Conversation Framework.

While both buying and selling have changed tremendously in the last two decades, the key components of a great sales conversation—and a great series of conversations—can be framed by four simple letters: RAIN.

RAIN Selling is an acronym for **R**apport, **A**spirations and Afflictions, **I**mpact, and **N**ew Reality. These are the core concepts you need to remember to lead a rainmaking conversation. In addition, the **A** and the **I** perform double duty, standing for **A**dvocacy and **I**nquiry, and the **IN** will help you remember to maximize your **IN**fluence and bring **IN**sight.

THE RAIN SELLING CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK



Build Real Rapport with Buyers

The concept of rapport building isn't new. You can find book after book written from the 1920s onward that will teach you "techniques" for building rapport with prospects.

While the subtle art of rapport may be intuitive to some, many buyers and sellers wrongly equate the concept of rapport-building with contrived chit chat.

You shouldn't make superficial connections; you should make genuine connections. Genuine rapport sets the foundation for trust and strong relationships.

All things being equal, people buy from people they like. Strong rapport can tip the scales in your favor to win new business.

And the numbers back this up. Our research shows that Top-Performing Sellers are 63% more likely to excel at building strong, long-term relationships with buyers. They're also 88% more likely to inspire buyers to reach out to them for advice and ideas.³ This is evidence that genuine rapport isn't just nice to have—it's a critical factor in sales success. When you build real connections, you're not just another seller; you become a trusted advisor, someone buyers turn to when they need help or insights.

³ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*.

5 Simple Ways to Build Real Rapport with Prospects

1. **Be genuine:** Before the first day of school, jobs, camp, and any family get together, my dad would always say, “Just be yourself and everything will be fine.” The same goes for generating rapport with buyers and customers. Don’t try to be anything you’re not. Don’t create a new persona and don’t sound contrived. Just be yourself and relax. Good things will follow.
2. **Show interest:** It’s no surprise that people are self-focused. This is quite helpful to those of us in sales because we need to learn about our buyers before we can provide the best solutions. Show interest in prospects as people and in their business challenges and you’ll improve your chances of success.
3. **Allow time for small talk:** If you jump right in with, “OK, let’s get down to business,” before you give everyone a chance to take a breath and say hello, it often creates a tense atmosphere. You have to gauge when to start talking business at the right time: too early and a chilly abruptness fills the air, take too much time chatting and the buyer may wonder, “Are we ever going to get going here?” Time the conversation right and you’ll be well on your way.
4. **Balance advocacy and inquiry:** One of the best ways to establish a connection with a buyer is to balance asking questions (inquiry) with talking or giving advice (advocacy). Talk too much and the buyer will tune out. Ask too many questions and they’ll feel like they’re getting the third degree. The rapport-building sweet spot is usually somewhere in the middle, leaning a bit towards giving the prospect more airtime than you.
5. **Listen actively:** While the heading for this is “listen actively,” it could just as easily read, “listen, actually.” Many sellers are too caught up in what they’re saying or too focused on what they’re going to say next. They’re not only not actively listening, they’re not *actually* listening. If your buyers perceive that you aren’t listening to them, building rapport will be virtually impossible.

When you build genuine rapport with buyers, you may find that the process moves more quickly, that you’re able to uncover a deeper set of needs, and that more buyers end up choosing you.

Uncover Aspirations and Afflictions

Most sales advice suggests that to sell products and services as solutions to needs, you must first uncover the problems and pains of your buyers (their afflictions). Uncovering your buyer's afflictions is a crucial step in the business development process.

The reasons are simple:

- If the buyer communicates their business afflictions to you, it's likely they want them to go away if possible; they're considering if it makes sense to invest the time, money, and brainpower to eliminate them.
- Each affliction you uncover gives you the chance to explore it fully to discover its true business impact.
- Uncovering and discussing one affliction can lead to other afflictions, which the buyer may not have been thinking about in the first place.

But focusing only on afflictions can do you (and your buyer!) a disservice because problems and pain are only half the story.

The Second Half of the Story: Aspirations

Afflictions only focus on half—the negative half—of the buyer's needs. If you focus only on the negative, you miss half your chance to uncover opportunities.

When buyers buy, they are typically thinking as much about aspirations (the future they seek) as they are about afflictions (problems they'd like to fix).

