

# WHITE PAPER

## Using your customers' desired actions to increase your website sales

The world's leading "top task guru" and "top line guru" explain how to grow your revenue by aligning what your company cares about with what your customers care about.



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# Using your customers' desired actions to increase your sales

## What is the first thing customers do when it's time to buy something?

They go to the Web. More specifically, they go to Google – and type in a search phrase. This is now where most purchases start.

And yet, many CEOs, if you look at the way they allocate their resources and organize their companies, are ignoring this reality. They treat the Web – and the customer's search-oriented buying process – as if it barely matters. As if their company was still a brick-and-mortar building, the customer had only a few choices, and “visiting” each vendor was a tedious, time-consuming, face-to-face experience, giving the customer plenty of incentive for doing business with the first vendor he visits.

Nothing could be further from the reality of today's relationship between buyers and sellers. In fact, *your website is your company*. And, the customer is visiting dozens of companies in mere minutes, just clicking on his mouse.

As he clicks through the Google results, he evaluates, rapid-fire-style, each company he visits. His internal checklist:

- > Do they have what I want?
- > Is it easy to figure out what they're selling?
- > Do they look professional, or like a garage operation?
- > Are they wasting my time describing my problem to me (which is ridiculous, because I know more about my problem than they ever could), or are they *immediately* showing me how they can solve my problem?
- > Do they even understand my problem?
- > What do I think of their solution? Will it work for me?
- > How much does it cost?
- > How have they structured their product or service?
- > How easy will it be to buy?
- > What will my experience be – with the product and the company – after I buy?
- > What do others say, who have purchased this product or service?
- > How easy is it, right now, to get these questions answered?

**Your  
website  
is your  
company**

These are just a few of the items flashing through his mind as he rapidly clicks through various websites, including yours.

Your web logs may show that he visited, but that's all you know. You don't know exactly what he was looking for. You don't know why he didn't stick around. You don't know what made him click away. If he did stick around more than a few seconds, what was it that caused him to leave a few minutes later?

Every single day, hundreds or thousands or millions of customers are coming to your website, seeking answers. Each visit is an opportunity to make a sale, because the

customer has already self-identified himself as someone who is interested in what you're selling. He's not just an idle "surfer" with nothing better to do. On the contrary, he's on a mission. He's going to get his problem solved, and he's going to pay somebody to do it.



This is the task that your customer is focused on.

This is where your revenue will come from – or not. Obviously, you will make more sales – your top line revenues will increase – if you make it easy for your customer to “accomplish his task,” whether it is buying from you the first time, coming back and buying again, referring others to you, or using your website to accomplish other tasks once he has become your customer. Make it easy, and you'll make more money.

And, if you are selling through business partners or distribution channels, the same truth applies. The easier you make it for these folks to accomplish their tasks, the more you will sell. They want to sell for you - it's in their best interest as well as yours. They are hoping you will make it easy.

### The company/website that is the easiest to do business with will make more sales

Which company/website should you aim to be? The “easiest” one. Are you there now? Based on our surveys and interviews of literally thousands of customers and partners – and years of experience helping companies optimize their websites, products, and organizations – we can safely say: No.

Only a few companies/websites in the world are the “easiest” to do business with, and most of us already know who they are. Amazon, Allstate, Best Buy, eBags, iTunes, Netflix, and Progressive come to mind. More than 15 years after the Web's emergence as the world's shopping mall, the companies that make it “easy” are amazingly rare.

Even the largest companies (and often, *especially* the largest companies) are not making it easy for the customer to achieve the goal of buying a product, or buying again, or using the website to accomplish other tasks.

Instead, the customer is discouraged from completing her tasks. Numerous “barriers to the sale” prevent the customer from giving you her money, which is what she's trying to do. Barriers include:

- Website navigation is organized to reflect the way the company or product line is organized, rather than the way the customer thinks of her problem and its solution. This is a huge issue for larger companies, where internal politics always “win” over customer preferences.
- Poor quality search results. Many people have given up using the search function on an organization's website because they find it to be of such poor quality. Search is critical to the way we live today and a poor search experience is a poor brand experience.
- Too little information on the site or information that fails to answer her questions.
- A flash animation screen on the home page, which has the same effect as hiring performing clowns to populate your store's foyer to “entertain” the customer. It forces her to wait, and prevents her from shopping.

