The Little Things

How small sales skills shape
big buying decisions.

By Nate Nasralla

Great things are but a series of
small things brought together.

- van Gogh

If you like this book preview, then you'll love checking out:

> ***Nate's Blog***
> *The latest frameworks, writing, and AI skills.*

> ***Selling With***
> *The art of selling with champions to shape internal buying conversations.*

> ***Brief & Brilliant***
> *How to simplify complex deals and sell through the chaos of modern life.*

The Little Things

Copyright © 2026 by Nate Nasralla.
All rights reserved.

Please, do the right thing. If you'd like to use quotes from this content in articles, reviews, blogs, or journals, just cite the book.

Context

This book builds on top of my two prior works:

> ***Selling With***
> *The art of selling with champions to shape internal buying conversations.*

> ***Brief & Brilliant***
> *How to simplify complex deals and sell through the chaos of modern life.*

But you don't have to read these two before starting *The Little Things*. Because this book is more like going to a concert: anyone can go and have a blast, even if they've never heard the artist. Then, if they like the concert, they can stream them on Spotify after (or in this case, Audible). And of course, if you'd heard that artist play a few times before the concert, you'll have an even richer experience.

That's also my intention here: to not only curate a set of the greatest hits, but to *move* you. Because unlike listening to music in your headphones, if you go to a live concert and you're *not* moving and dancing and *experiencing* the sound, you're doing it wrong.

So my hope for you this time around is that you experience this book, live, in your day-to-day work as you read. (You'll see what I mean, if you keep reading.)

Contents

Prologue: Slope, not intercept 6

1. Step by little step 12

2. Sailing through your next quarter 17

3. Skills versus SKILLs 22

4. What's the point? 27

5. How to map a business model 44

6. Practicing by analogy 56

Coming soon:

7. Splitting the future two ways

8. Working up and down the pyramid

9. Naming, framing and positioning basics

10. Finding tasty little nuggets

11. How to keep someone's attention

12. Asking "hard things in a soft way"

13. Winning competitive deals with the problem, not product

14. How to co-create the business case buyers

15. Mapping the “shadow org chart” to find influence

16. Writing through, not to your champions

17. Ghostwriting for executives

18. The Gospel: turn skeptics into believers

19. Unsticking stalled deals with genuine urgency

20. Working backwards

21. Expansion: taking a second bite of the apple

Prologue: Slope, not intercept

"So, how do you think that went?"

I wanted to see what Kora thought, before letting her down.

She'd been interviewing for our Account Executive role, and clearly, she wanted it. She'd shown up to our first interview with that nervous-yet-sincere energy that comes from wanting something, but not wanting to let the fact you want it get in the way of actually getting it.

"Well... not great." She said with the kind of laugh that ends in a frown instead of a smile.

Which I was slightly relieved by. Delivering hard feedback is just a little bit easier when someone's expecting it, and our entire interview process is built around live feedback.

If someone moves past our first round, they move to a set of exercises: first, they get some light background and a few call transcripts from a past sales cycle with one of our actual customers. Which they use to build a point of view on how our product would help. Then, they pressure test that point of view in a 10-minute mock discovery call (I play the customer). Finally, they package it all up into a bite-sized

demo that's tailored around what they learned in "discovery."

Stringing together a series of skills, in what ends up looking more like a try out than a traditional interview.

Once they're done, we'll break down feedback on what worked, what didn't, and what they'd change to get a different outcome. Which lets me see how self-aware a candidate is, and how willing they are to say, "Hey yeah, I've still got some stuff to learn, and my ego's okay with that."

Plus, I have a rule about our process: every candidate leaves the interview process better than they started. By getting them specific, highly-practical feedback they can use to win, wherever they end up working.

"I was just so rigid this whole time," Kora said after a few seconds of silence.

"Like I was *too* prepared," she continued. "I didn't trust myself enough to set aside what I'd rehearsed, and just go with it as the conversation changed."

"Which is what's making me most nervous about your fit here," I nodded.

I was hiring for our 'Mid-Enterprise' role: a blended book of business with both fast-moving, inbound deals with mid-market companies, which forces reps to work on the fly. While also balancing a shortlist of larger, more complex enterprise accounts and larger contract values.

"Things change fast in this type of role and segment, and your calendar's not going to have much white space for long prep sessions."

I waited, to see if I needed to speak the next line out loud, or if she'd connect the dots on her own.

But she didn't.

So I said, "I'm sorry Kora, but I just don't think this role is right for you."

Man, I thought, sitting quietly for a minute before opening up my next Zoom call.

I really wanted that to work.

Later that night, I was talking to my wife. Slicing peppers, searing steak, and lamenting how hard hiring is.

"I really wanted this one seller, Kora, to show up today. I mean, it's obvious she's a good human, but the fit just wasn't there," I told her.

"She might surprise you," my ever-wise wife commented in passing.

Maybe.

A few days later, I got an email.

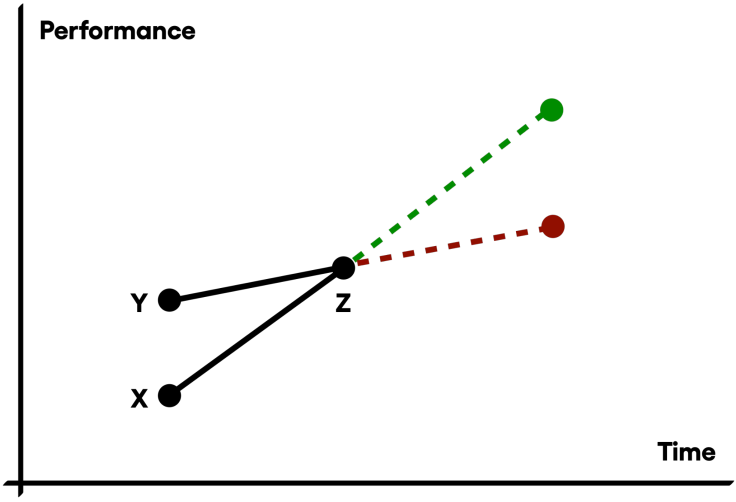
> *From: Kora*
> *To: Me*
>
> *Subject: Me again.*
>
> *I thought Kevin would be a good fit prospect, so I just gave him a quick demo with the sandbox account you set up for our last interview.*
>
> *If you skip to minute 11 in this recording, you'll see what I changed since our last conversation.*
>
> *Once you watch, think it's worth a do over?*

I smiled.

Have you ever heard the saying, *Slope, not intercept*?

Intercept refers to someone's position today. *Point X, vs. Point Y.* Meanwhile, slope tells you how rapidly their position changes over time.

Or in this case, their level of performance:



Blockbuster was once the source of every good 1990s Friday night. Most every American suburb had one, and its rental volume combined with late fees made its stock a Wall Street favorite. In 2002, its stock price soared from $10 to over $27 per share.

Meanwhile, Netflix traded for roughly $0.10 per share. Instead of running physical stores, they mailed you DVDs for one flat monthly cost, and zero late fees.

Blockbuster was high-intercept. But obviously, since you know how this one played out, Netflix was high-slope. So the idea is that to value an "asset," you've got to look at its trend over time, not where it's at today.