If you think about asking questions exclusively in the negative, you'll tend to probe for needs that way. You'll ask questions to the effect of: Where are you unhappy with performance? What keeps you up at night? Where is the pain?

Think of aspirations as much as afflictions and you'll remember to ask **future-seeking** as well as problem-solving questions—questions with themes like: Where do you want to go? What are the possibilities?

If you ask questions that look to the future, you'll find that, instead of just bringing some ibuprofen for the pain, you'll be able to paint the most compelling, impactful, and comprehensive vision of a new and better reality for your buyers.

Top Performers are 58% more likely to excel at leading thorough needs discoveries, effectively uncovering the full set of buyer needs—both afflictions and aspirations.⁴

⁴ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*.

Capturing Missed Opportunities

Assume for a minute that you're a partner at a diversified accounting, financial, and business advisory firm. You have a meeting scheduled with the owner of a medium-size business because they're not happy with the tax accounting services they're receiving from their current CPA firm.

Through a series of questions, you uncover several problems this business owner has with their current accounting firm, including missed deadlines, impersonal service, and a suspicion that the firm isn't up-to-date on the latest tax regulations. You know you can help. You continue the conversation, proposing next steps on how to move forward. You feel confident in how you manage the conversation and feel that a new client will be in your future.

As you're saying goodbye they say, "I'm meeting my lawyer for lunch. You two don't know each other. Want to join us?" Not wanting to pass up an opportunity to further the relationship, you're happy to oblige.

You get to lunch, exchange pleasantries all around, and sit down to eat. A few minutes into the conversation, the lawyer asks your potential client, "So, what's going on at your company lately?", "What do you want to get done in the next year or so?", and, "What do you think you need to do to get these things done?"

You're amazed by some of your potential client's answers. You find they have opened up, going on for a while about the major initiatives at the company, including some initiatives they haven't yet launched.

As you listen, you realize there are at least three areas within these strategic initiatives for which your expertise is a perfect fit and where your firm can help. And the size of the fees in these areas is three times as large as what you just talked about in your meeting with the buyer only an hour before.

What Just Happened?

In this example, you can see how the lawyer asked future-seeking questions (aspirations), not problem-solving ones (afflictions).

By doing so, an entire new range of opportunities opened.

The next time you're preparing to uncover a buyer's pain and problems that you can fix, try focusing on aspirations as well as afflictions.

You'll find the conversations to be richer, your relationships deeper, and your sales success greater.

Make the Impact Clear

After uncovering a buyer's aspirations and afflictions, the question becomes, "So what?"

If your afflictions don't get solved, so what? What won't happen? Will they get worse? How will they affect the bottom line of your company, division, or department? How will they affect your life?

If your aspirations don't become reality, so what? Will your competition get ahead of you if you don't innovate? Will you lose market share if you aren't aggressive in your strategy? Will you never be able to grow your business to a point where you can sell it and reach your personal financial goals? Will the promotion you so desire continue to elude you?

When you understand the impact caused by your prospect's afflictions, you establish the true business obstacles that they present.

Your ability to quantify the impact and paint the "so what" picture is the foundation for how important it is for the decision maker to buy from you. If you don't answer the "so what" question, the initiative will fall to the bottom of the priority list.

Make the impact clear and the buyer's perception of the gap between where they are and where they want to be grows to its widest.

TOP PERFORMERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO...⁵ % MORE LIKELY THAN THE REST



⁵ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*.

6 Ways to Communicate the Impact

1. **Calculate the business impact:** Each affliction that you solve and each aspiration that you help a buyer realize should have a financial impact. Simply put, make the business case for the financial effects of engaging your products and services whenever possible.
2. **Communicate emotional impact:** Increased prestige. A more enjoyable day. Faster promotions. Ability to relax on the weekend. Peace of mind. There are many non-financial influences on the sale that can tip the scales in your favor.
3. **Impact compared to the alternative:** You need to know not only the impact of working with you, but also the impact on the buyer of working with alternatives to you. Perhaps your company offers better ROI, their products are inferior, or your service is better. Know the alternatives and you can make the best case for helping the buyer to succeed with you.
4. **Establish what won't happen:** Sometimes the buyer sees the positive impact of engaging your services but doesn't see any negative impact to not moving forward. The result is usually a very slow decision-making process. If this is the case, you can ask the buyer what won't happen if they don't move forward. By doing this, you probe for consequences of inaction and move yourself up the buyer's to-do list.
5. **Build credibility with similar impact:** They have aspirations and afflictions. You're selling what they need to help them meet their goals. The value proposition is clear, but they're still unsure. Sometimes buyers want to know if you've been there before. And, when you were there, what happened.
6. **Demonstrate impact tangibly:** The more you can make the impact tangible, the stronger the case for the impact will be. In essence, you need to paint a picture for them so they can see, as tangibly as you can depict it, what's going to change for them if they engage your products and services.