**Each visit is an opportunity to make a sale**

- > Confusing pricing.
- > Convoluted downloading and registration.
- > Non-standard navigation, either by omitting expected functions ("Search," "Home," "About," "Contact," "Support," etc.) or by placing these functions in unexpected, hard-to-find locations on the pages.
- > Salespeople or customer support reps who can't answer questions that are not answered on the website.
- > Non-response to emails sent to the company, especially those sent via a web form on the company's website. Or when sellers do respond but don't respond immediately. The customer has often already made a purchase at a competing site by the time she gets a response from the first seller.

### The seller's perspective vs. the buyer's perspective

We all purchase products and services – on the Web and through salespeople. We all, as buyers, have encountered these barriers. We have searched for products and solutions, clicked through websites, attempted to get our questions answered, and tried to use shopping carts. As buyers, we are more than familiar with these frustrations. So, on a buyer-to-buyer level, we can relate.

Those of us running companies also know that our revenue comes from customers. We know that the more they spend, the more we make. We know that we should be making it easy for them to buy.

Why, then, is it so difficult for all organizations – from the smallest to the largest – to “make it easy for them to buy”?

Because the minute you start selling, you start thinking like a seller. You stop thinking like a buyer. Your perspective and your customer's perspective are on the opposite ends of the Buyer/Seller Spectrum.

**Make  
it easy  
for them  
to buy**

Table 1. The Buyer/Seller Spectrum	
Your Perspective (Seller)	Their Perspective (Buyer)
You need them to buy from you.	They don't care who they buy from. They only want to buy from a seller who “gets it.”
You think they'd be happy to spend money with you, if they just understood how great your company and products are.	They don't care about your company or your products. They care about their problem, and they want the right solution. They care about you meeting their need.
You need to charge as much as you can so you can make as much as you can.	They want the best solution for a reasonable price.
Your product designers labored for months creating a new product function. Now they assume, since they've built it, everybody will love it.	Your customer is only impressed with the product functions that matter to him. Does the new function matter to him? Do other functions matter more? How would you know?

Continued	The Buyer/Seller Spectrum
<p>Your salespeople think they know everything there is to know about the product and the customer. They think they've heard it all. So when the customer starts to describe the problem, the salesperson doesn't hear the whole story. He butts in - and starts to pitch.</p>	<p>Today's customer often knows more about the product and the competition's products than the salesperson does, because by the time he talks to the salesperson, he's gotten 80% of his questions answered. When the salesperson interrupts him and starts pitching, before he's heard the customer's whole story, the customer makes up his mind: <i>I'm going elsewhere.</i></p>
<p>You need business partners, distributors and/or retailers to sell your products for you. You sign agreements, then "let them loose," expecting the new sales to start rolling in.</p>	<p>Anyone who sells for you is a customer first and a salesperson second. They have their own needs.</p> <p>They need tools, training, strategy, and top-notch support. If you give these things to them, they can enthusiastically recommend you to customers. If not, they will either grudgingly refer customers to you, or won't refer them at all. For salespeople and your selling partners, the most telling moment is when they are on the phone with a customer, the customer has a question about your product, and the seller can't find the answer on the website you've built for salespeople. "Finding the answer fast" is their most important task.</p>
<p>Companies are like private clubs. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone interacts with everyone all day. CEOs spend far more time with employees than with customers. The customer - and selling partners - are outsiders.</p>	<p>Customers come to the website expecting a vibrant, relevant, helpful experience. Instead, they must hunt for useful information. They are sold to, but not assisted in their quest to buy. Or, in the case of selling partners, they are wooed but then unsupported when it's time to start selling. They are treated like unwelcome gate-crashers.</p>
<p>You have a "search engine vendor." The vendor has a program in place for you that uses popular search terms associated with your product or service. You pay the vendor to "optimize" your site for these terms, and you run search engine ads. You might even study your website visit reports to see which terms bring in the most visitors.</p>	<p>They type a certain phrase into Google, the phrase that they assume will lead to the desired solution. They would prefer to find the solution using this first, intuitive phrase. Often they are disappointed, so they "tweak" their phrase until it starts to lead to relevant results. This leads them to your website, and that phrase is then logged into your visits report.</p> <p>If you knew the first phrase, you'd be one of the few relevant vendors in the first set of results. The customer would click on your link. Assuming your website then answered the customer's questions, he'd gladly give you his money, and go on to the other things he wanted to get done that day. Mission accomplished.</p> <p>Do you know what that first phrase is?</p>