When I watched Kora's call recording, it was like she'd sent me someone else's video. During our interview, she clung to her original script like it was a life preserver. But in this recording, she rode the waves of Kevin's questions, using

his existing beliefs as momentum, instead of trying to paddle upstream against the conversation.

Clearly, I'd missed something in our first interview.

(Sidenote; now, I structure our hiring exercises in two parts: after giving a candidate feedback, they'll run the exercise a second time, so we can measure how they adapt and we can plot the "slope" between their two scenarios.)

I emailed Kora back, *This is great, how's tomorrow morning work to catch up?*

Two quarters later, she led the team at 130% of her quota.

Slope, as it turns out, is something you can build.

1. Step by little step

The question that Kora's story should bring to your mind is:

*Well how do you **create** "slope" as a rep? What separates high-slope sellers from everyone else?*

The answer to that question is worth, well, a whole lot.

I don't think I need to cite any "market data" here for you. Just go look at your own team's dashboard, and the gap between the small handful of reps on the top, and everyone else. That's how much revenue (and commission) it's worth.

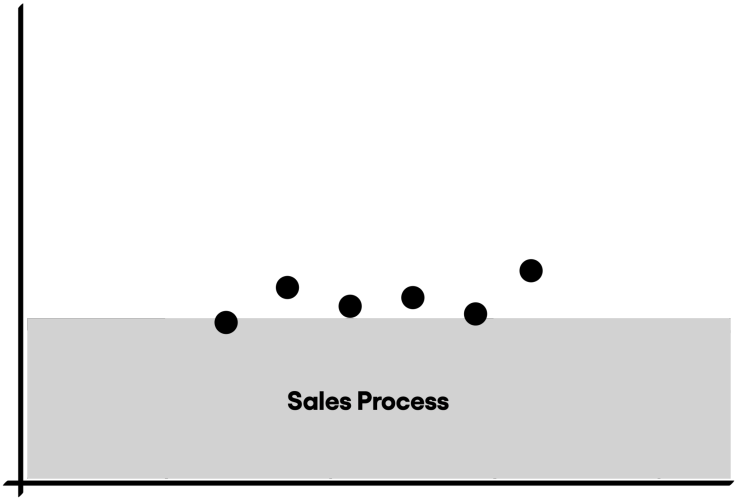
So, I've thought about this question a lot too.

And I'll start with what does *not* create slope in a seller's career: a well-defined sales process, a strong tech stack, hours spent scrolling LinkedIn, or consuming more and more sales knowledge.

For example, a sales process simply sets the *floor* to make sure the median seller's performance doesn't fall below it. By outlining the minimum steps required to avoid failing, based on the *average* buying journey.[1]

---

[1] That said, sometimes we make the sales process so overly-complex and detached from the buyer's decision process that it ends up pushing the floor down, not up. But that's another topic, which I covered in my last two books.



Similarly, a strong tech stack just multiplies someone's existing "degrees of slope," to help them accelerate along the trajectory they're already on. So it does nothing for someone whose slope is 0°. Multiply anything by zero and you get... zero.

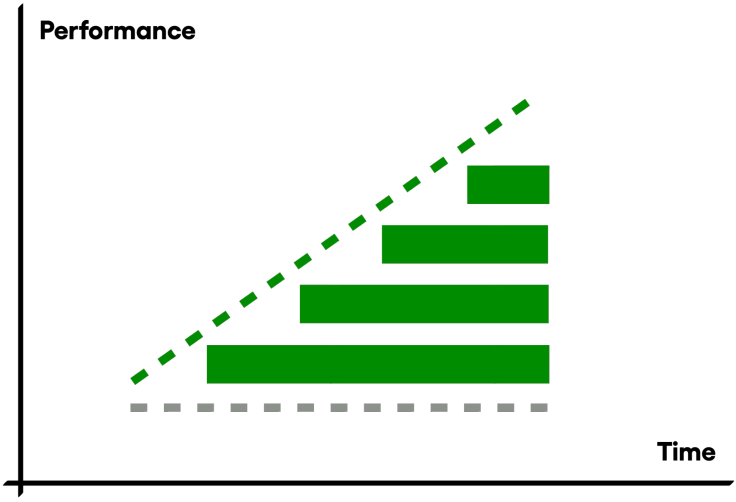
Or take knowledge: posts, blogs, podcasts, webinars and heck, even books. It's all static. But when we're talking about measuring slope, there's forward motion involved by definition, because slope is a ratio of change:

How high will you rise, with each step forward?

Which means accumulating knowledge to build the world's largest mental library won't separate you. Kora was not the only candidate I said "no" to. I gave everyone equally candid and detailed feedback on where I thought their gaps were, and why those gaps were too big for me to bet on.

But she was the one I ended up hiring. Because she converted knowledge of her gaps, into a new skill, which changed her outcome.

So skills create slope, *and the more skills you can stack on top of each other, the greater your slope.*



What's key here is that skills determine your performance, but they're not the same as results. Results reset every month and quarter. Whereas skills are sticky, so you can build on them over time. They keep paying dividends, far into the future.

Which also means you don't need to work on every skill gap, all at once. Kora didn't.

Instead, she picked one little skill that would set up other skills, practiced it, and put herself in a position to go work on the next: she went from listening for the answers she needed to hear because it matched her script, to adapting her point of view based on what she heard. Which meant she was then in a position to demo, discover, and drive next steps in a different way, later in the conversation.

So while it may seem like there are a million things to learn and change and fix, especially if you're selling in a complex, enterprise-level sales role, the process is always the same:

1. Find one little gap.
2. Fill the gap with a new skill.
3. Move on to the next.

At first, it won't feel like anything is changing. Every little step forward and level up won't be visible on its own. But eventually, little things become big things and are visible in the aggregate.

And I know, I know.

I'm walking a thin line now.

Pick a sales influencer at random, read their LinkedIn feed, and you'll probably get some plain vanilla advice about "skill stacking," somewhere in between the 5am cold plunges, inbox zero, consuming your body weight in protein grams, and ending every meeting with a gratitude ritual.

Which is why every chapter in this book is going to lay out the *work I'm going to ask you to do*.

In your existing day job, with the active deals in your pipeline today.

And if you *actually do* what's in the rest of this book, and don't see a change in your results, or your ability to repeat your results, I'll pay for your Netflix subscription this year. Promise.

But before you get to the work, humor me through two more ideas. They're the next two short chapters, and then we start.

2. Sailing through your next quarter

I rack up a lot of miles in the first quarter of the year, running keynotes, workshops, and sales kickoffs all over the world.

It's exhilarating, and exhausting. So at the end of the travel season, my wife gets to pick one place she wants to go as a family, and we spend all those miles.

The last few years, that's been the Hawaiian islands: Maui, Kauai, Oahu, and the Big Island. Which are long flights from Denver when you're traveling with a toddler, who's still figuring out that *I'm bored* doesn't have to mean *I should yell very loudly right now.*

Naturally, my solution was the smash Disney hit, *Moana*, and time-tested form of airline parenting: the iPad.

As my daughter watched Moana learning to sail on repeat, for hours in a row, I got a little curious about the history of wayfinding.