Paint a Picture of the New Reality

Whatever your product or service may be, before they buy, your prospect must see how it'll change their world for the better.

You have to help buyers understand exactly what outcomes they get as a result of working with you. In other words, show them how you'll create a new reality for them.

1. Establish the New Reality Benchmark

At the end of a well-managed sales process, your job is to depict a compelling new reality given the buyer's specific aspirations and afflictions and the impact of doing (or not doing) something about them. This process can start even before you have begun your needs discovery and solution crafting process. Ask them what they want the world to look like and you never know what you're going to find out.

2. Quantify the Impact

Quantify the new reality and the buyer will listen. For example, share with them how they will:

- Save 22% or \$1.2 million on costs of XYZ widgets
- Improve their cycle times by 13 days, cutting out major inefficiencies in their operational process
- Improve quality levels by 17% by setting up operations in a new city

⁶ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*.

3. Paint the Picture

It's now time to put the new reality into your proposal to the buyer. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a chart, a graph, or a table is worth at least that many words and probably more. The goal is to paint a compelling picture.

You don't have to rely on just one picture. As much as is appropriate, you can present the new reality in both qualitative (descriptive or conceptual) terms as well as quantitative (financial or other numerical-based measure).

Purchasing complex products and services can be as difficult as selling them. It's tough to get a handle on what to buy because it's difficult to differentiate between competing providers and their solutions. For the buyer, understanding and communicating the value of moving forward to their colleagues is where the difficulties often surface.

When you follow the RAIN Selling Conversation Framework and paint the picture of a compelling new reality, your buyers will know the solution is you.

Top Performers are 65% more likely to excel at leading highly effective proposal and finalist presentations, and 51% more likely to excel at inspiring confidence in buyers that they'll achieve the desired results.⁶

Balance Advocacy and Inquiry

The A and the I in RAIN play double duty to remind you to balance advocacy and inquiry in your sales conversations.

A lot of sales advice focuses on asking questions, or, as we say, inquiry. Asking questions is helpful in many ways, and is core to the process, but asking questions is only half the story.

In complex sales, buyers want advice. Education. New perspectives. Ideas. They need to know that you bring value to the table beyond just being a conduit for a purchase. This is where advocacy comes in.

Both play an important role. The trick is knowing when to use each.

Too much advocacy without sufficient inquiry can make you come across as pushy or tone-deaf to the buyer's needs. Conversely, too much inquiry without advocacy might leave the buyer wondering about the value you provide.

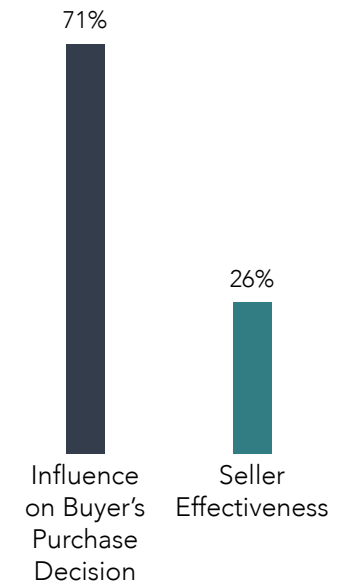
To achieve this balance:

1. **Start with inquiry:** Begin your sales conversations by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions. This approach allows you to gather crucial information about the buyer's needs and demonstrates that you're genuinely interested in understanding their situation.
2. **Listen actively:** Pay close attention to the buyer's responses. Only 26% of buyers believe sellers are competent listeners.⁷ Buck this trend by truly focusing on what the buyer is saying rather than just waiting for your turn to speak
3. **Document visibly:** Write down the needs and key points the buyer mentions. This practice not only helps you remember important details, but also shows the buyer that you're actively processing and valuing their input.

⁷ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *Virtual Selling Skills & Challenges*, <https://www.rainsalestraining.com/sales-research/virtual-selling>.

