



Understanding the Buying Process

Building a Seamless Experience that Supports your Buyers

Pamela Hudadoff

Dedicated to making expert marketing techniques more accessible

Applied Product Marketing LLC

Web: <http://www.AppliedProductMarketing.com>

Blog: <http://MarketSense.AppliedProductMarketing.com>

Designed for Buying

The goal of most companies is to get prospects to buy their products. Products are designed with the buyer in mind. Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said for the marketing and sales processes. In particular, businesses often force their customers through the company's selling processes instead of supporting the customer's buying process.

The **buying process** is the set of steps that a **customer** chooses to go through with the goal of satisfying a need.

The **selling process** is the set of steps that a **company** uses to organize and optimize the way that it sells its products.

Today, the differences between buying and selling processes are significant. These differences are costing companies lost sales.

The buying process described in this book expands upon the traditional five stage buying approach (traditional stages in black).



These additional stages uncover details that help marketing and sales understand critical elements in the buying decision. The buying process presented here represents that used for common, deliberated purchases. It does not represent impulse buy decisions. It does not account for the complexity of organizational buying processes. Yet, the insight provided can be useful in these other types of buying processes.

Perhaps the most valuable part of this eBook is the "Define your role" section. Included for each stage, this section helps marketing and sales in the following ways:

1. Realize that the buyer is in control
2. Think like the buyer thinks
3. Uncover holes in the buying process that are not addressed by the marketing and sales processes
4. Prepare to plug those holes in the marketing and sales processes
5. Create a seamless experience that supports the buyer through every step of their buying process

A couple of thoughts before you immerse yourself in the world of your buyer. The answer is probably not "more sales reps". And the other answer is probably not "invading the buying process with existing sales reps". The buyers choose what channel(s) they want to use in each stage. If you are not where your buyers need you to be as they go through their buying process, someone or something else will be. If you are thinking that there should be lots of overlap in how your marketing and sales channels support the buying process, you are starting to understand the problem.

Please feel free to share this eBook with others who would benefit from reading it by posting it on your blog, emailing it, or linking to it.

The copyright holder is licensing this under the Creative Commons License. Attribution 3.0.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

1. Awareness of a need

Most typical buying processes start when an individual becomes aware of a need or a want they would like to satisfy. That need or want may be the result of a problem they are experiencing. As they become aware of their need/want/problem, they are unlikely to be able to communicate it in anything but the simplest of terms. And those terms may not capture the true intent of their need/want/problem.

Need: I need a way to transport these boxes over to the new house.

Want: I want more adventure in my life.

Problem: I keep getting these nagging headaches in the early afternoon. This has been going on for a few days now.

If the person feels some immediacy regarding their need/want/problem, they will start searching for general information about it. And they will likely use a variety of channels to obtain that information. They may talk to friends and colleagues. They may read magazine or newspaper articles that address their need. They may use search engines or specific web sites on the Internet. They may speak with a sales person at a retail location. They may begin tuning in to advertisements that seem to relate to their need.

The goal of information gathering at this stage is to put a "name" on their need/want/problem. They do this by "trying on" different ways of verbalizing their need.

Awareness of a need

- ★ Stimulates the search for general information about a person's need, want, or problem.

Define your role:

1. What are the needs, wants or problems that our offering can solve? What do they look like at the earliest point of individual awareness?
2. How do individuals search for basic information about their need, want or problem? What terms do they use to initially describe their need? Where do they turn to learn more about their need?
3. How can we become part of the information gathering process used by individuals with needs, wants or problems that could be satisfied by our solution?

2. Frame the need

At some point in the initial information gathering process, the person comes to a point where they have settled on a particular way of thinking about and communicating their need/want/problem. They have “tried on” different ways of verbalizing their need, and have selected the one that best matches its characteristics.

I like to call this “**framing**” the need.

Need: “I need a *way to transport* these boxes over to the new house” becomes “I need to hire a *moving company* to help me move my things into the new house”.

Want: “I want more adventure in my life” becomes “I want to take an adventure *vacation*”.