How does someone *become* a wayfinder, and not just learn to sail?

Because wayfinding and sailing are in fact very different things. Sailing, these days, often comes down to acquiring

the best technology: high-end instruments for navigation, satellite communication, the works.

But wayfinding is about *judgment* that doesn't rely on tech.

For example, even on an overcast night with no visible stars to steer by, a wayfinder can physically feel the motion of their canoe and tell one ocean swell from another. They'll notice how the waves bend or reflect off a hidden island, and combined with other signs of the local oceanscape (like certain seabirds that fly back to land at night, after searching for certain species of fish), they can literally map the direction of islands they can't see, and adjust their heading. Lots of little things come together, to guide long and complex journeys that can cover thousands of miles.

It's incredible.

And it's a skill that nearly died, then came back to life, fairly recently.

By the 1970s the art was nearly extinct. It had been centuries since anyone in Hawai‘i crossed the open ocean without instruments. So a group of Hawaiians built a traditional voyaging canoe, the Hōkūle‘a, and set a goal to sail 2,500 miles to Tahiti with no compass or GPS. But before they did, they had one big problem: nobody left in Hawai‘i still knew how to navigate that way.

So they found the last of a dying line elsewhere: Mau Piailug, a master navigator from a tiny island in Micronesia, who trained in wayfinding since childhood. He agreed to

guide a canoe full of strangers across the Pacific by feel. On a starless night, he could lie down in the canoe and tell you which way it was pointed from the rhythm of the boat beneath him.

When a young Hawaiian, Nainoa Thompson, first went to Mau and asked him to teach them, Mau's answer was more or less*:*

I can teach you to find land, but I can't teach you the magic.

Which is the difference between two different kinds of skills:

An *explicit* skill is the part you can write down and hand to someone. The star positions, names of the swells, or which birds fly out at dawn. You could put all of it in a book, or a SKILL file, or memorize and recite it.

But a *tacit* skill is the magic. It's *feeling* the swell shift under the hull and knowing, without being able to say quite how, that there's land off to your left. You can't download it. You can't read your way to it. You only get it by doing that thing, over and over, next to someone who already can, until one day the ocean starts talking to you too.

If you sell for a living, this should start to sound familiar.

Tacit knowledge is, in fact, a seller's most valuable asset. It's *not* an abstract idea, like some picture of a monk meditating on a mountaintop. Think about it this way: a company will capitalize a patent or a brand, and put it right on the balance sheet as an asset. It's not tangible, but it is

valuable, and it generates future value. But the gut-feel a top rep uses to make a different call than everyone else? That never shows up in an accountant's spreadsheet. But it does generate revenue.

Here's an example: let's say a high performer walks out of an exec-level meeting, and the agreed next step is to loop in the customer's procurement team. Now, let's say that exact same next step happens on a second deal:

- Deal #1: the procurement intro hits your inbox at 8:30pm that same night, on a Friday.

- Deal #2: the intro lands the following Wednesday, at 10am.

Those are WILDLY different signals on how badly this customer wants to get moving. A top rep will separate the two scenarios in their mind, even if the meeting summary reads the same way, and play out their next moves in those two deals completely differently as well: how hard to hold the line on price, how bold to get on term length and commitments, etc. Nobody wrote it down for them, and it's not in the playbook, but they just know what to do because they've felt that "swell" dozens of times before.

Here's another: your champion has spent weeks saying "when we roll this out." Then, on one call, it quietly turns into an "if." One word that a green rep likely doesn't even hear, but a *great* rep will feel, days or weeks before it ever shows up as a slipped commit in the CRM, and they'll go to work rebuilding consensus before it stalls.

That's the tacit skill. Feeling the swell before the instruments catch up.

And it matters more and more, the bigger your deals get, because no two enterprise deals are sailing in the same ocean. Downmarket, deals are fairly linear, so the sales process works like a GPS: turn-by-turn directions through qualify, demo, propose, closed-won, as long as you don't go too far off-route. But upmarket, the GPS loses signal, like driving through a tunnel. There's no explicit instruction for, "Their CTO went off camera 5 minutes into the call, then asked one question at minute 28, and left before we could finish the answer."

That's the moment you stop following directions, and start wayfinding. (Assuming you've first learned the magic.)

3. Skills versus SKILLs

This idea of wayfinding raises a question:

If tacit skills come from doing the work beside someone who already has those skills, then, most of us are in trouble, right? I mean, most sellers won't get to learn under a "Mau" day in, day out. So what then?

Well, there is a new path available for you. A type of "build your own" apprenticeship.

More and more, our work life is being shaped by changes in AI tech. And the pace of how AI is changing knowledge work, specifically, is only getting faster. (Just look at what we call the files we feed AI models: "SKILLs.")

Most tech media, however, plays to the extremes: AI is either a savior, or destroyer. It's either replacing human sellers, or making a sales team "10X" productive.

While I do think AI is fundamentally reshaping how we work, I also believe there's a cost to overindexing on AI.

Research like the MIT Media Lab's *Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt When Using an AI Assistant* puts a name to something you've probably felt: brain rot. When we *over-rely* on AI, we become *de-skilled*.

With lower neural activity, worse memory, and cognitive muscles that atrophy. Like abs after winter break.

This last part may sound slightly hypocritical, like:

Nate, aren't you the guy who's spent years building an AI company for sales teams? Why would you say that?

I am.[2]

Which is exactly why I know the difference between the AI that builds you up, and the AI that hollows you out.

You see, most people think there are only two options:

Option one is to wave the whole AI thing off. Keep selling the way you always have, stay artisanal, and let everyone else mess around with the robots. The problem is you leave a whole lot of leverage on the table, and the reps who use tech well will simply out-run you as quotas go up over time.

Option two is to hand it the wheel. Let it plan the account, draft the work, etc. It feels incredible for about a quarter, because your intercept jumps overnight. But you've stopped doing the reps yourself, so your slope flattens out to zero, and you slowly become an average of whatever the model spits out. That's brain rot.

---

[2] See Part 1 to my book *Brief & Brilliant* on how we "co-evolve" with our tools, and why I write books, speak and advise, while building tech at the same.

There's a third way, though. It's both the reason for, and structure of, the rest of this book:

Using your tech the way Nainoa worked with Mau: not to make the voyage for you, but to help you feel the water and develop *judgment* in your own “quasi-apprenticeship.”

To run you through more reps, with feedback after each one, until a sales skill becomes something you can do on a call without thinking twice about it. Like what Kora did when she took my feedback, practiced, ran the exercise again with another prospect, then leveled up into a new role.

So from here, every skill we break down has a specific exercise for you to practice, and will highlight where and when to reach for AI. And, just as often, where *not* to.

