

# Qualifying the Prospect: Pick Winnable Battles

RICK PAGE, Founder and CEO, The Complex Sale



# Qualifying the Prospect: Pick Winnable Battles

RICK PAGE  
Founder and CEO, The Complex Sale, Inc.



This book, based on excerpts from Rick Page's acclaimed best-selling book, *Hope Is Not A Strategy: The 6 Keys to Winning the Complex Sale*, provides you with insights on how to better qualify prospects and pick the battles you can win. Rick is the CEO of The Complex Sale, Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia.

If you would like to learn more about how The Complex Sale can help you win the sales you can't afford to lose, contact us today at [info@complexsale.com](mailto:info@complexsale.com) or call us at 770-360-9299.

.....  
Copyright © 2012 by The Complex Sale, Inc.  
All rights reserved.

The Complex Sale, Inc.  
3655 North Point Parkway  
Suite 100  
Alpharetta, Georgia 30005  
770-360-9299 tel  
770-360-9298 fax  
[info@complexsale.com](mailto:info@complexsale.com)

## Qualifying the Prospect

One of the keys to success in business development is picking winnable battles.

But how you qualify a prospect depends on how many opportunities you have and how many resources you have available. The salesperson who has a full pipeline and more prospects than he or she can pursue qualifies in a much different manner than a salesperson at a lesser-known company or new territory just trying to get in the game. Consequently, there is no one mathematical process for qualifying prospects.

The key is to quickly decide:

- Is this good business for anyone?
- Is this a winnable opportunity for us?
- How does it compare to the rest of my opportunities?

## Qualification is Relative

In addition to assessing your chances of winning, other qualification questions should include:

- How does this opportunity compare with the rest of my opportunities?
- What resources would it require?

The answer is unique and different to every company and will vary from territory to territory.

The new account manager with nothing going on works on opportunities that others would walk away from. With a busy pipeline, veterans prefer to win or lose early.

Moreover, since each person's territory and pipeline are quite different, what is qualified for one rep may not be the best use of team-selling resources for the region or the firm as a whole.

## Qualifying Versus a Positive Mental Attitude

One of the obstacles of qualifying is also one of the essentials for selling: a positive mental attitude.

It is what enables a salesperson to start with a blank piece of paper and produce million-dollar quotas. It is what enables hunters to overcome obstacles and turn defeats into victories.

Look at your experience unemotionally and you'll see that the number of times miracle turnarounds happen compared to the number of times you actually pour money into losing causes tells us that maybe what is needed is a less emotional process of qualification.

But where is the line between qualification and quitting? Where is the line between a positive mental attitude and the rookie trait of overly optimistic "happy ears?"

A positive mental attitude is essential to selling, but remember:

**Hope is not a strategy.**

## The First Question You Should Ask

The first key qualifying question for anyone should be: Will this business happen for anyone at all? Experience has shown that many evaluations end with no buying activity whatsoever. When evaluations stall or fail to happen at all, one of two things is usually missing:

- There is not a business problem of great enough magnitude or urgency, or
- The project lacks political sponsorship to see it through the maze to completion.

And with no pain or power, this deal is not going to happen in our lifetime.

The second key question becomes: Is this a good opportunity for us? In up to one-fourth of these evaluations, the vendor is already informally selected before the process begins.



## The Buyer's Matrix - Before It Even Begins

There are many political reasons that the customer might want to keep you in the game even when you're not winning and they already know whom they want:

- The client may need to show due diligence.
- They may not legally be allowed to sole source.
- They may need to validate their decision.
- They may need to educate themselves about other issues.
- They may need to create buy-in from a project team by letting them participate in the evaluation.

Make sure you are not the stalking horse in these situations. If you get an unsolicited RFP on your desk and you didn't write it, there is a chance that someone else did. If that's the case, you are merely column B or C in that person's due diligence matrix, but you may not know it until it's too late.



## Is the Money in the Budget?

One of the indicators traditionally used by salespeople to determine the viability of an opportunity is, “Is the money in the budget?” To some salespeople, this is a binary question. No budget, no prospect. But if the offering is strategic enough, budgets may only be an indicator.