Problem: “I keep getting these nagging headaches in the early afternoon. This has been going on for a few days now” becomes “I have a *sinus* headache.”

The frame is the person’s way of narrowing down the world of possibilities. It represents the mindset the person will use as they go through the rest of the buying process.

The frame is a very powerful mechanism. It helps the brain focus on certain details and ignore others. Information consistent with the frame is accepted. Information inconsistent with the frame is ignored or rejected.

Frame the need

- ★ Establishes a **mindset** that directs the person’s search for satisfaction or a solution for their need, want or problem.

Define your role:

1. How can we help individuals frame their need, want or problem in a way that will put our offering in the forefront?
2. Where do we need to be in order to help individuals frame their need, want or problem?
3. How can we be visible in frames that are still valid for our product but are not the way we would normally present our offering?

3. Research the framed need

Once the need has been framed, the prospect's focus of his/her research changes. The prospect no longer spends time gathering the general information which helped them verbalize their need. Instead, the prospect's search process now focuses on:

- Understanding their framed need more clearly
- Learning about ways in which their need can be satisfied
- Identifying alternatives for satisfying their need

The prospect is likely to return to some of influencers on their framing decision. They are also likely to use a variety of channels to gather their information.

Need: "I need to hire a moving company."

- Gets a recommendation from a colleague
- Discusses moving experiences with others
- Searches the phone book for moving companies

Want: "I want to take an adventure vacation".

- Gets an adventure company name from a friend
- Obtains a brochure about adventure vacations
- Searches the Internet for adventure destinations

Problem: "I have a sinus headache."

- Searches the Internet for common causes
- Finds various treatment options and considerations

Research the framed need

- ★ **Collects information** that helps the prospect understand the need and how it can be satisfied.
- ★ **Identifies options** for satisfying the need.

Define your role:

1. How can we ensure that the prospect comes to us for information about their need?
2. How can we help the prospect to better understand their need?
3. What information do we need to provide to demonstrate how we satisfy the prospect's need?

4. Define decision criteria

Through their research, the prospect develops a deeper level of understanding of their need and potential solutions that satisfy that need. At the same time, they start identifying criteria that will be helpful for them in making a buying decision.

A number of factors influence the criteria that make their list:

- **Situational:** Immediacy of their need, amount of inconvenience (pain) caused by their need, constraints on the solution, availability
- **Knowledge-based:** Depth of their understanding of the need, depth of their understanding of the solution
- **Personal:** Personality, emotions, values

These considerations don't all have the same level of importance. The prospect will prioritize them based on how they value them.

Need: "I need to hire a moving company."

- Criteria 1: Availability in the next week
- Criteria 2: Ability to perform move in one trip

Want: "I want to take an adventure vacation".

- Criteria 1: Is child friendly
- Criteria 2: Offers trips to Costa Rica

Problem: "I have a sinus headache."

- Criteria 1: Cost
- Criteria 2: Doesn't cause grogginess or sleepiness

Define and evaluate decision criteria

- ★ Identifies potential criteria that will help the prospect make a decision.
- ★ Selects and prioritizes criteria that will be further researched for a set of alternatives.

Define your role:

1. How can we understand which evaluation criteria our prospects are likely to use?
2. How can we influence the evaluation criteria the prospect selects?

5. Narrow the alternatives

In previous information gathering, the prospect is likely to have run across a number of potential alternatives for satisfying their need. They have probably formed some initial impressions regarding each alternative's suitability.

Once the decision criteria have been solidified, the prospect will return to fill in holes in their knowledge. Their goal now is to fully understand how the alternative satisfies their criteria. They may also use their criteria to help identify new alternatives.