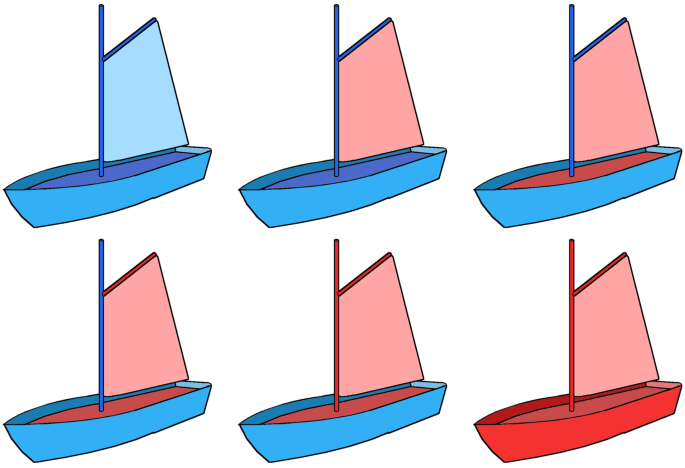
Call it a balance between skills, and SKILLs.

Before we start the work, there’s a final idea on sailing through your next quarter to cover: the Ship of Theseus.

In Greek mythology, Theseus was a king who sailed to the island of Crete to rescue the children of Athens, then sailed home with them victorious. Every year after, the Athenians honored his legend by sailing the same ship from the story. But over time, its wooden planks started to rot, and had to be replaced one by one. Which raised a question:

If you replace every single board on a ship, one at a time, is it still the same ship?

Or, with a slight twist: if you replace how you sell, one skill at a time, who do you become?



The keyword to pull out there is *replace*.

Because learning something new almost always requires unlearning something else. Ripping out a board that's part of you today, and trashing it, to make room for the new one.

So if the work that follows makes you a little uncomfortable, that's good.

It's how you'll know you're doing it right.

Part 1:
Something to say

4. What's the point?

We touched down in Washington D.C. an hour late.

No bagel and americano for me today, I thought. I'd have to skip my typical cafe order on the corner of Connecticut and M, and hustle right up to the conference room in time for Tuesday's leadership team meeting.

My first company had been acquired earlier that year, and I'd started leading the push upmarket by building out our enterprise division. Our leadership team was all based in D.C., and I lived in Chicago, which meant I was on a flight to the Capital most weeks.

You're good, Bill canceled. See email.

Brian, my friend and former co-founder, had texted me. He was heading up marketing, and was already in D.C. My WiFi was out on the flight that morning, so I wasn't sure what he was talking about. I swiped over to my email:

> *No points to raise? No point in meeting.*
>
> *-Bill*

Bill was our CEO. A former consultant and ultrarunner, he had the energy of someone half his age and was twice as

driven. In a way that others around him couldn't help but absorb it through some type of corporate osmosis.

Typically, the point of this particular meeting was for each business unit head to share something specific we thought all the others needed to know—because it'd overlap with and impact their role—but, they likely didn't know, because only we could have seen it from our point of view in the business (based on our respective roles in product, customer success, finance, marketing, etc.). Everyone was on the hook to submit at least one point to the shared agenda before the meeting, but this week, most hadn't.

I made it to the office at 10:55 a.m., five minutes before our usual 11:00 a.m. start time. I dropped my backpack at a desk, and walked back to the room, curious if I'd see people starting to filter into the room anyway.

Empty.

I guess Bill's serious.

Bill was intense, but he wasn't an outlier. Most prospects and customers you're meeting with are often thinking the exact same thing:

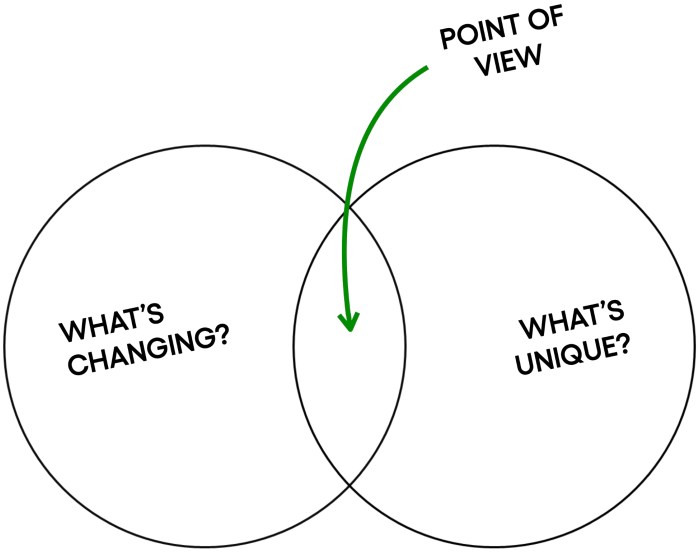
What's the point here?

That's why it's on us to start every external meeting with a sharp point of view.

But giving that advice to a seller often sounds like the hum of traffic to a city dweller: so constant, it doesn't even register anymore. It's something sales leaders *love* to say all the time, without actually showing you how to do it. So here's how to do it.

First, let's define what a point of view is: *something you know, that your customer doesn't, but needs to.* Because when they do, they'll likely change how they act, and in fact, they'd be willing to pay you for the insight.

Which makes a point of view the overlap between, (1) *what's changing* in their world, and (2) what you can *uniquely say* based on yours.



There's this saying, *nothing changes until something changes,* and it sounds pretty useless when you first hear it. But it's actually a profound part of sales success; tapping into the momentum that's created by some type of change that *already exists inside a company* is the difference between paddling upstream and spending a crazy amount of effort for little to no progress, or riding a wave and having a blast.

You see, buying executives (the ones who can actually say "yes" to your deal) operate by building up a mental library of experiences and patterns throughout their career, which let them quickly breakdown:

1. What type of situation is this?
2. What works in situations like this?
3. What next action puts us on that path?

It's serial pattern-matching based on a "been there, done that" ability. But when an executive's facing a high-stakes change in their business, they either:

1. Don't have enough insight to frame up what, exactly, is changing.

2. Or they do know the nature of the change, but it's uncharted territory, so they're looking around to see how others are reacting, before moving forward.

These are the two times when an executive's going to be most receptive to, and even craving, an outsider's guidance, because their internal compass is starting to break down.

And when I use the word *change*, I don't mean change as in, "we're switching our expense reimbursement platform." I mean the type of change that looks more like a rogue wave in the market, that's about to slam into the side of the ship they're sailing, or, a major leak that's sprung in their business model.

Here's an example.

For decades, IKEA was famous for its massive warehouse stores. The ones where you fuel up on Swedish meatballs near the entrance, to make sure you've got enough calories to last for hours trapped inside a seemingly eternal maze of Söderhamn sofas and sidetables.

But recently, IKEA saw a wave building on the horizon.

The next generation of shoppers is far more likely to live in dense urban areas, with close to zero interest in wandering around the blue and yellow maze before wrestling their flat-packed furniture onto a train home.

So, IKEA started building a different kind of store:

"Planning Studios" built right in the city center, starting on Manhattan's Upper East Side. They're around 8,000 square feet, so, roughly the size of a returns desk in a normal IKEA. You don't carry anything out, instead you're paired with a personal interior designer who plans out the room of your budget dreams. Including the most lucrative of them all: your kitchen. You leave with a style guide, architecture diagram and the boxes show up at your doorstep a week or so later.

Same company, but the experience became personal, local, and high-touch, on purpose, because that's what the next generation of shoppers wanted, and IKEA moved before the wave fully crashed into them.