Continued The Buyer/Seller Spectrum	
You like to use organization-centric words on your website; words that you feel comfortable with and you understand.	<p>200,000 people search globally every month for “low fares.” How many do you think search for “cheap flights”? 68 million. Yes, 68 million. Low fares is classic organization speak. Cheap flights is customer language—basic, clear, to-the-point.</p> <p>An organization Gerry worked with had a link on their page called “Find a dealer.” Gerry told them that customers don’t buy from “dealers.” He convinced them to change the link to “Buy – Shop Locator.” The next day their sales inquiries doubled. The right words make the sale on the Web.</p>
The more you spend “supporting” the customer the less profit you make. So the financially oriented managers in your company are always looking for ways to cut the levels of service you provide.	The customer needs support, but it probably isn’t the type of support you’re already offering. If it were easy for him to get his question answered in your documentation, he wouldn’t need to contact a support person. Right now chances are good that you are wasting money providing information customers don’t even care about.
You think you know what is important to customers. You have a list. Your company is managed according to this list.	<p>Your list is wrong. Thousands of customer interviews have convinced us that the “company’s list” and the “customer’s list” are always significantly different - including the items on the list, the specific characteristics of the items on the list, and the priority of the items on the list.</p> <p>Your list is driving your decisions, your decisions are driving your actions, and your actions are driving your results. If your list is correct, your decisions and your actions will lead to better results - and higher revenue.</p>

**The right words make the sale on the Web**

This table represents only a fraction of the differences between the seller’s mindset and the buyer’s mindset. These differences are preventing you from selling more.

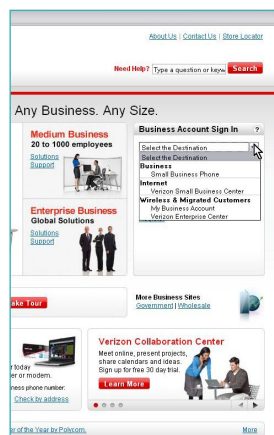
Any shift toward a subordination of the seller’s mindset to the buyer’s mindset can make a significant difference in revenue levels, especially if the shift is driven by customer research. Customers tend to notice when a company starts making it easier to perform important functions and make purchases. Higher sales are the logical and inevitable result.

As the seller comes closer to the buyer’s mindset, the seller begins to support the buyer’s quest more efficiently. More buyers come to the seller, and more buyers buy when they get there. More buyers return to buy more, and more buyers become “loyal” customers – as long as the company continues to think like a buyer and meet the buyer’s needs.

A perfect example of “making it too difficult to buy” is the Verizon website. Verizon splits its online accounts first into residential and business categories, with subcategories within each one. If you go to the business account sign-in box, you

can't even get in unless you first select the appropriate sub-category from a confusing and overlapping list of categories: Small Business Phone, Verizon Small Business Center, My Business Account, and Verizon Enterprise Center.

How on earth do they expect you to remember which of these cryptically named categories (which probably change every few months) they assigned you to? You have to sign in separately to each type of service to pay your bill or manage your account.



Allstate, on the other hand, asks you to sign in and then shows all of the accounts you have with Allstate – home insurance, auto insurance, and so on. This puts the customer at the center, rather than “splitting” the customer into various categories. Paying Allstate takes a couple of clicks each month, and there aren't any questions as you go.

**How do you convert your company from seller-centered to buyer-centric? How do you make sure your website – and the search strategies leading to it – make you the easiest to buy from?**

The conversion from seller-centered to buyer-centric, which we call “The Shift,” starts with a combination of quantitative and qualitative research.

**Quantitative “task” research:** Gerry McGovern, the “Top Tasks” guru, has developed and perfected a quantitative research methodology for identifying, prioritizing, and measuring the Top Tasks that people want to perform on a website. Over 90 task surveys have been conducted in 15 countries; more than 60,000 people have participated.

The survey consists of lists of tasks that can be up to 100 items long. These lists are developed by means of extensive customer research. The lists contain all the important tasks that customers have when they come to your website. More importantly, the task list is phrased in customer language, not organization language.

You might be wondering: Why so much emphasis on “tasks”? Sounds kind of “low level.”

Here's the reason: Traditional marketing is about getting attention. Web marketing and selling is about paying attention. If a customer is on your website, they're there for a reason. They have a task they want to complete. This is at the heart of our approach. First and foremost you must help the customers complete the task they came to your website to complete. Otherwise, you lose them.