Need: "I need to hire a moving company."

| Criteria/Company | Move Today | Interstate |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Availability | Yes | Yes |
| One trip move | Yes | Yes |
| Cost | Low | High |

Want: "I want to take an adventure vacation".

| Criteria/Company | Expeditions | Adventour |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Child-friendly | Can include | Designed for |
| Costa Rica | Yes | Yes |
| Availability | Custom dates | May, June, July |

Problem: "I have a sinus headache."

| Criteria/Company | Antihistamine | Decongestant |
|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Cost | Low | Low |
| Ability to function | High | Low |

Research and narrow the alternatives

- ★ Identifies all alternatives the prospect wants to consider.
- ★ Understands how each alternative meets the criteria.
- ★ Narrows down the alternatives based on the criteria.

Define your role:

1. How can we provide information that satisfies all of the prospect's evaluation criteria?
2. How can we rank well in the criteria the prospect values more highly?
3. What impressions do we need to make to influence the unstated and more emotional criteria that are part of the prospect's decision?

6. Select an alternative

The final decision is part knowledge and part emotion. It is a place of confidence. To get here, the prospect must have exhausted their questions and obtained answers for their concerns. That's the knowledge part.

The emotional aspect of the final decision is all about the expected experience – what it will feel like when the prospect finally purchases and uses the product.

- What benefits will the buyer enjoy
- What pleasures and senses will be stimulated
- What emotional needs will be filled – love, acceptance, approval, ...

On the other side of the emotional balance are the prospect's fears related to not buying the product.

Need: "I need to hire a moving company."

I can better oversee the move by using the *Move Today* movers. I feel more in control by selecting them.

Want: "I want to take an adventure vacation".

I can include the key adventure activities the whole family wants. I'll be a hero by going with *Adventour*.

Problem: "I have a sinus headache."

I won't have to miss a day of work by being groggy. Since it has fewer side effects, I'll try the antihistamine first.

Select an alternative

- ★ **Conclusively answers** all of the prospect's questions and concerns.
- ★ **Positively envisions** the purchase, ownership, and use experience.

Define your role:

1. How have we addressed any concerns the prospect has about our product?
2. How have we encouraged the prospect to positively visualize himself or herself with our product?
3. What benefits, pleasures, and emotional needs have we painted in that visualization?
4. Do we need to portray any negative effects of not selecting our product?

7. Make the purchase

But wait, the prospect is not done yet. They need to go from “selected” to “purchased”, and obstacles may stand in their way. One buyer can be walking to the customer check-out with the product in hand and be deterred by a long line. Another buyer can be frustrated by the differing product prices in a newspaper advertisement and on the company’s web site.

Other obstacles include:

- Preferred channel doesn’t carry the product
- Product is out-of-stock in the selected channel
- New factors come to light as additional criteria
- Competitive price promotion affects selection decision

The purchase isn’t complete until money exchanges hands.

Need: “I need to hire a moving company.”

I called *Move Today* and make the move appointment. They sent me confirmation of my deposit and a move day checklist.

Want: “I want to take an adventure vacation”.

Adventour helps me book all of the components of the vacation. There are no price surprises.

Problem: “I have a sinus headache.”

I go to my favorite store to buy brand XYZ of antihistamine. It is out-of-stock. I buy the store’s generic brand.

Make the purchase

- ★ Selects a channel in which to purchase the product.
- ★ Completes the purchase in the selected channel.

Define your role:

1. What channels do we need to enable for purchase?
2. What price differences do we maintain across our channels? What affect does this have on a purchase?
3. How can we handle out-of-stock situations so that we don’t lose the purchase?
4. How have we minimized “surprises” when the buyer comes to purchase?
5. How do we anticipate and respond to price promotions from our competitors?
6. How can we minimize time lag between the buyer’s decision and the purchase?

8. Reevaluate the decision

Money has exchanged hands. It would appear that the purchase is complete. That might be the case if you were at a small store in France where returns are not accepted.

The truth is that many purchases can be returned for a partial or complete refund. Whether these policies are part of an accepted societal practice or the explicit result of a satisfaction guarantee, they mean that the customer has the chance to reevaluate their purchase based on their actual experience with the product.

When a customer reevaluates their purchase, they can still change their mind. Whether by returning their purchase or by complaining about their experience, the damage is done.