Now let's say IKEA was one of your accounts.

Back when this shift was still forming, your job *wouldn't* have been to walk in and pitch your product: it would've been to see the wave, before their response was fully set in motion, and bring them your point of view. Which starts by naming that change, saying something like:

> *The shopper who built your business is aging out, and the one replacing them will never set foot in a big box store. Which means the real estate footprint that's been your greatest asset is becoming your biggest liability.*

But, this isn't a true point of view until we introduce something unique, that only we can say, that overlaps that change.

Remember the meeting agenda from earlier?

"I know _____, and you need to know that too, because it's going to change how you respond to _____."

So let's continue:

When you walk through a 300,000-square-foot IKEA warehouse, the genius isn't the price tags. It's that you're standing inside 40 different furnished rooms. You don't have to *imagine* the Söderhamn sofa in a living room,

because you're sitting in one. The showroom did the “imagining” for you.

But when you take that away by putting the shopper in a design studio on Third Avenue, or while scrolling their phone at midnight, you’re forcing their brain to do the hard work. They're staring at a product page doing math in their head.

Will it fit? Will it clash with the rug? Is it too big for the wall by the window?

Most people are terrible at this, so they’ll do the safe thing, which is nothing. Their cart sits full while they close the tab, and they keep scrolling Instagram for more “inspiration.”

IKEA had a name for this: *the imagination gap.* The distance between what a customer can picture, and what they'd actually buy *if they could just see it.*

Okay, now, let’s say you sell an augmented reality (AR) platform: a customer snaps a photo of their actual room, your software strips out their old furniture and drops in real, to-scale IKEA pieces, right there on their phone or the designer’s desktop. They can move it, swap the grey for the blue, and buy the one that looks right for *their specific* room.

Putting all those pieces together, here's how you'd open a conversation with IKEA:

> *The shift to a studio store format is a good start to winning back the urban shoppers you've been losing to Wayfair and Amazon.*
>
> *But your big blue boxes used to close the 'imagination gap,' by letting people walk through 40 different staged rooms. Now, that gap is probably showing up in one key number: cart-to-checkout rates.*
>
> *A studio and an online product page can't do that, so even with a designer sitting next to them, your best customers are back to second-guessing a purchase, especially in your highest-value category: kitchens.*
>
> *So before this call, we took your ten best-selling cabinet options, and dropped them into fifty real photos of small Manhattan apartments, the exact shopper your Upper East Side studio was built for.*
>
> *With specific quotes from those potential customers, on how that experience compares to what your shoppers experience today.*

Notice something:

We're not asking for "30 minutes to walk you through the platform." We're showing up with something the customer would pay for: market research, specific to their highest-value product category, in a high-stakes demographic.

Jordan Crawford, who writes *On the Edge* and is a brilliant builder and thinker in go-to-market, puts it this way:

> *I'm always looking to create what I call a "permissionless value prop." Nobody asked me to create it, but I went and found data that suggests a company is privately struggling with the exact problem I know I can solve, and I'll use that to give them one thing they'd* pay me *to receive. Something that's 'independently valuable' to them.*

This is *not* an easy bar to clear, by the way. Because "independently valuable" means a prospect *doesn't need to buy from you to benefit from you.*

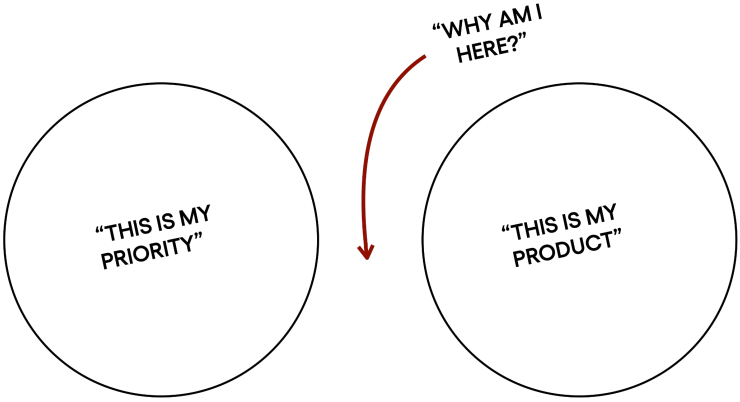
It's the generous process of leaving someone better off, without any promise of a payoff.

But how do I know I've built the right point of view? What if what I say is just... wrong?

In my experience, that's not a bad outcome. Instead, there are only two ways to lose:

One is that you don't actually bring a point of view.

The buying executive walks in, and naturally, is spending 100% of their brainspace thinking about their own priorities. Meanwhile, you're carrying on about your product, and there's zero overlap:



The second is you do create a point of view, but it's so generic, you don't get any reaction. Because a *point* of view needs to be exactly that: pointy. Sharp. Spiky. Something that draws out a strong reaction, one way or the other:

- **Confirmed**. The exec agrees, leans in, and says, *"That's exactly right,"* while thinking, *this was worth more than any other meeting I've had today.*

- **Corrected**. Where they think, *well that's not right, but there's something here*... so instead of writing you off, they give you specific feedback.

That second scenario is what most people mean when they ask, *"What if I get it wrong?"* But if you're corrected with a strong reaction, that means you're now getting into a new level of discovery that you otherwise wouldn't have, because the executive cares enough to engage instead of checking out.

Try This

Now, you know why we need to build a point of view, how to do it, and what a specific example sounds like. So next, we'll put this approach to work with your own deals. Pick one deal in your early-stage pipeline that's stalled, or where you haven't yet earned time with that account's executive.

By the end of this, you'll have a pointy message to either spark a new level of momentum, or, we'll decide you can feel good about qualifying them out of your pipeline; because you did the right work but found there just wasn't enough change in the account to make something happen.

Here's how we'll go about it:

1. Stack rank what's changing inside a target account.
2. Give away something specific to guide a response.
3. Combine 1 and 2 using your customer's own words.
4. Do it again for two more accounts, then compare.
5. Confirm or correct your point of view with feedback.

Starting with step one:

1. Stack rank what's changing inside the account.

First, create a shortlist of what's shifting inside and around your target account. To give you something to work with, put your favorite robot to work by asking it:

> I'm building a point of view for [Company]: help me find a change worth building it around.
>
> I am NOT looking for small, operational changes like a new tool, a reorg, or a routine exec hire. I'm looking for a fundamental shift in their market, their buyer, their business model, or cost structure that a senior leader is either (a) struggling to name, or (b) can name, but hasn't figured out how to respond to.
>
> *Run two passes:*
>
> *1. Market: what structurally changed in this industry?*
>
> *2. Account: how were they specifically exposed to that change, and how are they responding? Quote the exact words their executives use.*
>
> *Give me a shortlist of 5 - 10 changes.*

Now, your next step is to stack rank those changes: are they strategic and market- or business-model-level? Or, more routine and low-level operational decisions?

Put it this way: if you could secretly look at their next board meeting agenda, which of these changes would be on it?

In what order?

2. What could you give them, to guide their response?

Here, our goal is to find a specific offer that has standalone value to them, regardless of whether they ultimately buy from you. We want to get them thinking:

If they did this before we're even a customer, I wonder what things we'd be doing together after we're a customer.