Once Gerry and his team have created the task list, customers are asked to quickly scan it, then choose the top 5 most important tasks. They rank the tasks from 1 to 5, with 5 being most important. According to traditional polling theory, this method shouldn't work. Gerry has found just the opposite. Not only does it work, it works consistently and reliably.

**You must help the customers complete the task**



Customers use their “gut” to identify the Top Tasks, which is exactly what they’re doing when they zip over to your website.



When people vote in sufficient numbers, rock-solid trends emerge. In a typical poll, with 100 voters, the top 3 most popular tasks will have been established. Even if another 5,000 people vote, the top 3 tasks will not change. What Gerry has found again and again is that there is a small set of tasks – the Top Tasks – that are of huge importance. There is also a large number of tasks – the tiny tasks – that are of little or no importance. Often we find that organizations are pushing the tiny tasks at customers and hiding the Top Tasks – a guaranteed formula for losing customers.

There is nearly always a disconnect between the Top Tasks desired by the website visitor and the Top Tasks as imagined by the website designers.

For example, how do people make the decision to buy a car navigation/GPS system? That’s the question a consumer electronics company wanted the answer to. The Top Task, identified using Gerry’s research, was “automatically and quickly recalculates a new route if you miss a turn or change your plans.” It got a massive 12% of the vote.

However, when Gerry asked a number of company product managers to vote, there was no overlap between the customers’ top 10 tasks and the top 10 tasks of the organization. There was a major disconnect, as can be seen from the following table, which details the top ten tasks for each group.

Table 2. The Task List Disconnect	
Customer Top 10 Task List	Organization Top 10 Task List
Automatically and quickly recalculates a new route if you miss a turn or change your plans	Perfect integration into the dashboard
3D moving maps to help you navigate more easily	Best brand in navigation
Easy-to-follow, accurate directions	Industry-leading pinpoint accuracy even when GPS signal lets you down (tunnel, high rises, forest, etc.)
Full postal code searches	Internet and Web access
Bright and clear anti-glare screen	Really easy to use, even by people not familiar with the technology
Clear friendly spoken instructions	Free live traffic information: Great way to avoid traffic problems
Drive safely: Voice control allows you to keep your eyes on the road	Free professional fitting
Easily update software and maps	Navigate 26 countries – straight out of the box
Bluetooth-enabled (phone and music)	State-of-the-art GPS, music center and Bluetooth all in one unit
Most up-to-date map information	Plays CDs & DVDs in almost every possible format (MP3, AAC, WMA, DIVX)

## Top Tasks are of huge importance

Have a look at the customers' Top Task again: Automatically and quickly recalculates a new route if you miss a turn or change your plans.

Out of 93 tasks tested it got a whopping 12% of the vote. People chose this as their top task whether they were thinking of buying for business or personal use, whether they were under 25 or over 45, whether or not they were a customer of this particular company, whether they already owned a navigation system or were planning to buy their first one.

This is what Gerry has come to call the Super Task. It's way out in front of everything else. For example, the next most popular task, "3D moving maps to help you navigate more easily," had only 7% of the vote, significantly 5% less than the top task.

"Find People" is often by far the Super Task on large intranets. "Find a Course/Subject" is usually the Super Task for universities, as is "Book a Room" for hotels, and "Book a Flight" for airlines.

Do you have a Super Task? How do you know what it is? Research will reveal it, and, once it is identified, you should give it overwhelming prominence on your website. At a minimum, it must be dominating and doable on your homepage.

One of the beauties of the statistical approach is that it presents irrefutable evidence of the customer's desired tasks. The customer has entered the company's closed "clubhouse" and is starting to influence decisions and actions. The company - and its website, which really is the company - starts to move toward meeting the customer's needs, making it easier for the customer to buy.

Once your customers' top tasks have been identified, you will need a method for continuously improving them. Gerry's method measures customer success based on three key metrics:

1. **Completion rate:** What percentage of your customers are able to complete their top tasks?
2. **Disaster rate:** What percentage of your customers *think* they have completed a top task, but have actually gotten the wrong answer?
3. **Completion time:** How long is it taking customers to complete their top tasks?

With fact-based, time and motion studies, you will be able to pinpoint the areas on your website that are impeding completion rates and reducing completion times. You will know exactly where the "disasters" are on your website. Then Gerry and his team will show you how to fix these issues.