Money in the budget indicates that management thought there was a big enough business problem to commit funds for the coming year. The CEO and other chief officers are always planning ahead of budget and can often spend off the current budget.

If there is no money in the budget to solve the business problem, you can do one of two things:

- Get high enough in the organization to someone who can spend money off budget, or
- Sell it this year to get it in the budget for next year.

In either case, it's a longer sales cycle. You'll need to get higher in the organization and the political risks are greater. But that doesn't mean you walk away. The most important emotional and strategic issues are quite often not budgeted.

Also ask yourself, “Who's budget is the money in?”

If the money is in someone's budget who opposes you, you have a problem. Remember the golden rule of budgeting: **The one who has the gold makes the rules.** (Not exactly, but they do have more power.)

Also examine the issue of financial stability. Do they have the ability to pay? Money may be in the budget, but one bad quarter in some industries could stop all capital purchases.

## Intangible Qualifications

There are also strategic and intangible reasons that override a logical analysis as to why you pursue a particular opportunity.

- It may be a brand name customer.
- You may want to penetrate an industry or country.
- You may want to prevent a competitor from getting a toehold.
- You may want to take a marginally profitable opportunity yourself to gain a toehold into the account.

Ask yourself these two key questions:

### 1) Will the business be profitable?

Unfortunately, most salespeople are not measured on profitability they are measured on revenue. Consequently, they don't ask this important question enough because it is not on their agenda.

### 2) Will this business result in a satisfied client?

If not, you may get this piece of business, but inoculate the client and the client's executives from doing business with you again, anywhere. Most salespeople are measured on revenue rather than customer satisfaction and repeat sales. But don't underestimate the personal impact of signing bad business on your reputation with network peers it can be career limiting.



## Buy Another Card?

Account qualification is like playing poker. You put a dollar in the pot and you get one card up, one card down. Initially, you don't know much and the first round of betting is not too expensive maybe just a quarter. As the game proceeds, someone pairs up and suddenly the price of poker goes up. It's going to cost us more to stay in this game, which must be weighed against our odds of winning.

This is the way qualification should be done weighing the resources in time and talent required versus our chances of winning. The earlier and tougher the qualifying is, the more effective it is. Like poker, eventually you will have five cards out and \$10 in the pot, at which time your thinking changes. Instead of focusing on the opportunity, you now think about the investment you have and how you can't let that money go to waste. So, you stay in until the last card, but the last card doesn't cost a quarter or even a dollar. It costs \$20, because there is no end to the betting and no limits.

After a certain amount of investment, the deal is managing you sucking up valuable resources. In hindsight, you wish you had never engaged in the first place. **You must have a process for telling in advance which deals you should get in and which you shouldn't.**

## No Silver Medals in Selling

If you have relative strengths, there is almost no deal you can't win with enough effort. But at what cost and at what risk?

The worst-case scenario is to commit significant resources and finish second. There are no silver medals in selling and, unlike racecar driving, there is not even any lap money for leading the race.

Your qualification process must include at several points a “go,” “no go,” and an option to “buy another card” depending on how expensive that card is.

Qualify out because of any of the following reasons:

- You can't solve their pain well.
- You have no access to power.
- The decision-making process doesn't favor you.
- You don't have the resources for an adequate pursuit.
- You have better opportunities elsewhere.

## About The Complex Sale, Inc.

The Complex Sale, Inc. is a sales methodology and consulting company that helps you win the sales you can't afford to lose - from speeches and tools to training and coaching to total sales force transformation. We help leading companies create pipeline, win opportunities, and dominate accounts in the complex selling environment. Founded in 1994 by Rick Page, author of the sales bestseller *Hope Is Not A Strategy - The 6 Keys to Winning The Complex Sale* and *Make Winning A Habit - 20 Best Practices of the World's Greatest Sales Forces*, The Complex Sale delivers programs are taught by executives who know the environment firsthand. We provide the skills and processes you need to make winning a habit in your organization. For more information, call (770) 360-9299 or visit us online at [www.complexsale.com](http://www.complexsale.com)