To get there, first, you need to identify what makes your product, background, or view of the market unique:

What do you know that others don't, but they'd value if they did? Write down 3 - 5 things *on your own*.

So *don't* use AI here at first, because the point is to arrive at an insight that's not part of any model's training data (and therefore, isn't already available to your customer through a quick AI chat).

Maybe your company trained its own models on proprietary data, and built a set of benchmarks that let an executive compare themselves to their peers instead of drifting, wondering, how are we actually doing?

Or maybe your edge isn't in the product data. Maybe it's the fact you've watched 30+ companies make the obvious decision, only to hit the same blockers in the same order. To an exec about to greenlight a new direction, that map is worth serious consulting dollars.

Once you've got your list, now, ask your robot this:

> *Here are a few things I uniquely know or have access to, that most people selling to my customers don't:*
>
> *[Paste your 3–5 list here with details]*
>
> *Turn each one into a tangible offer that I could actually deliver to an executive: a specific artifact, teardown, benchmark, analysis, etc. with standalone value to them,*
> *whether or not they ever buy from me.*
>
> *Cut any ideas that they could easily build on their own, or that a competitor could replicate.*
>
> *Turn the remaining offerings into a menu I can keep in my back pocket to match to different changes in a given account, with two scores for each offering:*
>
> *1. level-of-effort for me to build it*
> *2. level-of-value to them after I do*

Weak options are what's basically a product pitch in disguise. "Here's an ROI calculator for our product." Or, "Here's a free account to see an example dashboard."

Compare that to the IKEA example from earlier:

We took your ten best-selling cabinets and dropped them into 50 real Manhattan apartments, with quotes from the exact shoppers your Upper East Side studio was built for...

Want to see what they said you should do, right now (and avoid paying a research firm)?

3. Combine Steps 1 - 2 into a single point of view, using language your customer would actually use.

Here's a simple structure you can use to do this *by hand.*

> *Because of [a major change in the customer's business], now's the time to [respond with a specific, recommended approach you can enable].*
>
> *Starting with [describe your specific offering here].*
>
> *Which means, we'll [unlock a good outcome] while avoiding [bad outcomes, that only get worse].*

Now, it doesn't have to sound like that *exactly.*

That's the general structure, with the key ingredients you'll want to weave in. The goal is just to get your brain moving, and help you find the right overlap that becomes your point of view; one that's highly valuable to the customer *today.*

You'll know you're there when it's something an executive can disagree with. If it's too vague or too agreeable, it's not pointy enough. And pressure testing that is where you can put your robot to work again:

> *I need you to play a skeptical, time-poor version of [Key contact, the actual person you're targeting] at [Company]. Research who they are, how they think, what makes them different from other general buyers in our "persona."*
>
> *I'm going to give you my point of view, and I want you to react how they would as a skeptic:*
>
> *Where will they say I'm wrong, I'm telling you what you already know, etc. Don't be polite.*
>
> *My point of view: [Paste your input in]*

4. Now, do it again for two more accounts.

Replay Steps 1 - 3 for two different accounts, and compare them side-by-side. How much of the language is recycled? Are they differentiated enough, and is your offering adapted to each account's specific context?

It's good to have a one-to-many starting point of view, for similar personas in the same vertical. But, you need to get beyond the obvious into what's purely account-based to get the type of response you're after.

5. Ship it, then confirm or correct your point of view.

Once you actually bring this to your account, *Hey, given [shift], I had an idea for [response]... attached. Catch up?*

You’re likely to get an invite set for a next meeting. Which is when you’ll want to unpack their thoughts. With the hard part: share it, then stop talking.

Often, in a rush of nerves and anxious dread of how they’re going to respond, we’ll keep rambling. Usually with a bunch of disclaimers and remarks hedging against a potentially negative response. Which only dulls the point.

So, let them respond, and one of two things will happen. You’re either:

- Confirmed: "That's exactly right."
- Corrected: "That's not quite it, but..."

And both of them are wins.

So write down which one it was after, the exact words they used in their feedback, then update your point of view before sharing it out more broadly in the account.

More on that next.

5. How to map a business model

For decades, a big part of how makeup got sold was a woman walking into a department store counter, testing a shade on the back of her hand, then her face, and asking the person behind the counter what they thought.

Then, in the spring of 2020, all those counters closed.

Nobody wanted to share lipstick with strangers in the middle of the COVID pandemic. And by the end of June, roughly one in five stores carrying Estée Lauder's brands in the Americas was still shut. So with half the world wearing masks, products like foundation and lipstick were hardest hit: makeup sales fell 18% that fiscal year, and in the worst quarter, *total sales* dropped a whopping 32%.

At the time, my team was selling a data platform that tracked emerging companies (think Crunchbase) to innovation teams inside large enterprises.

But we learned that our data alone didn't create much value for our customers. A list of startups building cutting edge tech was only useful if a customer knew which one mattered to their business, and why. Translated: you might have a killer product that nobody (yet) cares about, because they haven't prioritized the problem it relates to.

So we wrapped advisory services around the platform, recommending specific initiatives that tied back to each customer's business model.

Because an innovation team's whole job is to find and fend off the biggest threats to their core business, while thinking about the future state alongside their executive team. Their method just happened to be finding emerging tech to either license, partner with, invest in, or acquire outright.

Which made Estée in 2020 a pretty good case study for this next skill.

Their revenue mix was swinging from in-store to online, fast. Online sales grew double digits that year, to roughly 40% of sales in the Americas.

But at first, their website had the same problem the counters had solved for decades: you can't try on lipstick through a screen. So shoppers showed up online, couldn't tell whether a shade would work on them, and left.

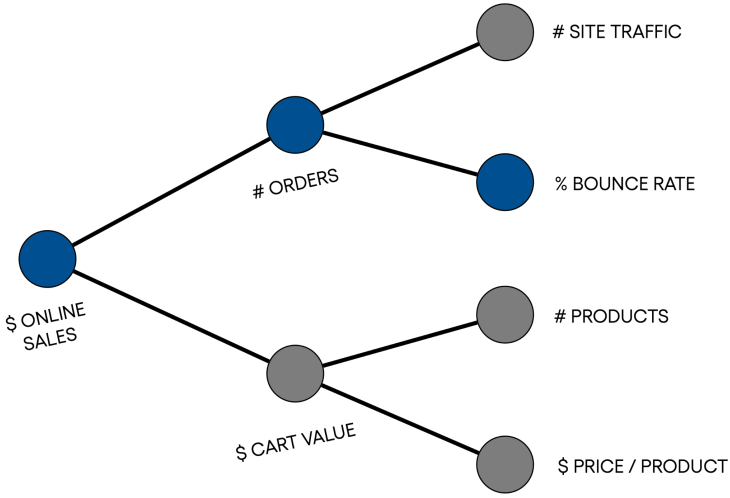
That bounced traffic was a huge deal when the future of the business depended on digital customers clicking "buy now."

Which made a new initiative pretty urgent: stand up a virtual try-on option, so a shopper could see products on her own face before buying.

