

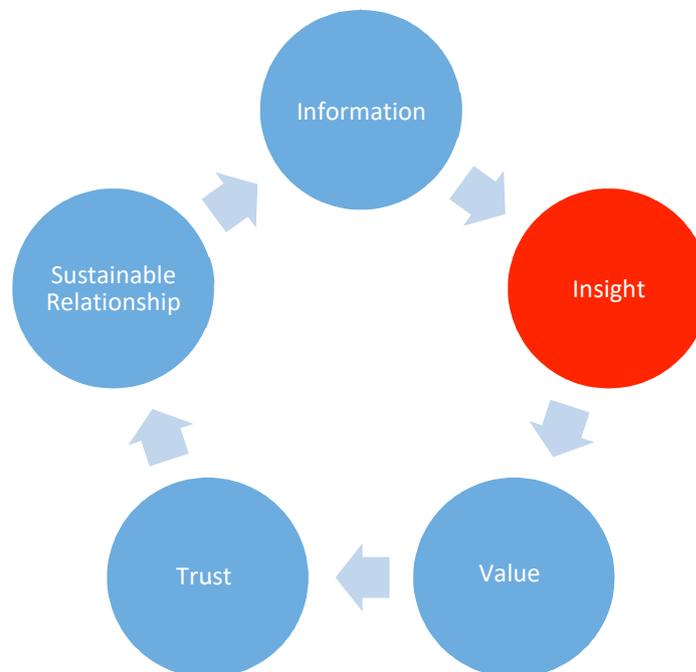
G CIV®: an interviewing approach that leads to competitive advantage

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Gaining “insight” in the organisation of contacts and prospects is undoubtedly the most valuable competence of consultants, account managers and sales people. Acclivus Corporation¹ defines gaining “insight” as “looking beyond the obvious”. This “insight” creates the opportunity for the selling organisation to offer more value than their competitors. This is exactly what will differentiate your organisation and create customer preference as well as customer retention.

The structure below is inspired by the Acclivus model. Its genius lies in its simplicity.



We can see that there is a logical relationship between the information we have about our customer, the differentiating insights we develop and the value we can offer our customer. This proves that it is no longer sufficient to just listen to your customers to make the difference. Hence, the listening capabilities of your organisation make the first and extremely important step in gaining “insight”.

Old school sales training would teach people the questions to ask. As such, it often happened that I inquired with sales people what *asking questions* meant to them. The answer was often limited to just: “It is important to ask open questions”.

My point of view is this: do not focus on the question but focus on the information you want to collect about your customer or prospect.

¹ www.acclivus.com
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A lot of information is available via internet, often on the company web site or even on news sites. Financial information can be found on specialised sites. A professional salesman should spend sufficient time looking up this information before even meeting the customer. This search for information can also be done by your competitors. Besides the possibility to better prepare yourself than the competition, it does **not** give you any competitive advantage.

This competitive advantage is not achieved unless you find out more in-depth information about your customers than your competitors. Therefore, the role of salesmen, account managers and consultants is crucial (even critical) in this process of collecting information. Your commercial staff needs to have advanced intelligence skills. These skills entail, besides a correct attitude and a certain intellectual level, a very specific set of communication competences, strategies and tactics. In this paper, we explore a very specific and possibly the most important skill.

Historically, many different theories on selling have been developed. You can find a detailed overview on the blog “history of sales methodologies”². The main points of the early theories consisted of identifying one way or another to recognize the needs of the customer and focus on proving to the customer that you fulfilled all of their needs (Xerox- Professional Selling Skills, 1972).

Then, in 1988, Neil Racham introduced SPIN-selling, a methodology that focuses on identifying the problems of the customer (as opposed to their needs) and exploring, together with the customer, the implications of these problems. Thus, the methodology also looks at the customer’s need to solve this problem.

When I started training for Acclivus corporation, I gained some new insights that offer another outlook on sales. Acclivus developed a questioning approach that goes beyond the customer’s problem, namely: what is the underlying reason to encounter a problem of any kind? The answer to that question is simple: customers have goals they want to reach and each and every single thing that prevents them from achieving that goal forms a problem or a challenge.

For instance: a customer may want to grow. This is a goal. There may be a multitude of obstacles: lacking capital, lacking management capacity, lacking the right knowhow or market knowledge, lacking production capacity, IT capacity, etc. Several of these obstacles can also occur at the same time.

Possibly, growing is not the customer’s only goal. He may want to grow *profitably*. He may want to achieve a higher market share or increase their shareholder value. It is very likely that when a salesman is called in, the customer only addresses one of their problems and is looking for a particular solution to one specific problem. Even more likely, the customer may have already identified a solution, and is just looking for the cheapest offer.

If that is what the customer wants, it should of course be respected. But where does this leave you, as a selling organisation? There is a high risk of ending up in a price discussion where, in the best case, you can discuss the total cost of ownership of your products and service.

Therefore, a salesperson needs to be able to steer a conversation in such a way that he is capable of identifying the real goals of the organisation’s customers and prospects. Goals may refer to goals at a corporate, divisional or even personal level. In all cases, a multitude of goals can be identified.

Only if you know these goals can you understand which problems or challenges the customer or prospect perceives. Perception is the right word here because problems are often *perceived*, but are

² <https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/history-of-sales-methodologies>.
www.petercoeckelbergh.be

therefore not necessarily existent. Oftentimes customers have overlooked problems, or the solution to the problem has become a goal in and of itself. Discussing this problem/goal confusion is often very interesting to the customer as they can gain new insights. These insights may be very valuable to the customer.

Neil Rackham inspired us to link challenges and problems to implications: the bigger the implications of a specific problem, the more value you can offer your customer. That is if you solve the problem, of course. Again, often the implication of a problem may get mixed up with the underlying problem. Here too, attempts from salespeople to understand the implications of specific problems can lead to mutually beneficial insight.

Finally, the next level the commercial team needs to achieve is creating *value* for the customer. This value might take on different aspects. Of course, your service and products as a selling organisation are a very important value contributor. However, your organisation can offer value in many different ways.

In our paper “Selling is facilitating the customer buying process”, we show how the GCIV® approach can be applied at very different moments in the buying process. The paper also demonstrates how your company may offer value long before you know which product or service you will offer your customer.

Another way of defining selling is “facilitating that a customer achieves his goals”. In the paper mentioned above we explain why and how you should evaluate, with your customer, to which degree they were able to reach their goals. Possibly, the customer has new goals or has more or less modified his goals. New problems might have arisen, which generate new opportunities to create value for your customer.

Now, you no doubt ask yourself how you can implement the GCIV® method successfully. Many may think that it is too complicated. While it is certainly correct that the implementation will not be an automatic process, it is not complicated at all. If the commercial staff of the organisation understands the power of the GCIV® approach, they will start thinking differently about their customers, and it is this different thinking that will eventually lead to changes in behaviour.

My biggest success in implementing the approach was through practice-based workshops, in which we applied the approach on real cases. The participants developed communication strategies themselves to get the GCIV® from their customer. In some cases, our aim was to map out Key Account Management. It must be added that the workshops, in order to achieve the optimal effect, require intensive coaching by sales management. Frequent workshops have also shown to be the most efficient. However, no matter which method was used, the results were always successful and really changed the relationship between the participants and their customers. For more information:

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