#### Qualitative "Perceptions and Solutions" research:

Kristin Zhivago, an expert on the customer's buying process, has developed and perfected a qualitative interviewing methodology that identifies:

- > What the customer is looking for and how they expect to find it
- > The customer's buying process – the steps they take, who's involved, their concerns and questions, and the answers that will satisfy them

- Customer perceptions about the company's products, people, processes, and services
- Customer perceptions about competitors
- The trends customers see in their industry – and the moves they are going to be making, themselves
- The price that the customer is willing to pay for a good solution
- The search phrases that customers use when they first start searching
- The management, process, and/or system problems that are acting as barriers to the sale - on the website and elsewhere
- The website and salesperson issues that are driving customers away
- The solutions that would actually work

Kristin has personally conducted thousands of in-depth, conversational phone interviews with customers, business partners, and employees, in both consumer and business-to-business industries. She has a strong technical background, especially valuable to companies selling very complex technical products - software, hardware, and communications - but she also guides companies to higher revenues in the health, travel, and food industries.

Kristin has found, as Gerry has, that customers are strikingly similar in their top-of-mind perceptions. The needs driving their buying decisions, the hopes they have as they search for solutions, the expectations they have for products and services, and the factors that cause them to make a purchase - or not - are consistent from customer to customer, within a given group of customers that a client is targeting.

The results of her research are provided in three forms:

- **Conversation report:** Word-for-word transcriptions of the customer conversations, organized by subject
- **Executive summary:** Tables containing the phrases used by customers to describe their perceptions, expectations, experiences, and suggestions
- **Recommendations:** A series of recommendations, both strategic and tactical, describing the solutions that will work and the most efficient (and cost-effective) ways of implementing them.

#### Re-engineering your organization to increase revenue

These findings are presented and discussed in a strategy meeting, in which Kristin and company managers create and agree on:

- The company's actual brand – the promise the company can keep, given its products, processes, people, passion, and policies, that satisfies the needs of its customers
- A map of the customer's buying journey, including the discrete steps in the process, the influencers, and the marketing and selling tools and methods that will support every step of the customer's buying process
- The "weaknesses" that must be fixed and the "strengths" that should be promoted

## The Shift from seller- centered to buyer- centric

- The organizational, process, and policy changes that must be implemented in order to more closely align the company's selling and marketing process with the customer's buying process
- A Revenue Growth Action Plan, which outlines the steps that must be taken in order to implement The Shift from seller-centered to buyer-centric. The Plan includes descriptions of each step, a timeline, who is responsible for those steps, and how they will be managed and measured.

After the meeting, Kristin works with clients on the projects that must be undertaken so the company can make The Shift. Her goal is to “work herself out of a job,” in the sense that every solution that is put in place is designed to be self-sustaining. First the solution is devised, described, and agreed upon, then the elements are put in place. Projects include development of strategy, product and company positioning, content creation, website navigation architecture, recruiting of appropriate staff, retraining current staff, and management coaching.

Transforming your company from seller-centered to buyer-centric is difficult, but not impossible. It requires:

- A commitment to determining how your company's mindset differs from the customer's
- A combination of tested and effective quantitative and qualitative research
- Proper analysis of the findings
- A plan that will help your company make The Shift from seller-centered to buyer-centric
- Implementing and managing the projects that will convert your company and raise your revenue levels.

## About the authors



**Gerry McGovern** is the founder and CEO of *Customer Carewords* in Dublin, Ireland. He is widely regarded as the worldwide authority on increasing Web satisfaction by managing customer tasks. Gerry has spoken, written, and consulted extensively on Web content management issues since 1994. He has perfected a *works-every-time* quantitative research method for determining the top tasks that customers and partners want to perform on a company's websites. Once top tasks have been identified, he then helps companies make the necessary improvements, so that customers are able to perform their tasks, including making more purchases. His fifth book, *"The Stranger's Long Neck: How to Deliver What Your Customers Really Want Online,"* will be published in June 2010.

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**Kristin Zhivago** is the founder and President of Zhivago Management Partners, Inc. in Jamestown, RI, USA. She is a "Revenue Coach" and a leading expert on the customer's buying process. She helps CEOs and entrepreneurs increase their revenue by making it easier for their customers to find them, understand what they're selling and how it will help them, and buy from them. Since she founded her company in Silicon Valley in 1979, she has interviewed literally thousands of customers in the high-tech, health, publishing, travel, and consumer industries. She has perfected a *works-every-time* qualitative research method to determine "what should be promoted and what is broken," and uses her findings to guide managers in creating customer-centric websites, products, services, and organizations. Her second book, *"Roadmap to Revenue: How to Sell the Way Your Customers Want to Buy,"* will be published in 2010.

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