(And they did move fast: Estée built a virtual try-on platform that let its portfolio of brands launch try-on in as little as 10 weeks, down from about six months. As Chris Aidan, their VP of Digital Technology and Engineering, put it,

"Consumers are able to see the exact tone and pick products they know are going to look good.")

Here's a simplified version of how that looks, drawn out:



What you're looking at is a driver tree. It links "outcome" metrics to a series of related "input" metrics, simplifying complex goals into a set of cause-and-effect relationships.

The left side is what you'd like to influence, as the target metric. The right side is *how* you'll drive that change.

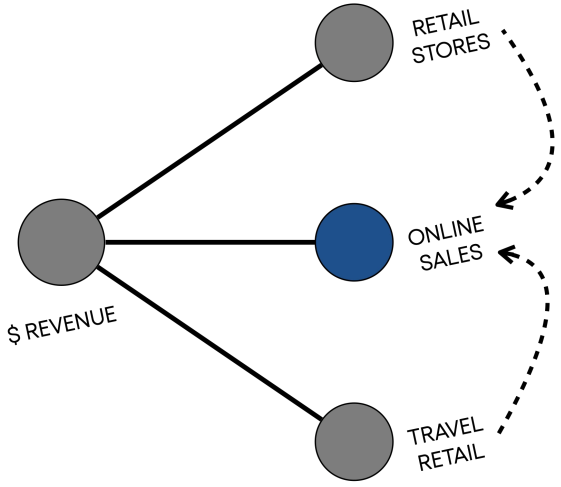
Finance teams have used these for decades to create forecasts and decision scenarios. Which is exactly why you should learn to draw one: it lets you think in the way the person signing your contract already thinks.

You can follow the roots of a driver tree even deeper, too. What drives the bounce rate for someone shopping for lipstick? That has its own set of inputs: whether the site loads fast, whether they like the brand's vibe, and, the one the pandemic broke: whether she's confident the shade will actually look good on her.

It's also how you diagnose what's really going on. If revenue's down, is that because:

- Fewer people are buying?
- Or the same people are spending less?

For Estée, the left side metric (online sales) was trending up. But zoom out one level, and you'll see why: it was mostly revenue flowing over from branches that had closed, like retail stores and travel retail. Not because the right side of the online tree was performing any better.



Now, here's the part most sellers miss:

It's rare to sell something that directly moves the metric one node to the right of revenue. (“We’ll deliver you 2-3X more orders!” is how most phishing emails start.) Instead, most deals involve the subtle art of aligning on why a driver sitting a few levels "to the right" on the tree is the *right* path to the first-level outcome. And since your message then becomes more indirect, it becomes more complex. So the further to the right you go, the more you need to establish a clear and specific link that's believable.

If you say: *Better website UX drives cross-sells!* Well, sure, that's probably true.

But it's less clear why *that* path gets you to the outcome better, faster, and more reliably than another approach. (Like adding more product inventory to match what your top-spending customers are leaving your site to buy from a competitor, because you don't carry it.)

Same with Estée. A CFO looking at makeup sales falling by 18%, but skin care jumping up by 13%, could reasonably ask: *Why fix makeup conversion at all? Why not pour more budget into the category that's already growing?* Your path doesn't just have to work, it has to beat that alternative.

So here's how you'll make a strategic recommendation that guides your customer's response to change:

Actually draw out their business model.

Use the practice of creating a driver tree to align your thinking with the executive's. Try to trace the approach

they're already investing in, and from there, you can either align your message to it, or, show them a new path.

When you do this, you'll avoid the top mistake most sellers make while creating messaging for executives: they hear a problem, and match it to their solution, while skipping past the "approach." Which means they're ignoring *project* risk (prioritizing an altogether different driver path), by focusing too narrowly on *product* risk (walking down that specific path with another vendor).

So, before you speak to a specific set of features, confirm everyone's first aligned on the higher-order questions:

What's the right driver to focus on? What must be true about how we impact that driver?

In other words, this is less, *"buy our try-on software."* It's more, *"fix shade confidence before you buy more traffic."*

And the related question, *"What's the story this exec wants to tell?"* Followed by, *"How can I make sure they get to?"*

At Estée, that story might have sounded like: *We didn't lose our try-on counter, we just put it inside every customer's pocket.*

Which is also how your point of view from the last chapter gets sharper: the change tells you what's happening, the tree tells you where it hits, and which lever you'll help pull.

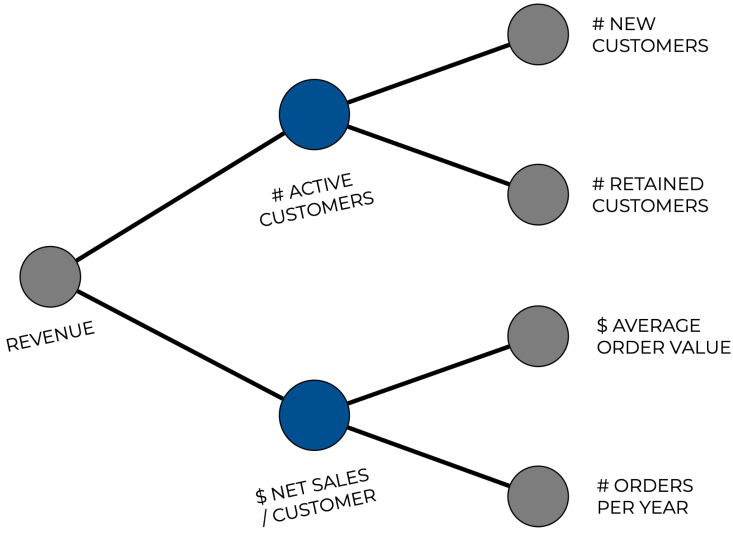
I know this can feel a little obscure. Drawing out a customer's revenue model sounds like homework for their finance team, not yours.

Most sales books skip this part. I'm not, because it works. Here's an example I shared in the book *Brief & Brilliant*.

Kishan texted me: *"You got a few minutes? This one could be big."*

By big, he meant a $30 million deal with one of the largest e-commerce sites in the US. The company had been getting hammered by analysts, who didn't think it could add enough new customers to justify a price target above $40 a share. Kishan had a feeling the whole deal would come down to what they could tell Wall Street.

So we drew out their driver tree.



Kishan didn't believe they really had 28 million customers. He thought they had tons of duplicates and fake accounts, and no good way to stitch identities together, which is

exactly what his platform did. (For example: I have an Amazon account, my wife had one from long ago, and I have a work account. One house, three accounts.)

So if they actually had 23 million unique customers instead of 28 million, for example, that also means net sales per customer has to jump: from $1,100 to about $1,340.

Same revenue. But suddenly, there's more market left to capture, and every customer they have is worth more than anyone thought. *Kishan was handing their executives the ability to bring analysts good news overnight.*

Which meant his deal was less identity resolution, and more about the next sentence on their earnings call.

Try This

Go back to the deal you built a point of view for in the last chapter. You already know what's changing for them. So now, you're going to find *exactly* where that change shows up in their business model, and build the confidence you can do something to help.

By the end of this, you'll have their business model in one visual, a driver path you can credibly move, and the story it lets their executive tell.