⁸ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *Virtual Selling Skills & Challenges*.

LEADING A THOROUGH DISCOVERY OF MY CONCERNS, WANTS, AND NEEDS⁸



Balance Advocacy and Inquiry

4. **Tailor your advocacy:** Once you have a clear understanding of the buyer's needs, you can more effectively advocate for your solution. Use the information you've gathered to explain how your product or service specifically addresses their unique challenges and goals.
5. **Encourage collaboration:** Make the needs discovery process a joint effort. Invite the buyer to refine or clarify the needs you've documented. This collaborative approach builds trust and ensures you're both on the same page.
6. **Follow up and confirm:** After the meeting, send a summary of the discussed needs and your proposed solutions. This step reinforces your understanding and gives the buyer another opportunity to provide input or clarification.

By mastering the balance between advocacy and inquiry, you'll not only improve your needs discovery skills, but also significantly enhance your overall effectiveness in sales conversations. Ask the right questions, listen attentively, and then advocate for tailored solutions to set yourself apart from the 74% of sellers who fall short in this crucial area.⁹

You need to balance advocacy and inquiry.

Sales winners demonstrate they understand buyers' needs 2.5x more often than second-place finishers.¹⁰

⁹ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *Virtual Selling Skills & Challenges*.

¹⁰ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *What Sales Winners Do Differently*, <https://www.rainsalestraining.com/sales-research/what-sales-winners-do>.



Influence and Bring Insight in Your Sales Conversations

The I and N in RAIN serve as reminders to **IN**fluence and bring **IN**sight.

Let's start with influence. There's been backlash in recent years against sellers exerting their influence because in sales, where trust is important, sellers don't want to be seen as too overbearing or too pushy.

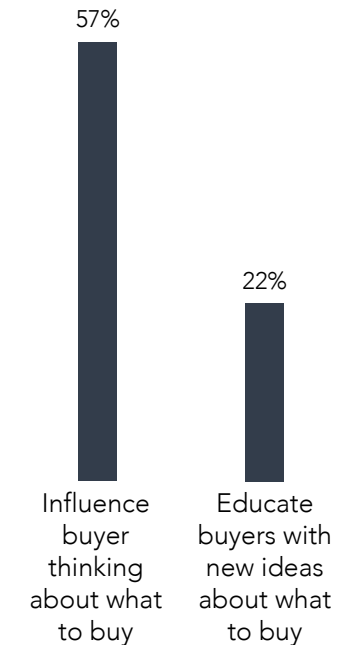
It's good not to be overbearing or pushy, but you shouldn't equate these concepts with influence. It's your job as a seller to do two things:

1. **Help buyers make decisions in general.** This is where you should exert your influence: to help buyers take action.
2. **Help buyers make the right decisions,** decisions they'll be happy you helped them make six months from now. To do this, they often need your help and direction—sometimes with a firm hand—to head down the right path.

Finally, there's insight. As we mentioned when we talked about advocacy, buyers want ideas—ideas that will help them solve their afflictions and achieve their aspirations. Sellers do this with advocacy, but also with inquiry, questioning buyers' points of view when an evolution in that point of view will serve buyers' best interests.

Both influencing and bringing insight are more of an advanced topic in consultative selling, but the point here is that it's all contained in RAIN.

TOP PERFORMERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO...¹¹
% MORE LIKELY THAN THE REST



¹¹ RAIN Group Center for Sales Research, *The Top-Performing Seller*.

The 11 Principles of Influence in Sales

1. **Identify the Gap:** Establish the gap between [where the buyer is now and where they want to be](#). People know what they have, but they want to know what they're *missing*. Give them the sense they're missing something and they'll want to know more.
2. **Likeability:** People buy from people they like. They interact with people they like. They build trust and relationships with people they like. Without likeability, you won't have access to buyers to influence them.
3. **Ownership:** To the extent a buyer emotionally owns a change—any kind of initiative they're trying to accomplish—they'll be more inclined to see it through and to give it energy, focus, and attention. If a buyer sees it as someone else's initiative, it won't be at the top of their agenda.
4. **Justification:** This principle appeals to the rational side of the buyer. Buyers need to be able to make a rational justification to themselves and others as to why they want or need to do something. See page 11 for six ways to communicate impact in sales.
5. **Collection of Distinctions:** When you differentiate, you provide buyers with a mix of distinctions that [set you apart from your competitors](#). Typically, it's a combination of you as the seller, your offering, your company, and the results you can achieve that make up the mix of distinctions. When a buyer views you and your solution, *as a whole*, as different from other options, it's influential in their decision making.
6. **Perception of Scarcity:** People value rarity and don't want to miss out on an opportunity. When buyers view what you bring to the table as scarce, they'll not only value you more, but also take action faster because they fear losing out.
7. **Trust:** Buyers buy from people they trust. They listen to people they trust. They give access to, spend time with, and help people they trust. The more trust you build, the greater the influence you'll have. Here are [ideas for building trust in sales](#).