Need: "I need to hire a moving company."

Move Today arrives on time. They load the boxes and furniture into their van. We drive to my new home. They unload and are done by 3:00 pm. I am delighted.

Want: "I want to take an adventure vacation".

Mid vacation, our plans are interrupted by a local strike. We miss out on two of our planned adventures. *Adventour* won't give us a refund.

Problem: "I have a sinus headache."

The antihistamine doesn't seem to be helping my headache. I guess I'll try the decongestant.

Reevaluate the decision

- ★ **Compares** the realized product experience with the expected product experience.
- ★ **Returns** the product if their experience with the product doesn't meet their needs or expectations.
- ★ **Complains** about the product experience when they feel they have no recourse for a poor product experience.

Define your role:

1. How do we minimize a customer's need to return our product?
2. How do we ensure that the expected customer experience is the experience they actually realize with our product?
3. How do we turn a refund situation into a new purchase?
4. How do we fix a customer's unsatisfactory product experience into the opportunity for positive word-of-mouth?

It's All about Supporting Your Buyers in Their Process

- 1. Understand the buyer's motivation.**
You can't do #2 until you can do this. When you understand their motivation, you learn how to reach them before they frame their need.
- 2. Help them frame their need.**
Your chances for consideration are much greater when you are there helping them as they frame their need.
- 3. Make it easy for them to explore.**
Anticipate all of the questions and concerns that they will need to have answered. Then answer them across as many channels as you can.
- 4. Don't hide the truth from them.**
In this connected, Internet world, they probably already know it.
- 5. Seed them with decision criteria.**
Show your expertise and build trust by making this step easier for them.
- 6. Respond to their decision criteria.**
Even when the answer may be unfavorable, make it easy for them to know where your product stands. (See #4)
- 7. Let them decide for themselves.**
Never disparage a competitor. Don't even represent what they do. Let your integrity and your product speak for themselves.
- 8. Simplify and align your purchase options.**
Allow easy and quick purchase in the channel that makes the most sense for them. Don't challenge them with channel price disparities.
- 9. Cement a positive experience.**
Remember that their experience starts with their first touch point with you and that it doesn't end with the exchange of money.

Interested in Increasing Sales by Supporting Buyer Processes in Your Sales and Marketing Activities?

Though you can read about buying processes in books and articles, there is nothing quite like examining your own experiences as a buyer. However, you are often not the buyer of your own product. To get insight into their buying processes all you need to do is ask them. Start with your customers and move on to your prospects. Most customers will probably welcome the opportunity to tell you their story. All you need to do is give them a chance.

About Pam

- ★ Pam Hudadoff has been introducing and implementing innovative marketing techniques in high tech companies for over 18 years. She has worked in market development, product marketing and marketing communications while in positions at IBM, Sun Microsystems and iPlanet. Today she applies these skills to help start-up, mid-sized and large companies meet the marketing and sales challenges of this Internet-based world.
- ★ With this eBook, the first in a series, Pam is tackling the question – ***how does a company build and maintain persuasive momentum in the buying process to capture and accelerate sales.***
- ★ To help you understand and build support for your customers' buying processes, Pam offers half day seminars and full day workshops. For more information about these offerings, contact her at **pamela.hudadoff@appliedproductmarketing.com**.

Selected Additional Reading on Buying Processes:

The standard text for beginning marketers. You will find chapters on the traditional buying process here.

Philip Kotler and Kevin Keller, *Marketing Management* (Prentice Hall, 2008).

A book that makes a persuasive argument for aligning your sales process to the customer's buying process.

Bryan Eisenberg and Jeffrey Eisenberg, *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark? Persuading Customers When They Ignore Marketing* (Nashville: Nelson Business, 2006).

Valuable insight in how customers use many channels in their buying processes.

Paul F. Nunes and Frank V. Cespedes, "The Customer Has Escaped," *Harvard Business Review*, November 2003, pp. 96-105.

The company names used in the examples in this eBook are fictitious and are not meant to represent any company that offers similar services.