1. Draw their business model, by hand.

Start with the highest-level outcome metric your customer's executive owns on the far left. Break it into its first-level drivers, then keep branching right, two or three levels deep.

I'd recommend a whiteboard here, and take a swing first before adding AI. The drawing is the thinking, so if you let AI draw it first, you'll get a pretty visual with no idea where it came from. Then, use AI to fill in the numbers after:

> *Here's a driver tree I just created for [Company]. Compare this to how their business actually operates, and surface where you disagree.*
>
> *Once we've aligned on the model, fill in the specific metrics with language their executives actually use based on public sources: podcasts, investor presentations, etc... and include any available numbers with a trend over the last 4–8 quarters.*

2. Highlight where a recent change shows up, then trace the driver path you can influence.

Take the change from your point of view, and circle where it directly lands on the tree. Which metric is most visible? For example, if you're selling to an engineering leader, is it a headcount change?

Then, circle the one metric you can directly move, and trace the lines from that node, all the way back to your first circle.

Now count the branches. Is it one branch, like Kishan? Great. Three or more, like Estée?

Now, every link needs to be specific enough that an executive will believe it:

- A weak message skips every step in between:

  "Our platform drives digital revenue."

- A strong message connects the dots:

  "Virtual try-on raises buying confidence while selecting a shade, which cuts bounce rate and lifts conversion rate in the channel that's carrying the business.

  Which answers the first question your CFO will ask: why fix makeup, instead of just leaning into skin care?"

3. Map two or three other paths they could take.

Did you notice the second half of the example I included above? Your customer isn't actually choosing between you and “doing nothing.” Teams are always working on something. So they're choosing between you, and prioritizing a handful of completely different approaches.

So get these out on the page too:

> *Now play the role of [Executive's name], who's on the hook for [outcome metric]. List the 3–5 paths you'd realistically consider prioritizing to move that metric, including options that have nothing to do with buying our service. For each: prioritize them based on the level of effort, time to value, and amount of risk involved. Then, tell me which one you'd actually invest in and why. Be honest and direct, even if it's not mine.*

And on your own, answer that same: which path gets *them* to the outcome fastest? If another path truly is faster, you'd rather know now, than find out with a closed-lost note.For Estée in 2020, the paths on the table looked something like this:

- **Lean into skin care.** It's already growing 13%, and a CFO will absolutely raise it. But it writes off the makeup business, and shoppers who buy both.

- **Close stores and shift the savings online.** Estée announced plans to close 10-15% of its stores. It cuts costs, but doesn't fix why online shoppers bounce.

- **Buy more traffic.** Fast to turn on, but it's pouring more shoppers into a site that can't convert them, so you're just paying more for the same bounce.

- **Wait it out.** A bet that counters reopen before online habits stick.

- **Virtual try-on.** Fixes the one input that's actually broken, on the channel now carrying the business.

The point: most sellers don't *really* know what they're competing against, because it's rarely another vendor.

4. Write out the storyline each path lets them tell.

Every option creates a new soundbite that executive gets to say to their board, or in the next all hands, or in a press release. Write each one out:

- Lean into skin care: *"Skin care carried us this year."* A mixed story that admits makeup is shrinking.

- Close stores: *"We right-sized our retail footprint."* An "efficiency" story.

- More traffic: *"We doubled our digital marketing spend."* A cost story.

- Virtual try-on: *"We didn't lose the try-on counter, we just put it inside every customer's pocket."* An innovation story.

Now, which one would they actually want to say out loud?

That's the story you're selling, and your product is just how it becomes true.

5. Draw it with them.

On your next call, outline your thinking, and then seek to be corrected: *"What am I missing? What are you thinking about, that I didn't touch on?"* Confirmed or corrected, either way, update your model and you'll have a picture of their business nobody else does.

6. Practicing by analogy

I haven't read 95% of the top sales books out there, and I haven't been through another company's formal sales training myself (even though I've built them).

Instead, I've learned to sell "by analogy."

Which isn't a new idea: Arnold Schwarzenegger took ballet to improve his transitions while posing in bodybuilding competitions. Kobe Bryant took tap dancing to strengthen his ankles and improve his footwork on the basketball court.

For me, the ballet was case interviews.

The best sales training I never had came when I wasn't totally sure what I wanted to do with my career. I'd been medically disqualified from commissioning as an Army officer, then I'd been working on growing a small startup with friends from business school, but I didn't love it. So I figured consulting would help me learn, while figuring out what came next.

I got a job building valuation models at a consulting firm, and to help me get that job, my roommate at the time, Greg, spent countless hours drilling me with mock "cases."

We'd lie in our bunk beds and cover everything from M&A recommendations, expanding market share, calculating fair

market value, and on and on. Then, once I got my job, I started building 100+ tab Excel models for massive enterprises.

So what, exactly, is a “case?”

Cases test your ability to structure your thinking, and communicate a recommendation. They’re exercises meant to compress months of typical consulting work into a single conversation:

1. You start with a small set of facts.
2. You ask the right discovery questions, and earn more data on the problem.
3. You match a framework to the situation, to understand what’s wrong and how to fix it.
4. You develop a short set of recommendations.
5. You lay it all out in a tight narrative.

It’s a process that should sound pretty familiar at this point, because it’s the same one you’ve been practicing over the last two chapters:

- The small set of facts = what’s changing in the account.
- Discovery = earning the next layer of data.
- The framework = your driver tree.
- The recommendation = your point of view.
- The narrative = the story the executive wants to tell.

And it’s *the* skill behind your journey to become a more strategic seller. Which you don’t arrive at by adding the word “Enterprise” or “Strategic” to your title. (I know plenty

of mid-market and commercial reps who can outthink their upmarket counterparts.)

Instead, it's about making a shift:

From: selling products that solve problems.

To: selling projects that support priorities.

It's the same move as the last chapter: agree on the project before you pitch the product.
So, we're going to practice this sales skill, by analogy, before we move to Part 2.

Try This

Start by giving this prompt to your favorite LLM:

> *I'm interviewing at Bain & Company and McKinsey to become a management consultant, and I need you to help me practice with a mock case interview.*
>
> *Play the part of a senior-level consulting executive, presenting me with a real-life case that starts with a high-level, strategic business problem that tests how well I can structure an initial point of view on the fly, conduct additional discovery to get even deeper insights, and over time, you'll give me more data as I earn it. Finally, I'll need to put together a concise presentation to reflect back a tight and cohesive narrative that you'd want to act on.*

> *Research a real-world problem then build a series of tables or simple charts that illustrate progressively deeper layers of business data on the problem that I'll earn access to, one at a time, based on discovery. Don't over-share upfront.*
>
> *Start to interact with me as the interviewer, keeping the interview flowing, then give me 10 minutes to prepare my final recommendation. After, grade me on four things: did I find what's changing, did I structure the problem, was my recommendation pointy enough to disagree with, and did I tell a story an executive would want to repeat. Highlight where I was sharp, and what still needs work.*

(Set the timer on your phone, since the model can't keep time.)

Then, run a second case a few days later, and compare the two grades. That gap is your slope.

Finally, run the same steps on the live deal you've been working on since Chapter 4. Same structure, real stakes.