It's important to note that trust connects to each of the other principles as well. The more buyers trust you, the more they'll believe in your justification case, see you as distinct and scarce, trust your urgency case is real, and so on. Trust is core to being influential and applying each of these principles with the greatest success.

8. **Indifference:** It's okay to *want* a sale, but not to *need* it. Indifference is emotional detachment to the outcome of making the sale. Indifference is often best understood in light of its opposite: neediness. The more you seem like you *need* the sale, the less likely a buyer will view you as a peer and the more difficult it'll be to sell.
9. **Urgency:** When you make the case for change, you make the case for why *act*, but you also [need to make the case for why now](#). To make that case, it's important to establish a closing window of opportunity. As with the other principles, there are many ways to do it, it's just critical that you make it happen—and that you do so genuinely and honestly.
10. **Stepping Stones:** Once people get on a path, they're much more likely to stay on that path. To the extent you can get buyers to make small agreements for action, you can get them to make bigger agreements for action. Stepping stones are about creating an interim step—something that makes the leap of faith of working with you much easier to take—by taking smaller steps in succession.
11. **Commitment Encouragement:** Always strive to secure the next step. Research has shown that when you can get people to make verbal, written, and public commitments, they're more likely to keep them. The best sellers ask for commitment at the right time, get signatures, and get buyers to communicate commitments publicly.

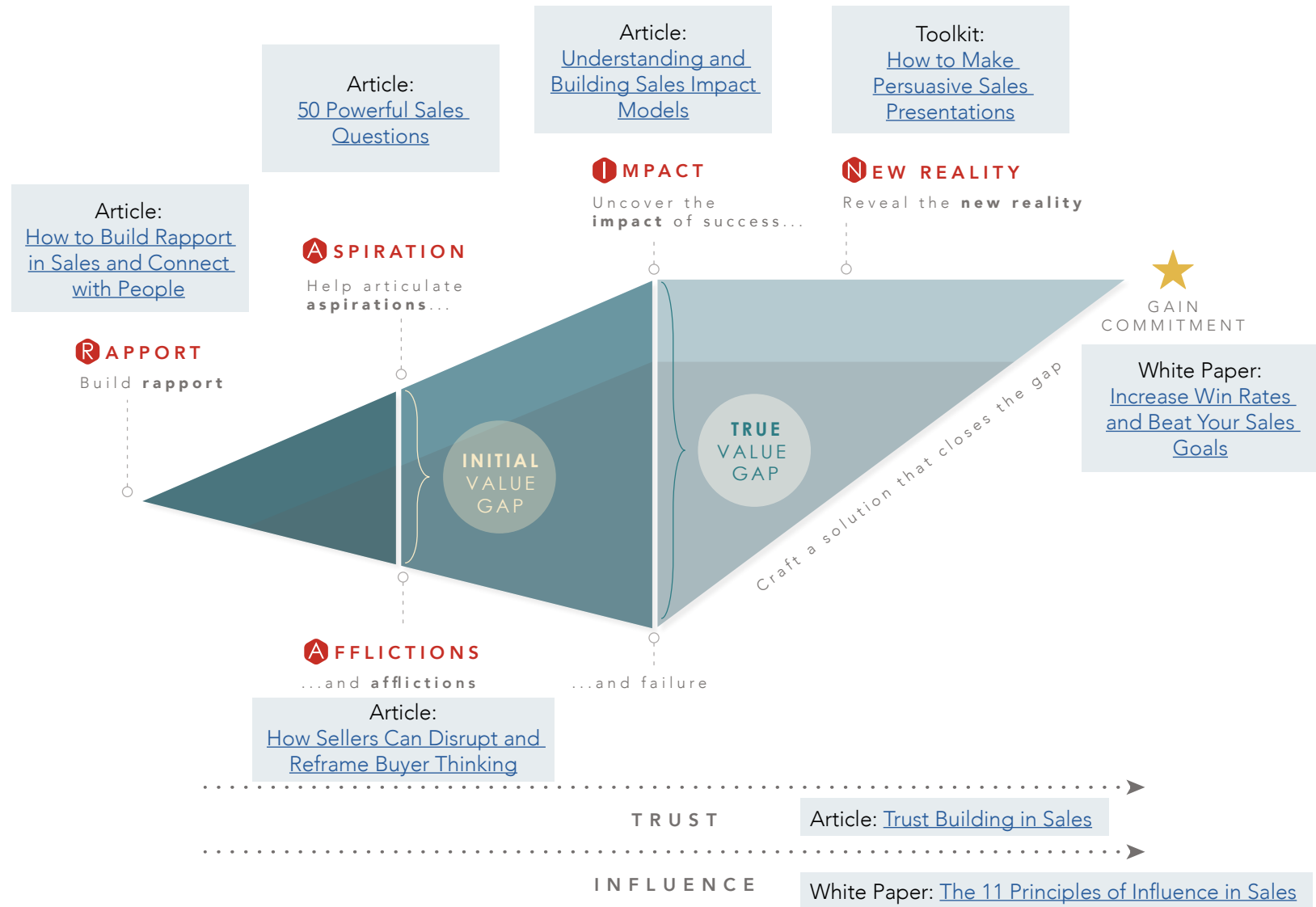


RAIN Is Only the Beginning

The power of the RAIN Selling Conversation Framework is like anything; the more you practice the better you become. If you remember what RAIN stands for, you can apply it in your next sales conversation and see a difference right away.

But if you're really looking to supercharge your results, the RAIN acronym is only the beginning.

Click on the resources to the right to dive deeper into each component of the RAIN Selling Conversation Framework.



Foundations of Consultative Selling

Lead Masterful Sales Conversations with Consultative Selling Skills

Sales are won and lost based on the conversations your sellers have with buyers. Too often, sellers make mistakes—common mistakes that end up losing them the sale.

Our RAIN Selling: Foundations of Consultative Selling training program teaches your team a proven process for leading masterful sales conversations from “hello” to “let’s go.”

This program introduces the strategies and tactics that are the foundation of successful selling, and the key selling skills your team needs to become top performers.

With a training library composed of over 85 learning modules, we work with you to quickly design custom curricula with the content your team needs to lead masterful sales conversations.

Foundations of Consultative Selling modules include:

- Introduction to Consultative Selling
- Leading a Thorough Needs Discovery
- Building Rapport
- Making the Impact and ROI Case Powerfully
- Crafting a Value Proposition Positioning Statement
- Overcoming Objections
- Mini-Stories That Sell
- New Reality and The Buyer Change Blueprint
- Communicating with Different Personalities
- Keys to Qualifying the Sale
- 11 Keys to Influence and Persuasion in Sales
- Strategies to Build Trust in Selling
- Mastering the Art of Sales Collaboration
- Delivering Compelling Sales Presentations
- Value Through the Eyes of the Buyer

[Click here to request a complimentary consultation](#) →



RAIN Group Delivers World-Class Sales Training

- Modular, multi-modal, and purpose-built for the **modern learner**.
- Unique approach to driving **behavior change** through a process we call Execution Assurance.
- Focused on driving the **business results** important to you.
- A **transformational experience** that ensures the development, adoption, and implementation of new skills.
- Action-oriented **coaching** prepares sellers for real situations and provides direct feedback.

About RAIN Group

Drive Transformational Change through Award-Winning Sales Training

We help organizations:

- Enhance sales capability with award-winning sales training
- Design and execute strategic account management initiatives
- Increase effectiveness of sales management and coaching

Best IP: We study buying and selling relentlessly through the RAIN Group Center for Sales Research. Our research and field work allows us to create industry-leading intellectual property to help our clients achieve the greatest success.

Best Education System: We use the best education approaches, methods, and technologies to make training work, stick, and transfer to the job.

Best Results: We make it our mission to drive value and achieve the highest client satisfaction through excellence in quality and producing transformational results for our clients.



raingroup.com | info@raingroup.com | 1-508-405-0438

