

Value Selling Maturity Model

The five levels of selling on value, with the 2026 addendum on AI ROI, measurement and renewal.



ABOUT THIS EDITION

Level 5 is tested at renewal

In 2015, Robin F. Goldsmith and Anthony Sarno described five levels of selling on value. Levels 1 to 4 bring modest gains. Level 5, the REAL Customer Value Selling Proposition, is where breakthrough results happen.

The 2026 edition keeps the original paper unchanged and adds a short addendum. It carries Level 5 past the buying decision: the customer value case agreed before purchase becomes the point of comparison during delivery and at renewal. Renewal is an application of Level 5, not a sixth level.

What's inside

Pages 3–14	The original 2015 paper, pages 1–12 as published: why value selling matters, the five levels, and the comparison table.
Pages 15–16	The 2026 addendum: Level 5 after the buying decision, AI ROI tied to business outcomes, the two evidence states of a renewal report, and five Level 5 review questions.
Page 17	Where to go next.

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VALUE SELLING MATURITY MODEL



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Value Selling Maturity Model

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Value Selling Maturity Model

Businesses always want to get the best deals for their money, but in today's tight economic times they are under extra pressure to buy, build, and pursue only those solutions with unquestionable value to their company. This in turn is forcing them more than ever to require both internal and external proponents to explicitly identify and communicate the value of their proposed solution expenditures; and increasingly they want that value expressed quantitatively in terms of financial Return on Investment (ROI).

Accordingly, buyers more frequently are looking to sellers to provide descriptions of their solutions' value, especially reliable ROI calculations that the buyers can use internally to support the purchase of the seller's products and services. This paper describes five Value Selling Maturity levels that tie to sales effectiveness.

Value Raises Sales Volume and Prices

Showing value has always been the key to greater sales and higher prices, in particular, as the way to overcome "Your price is too high" objections. These days, though, the bar has been raised. It's often no longer enough just to claim value. Now the customer has to see, believe, and care about the value.

Difficulty persuasively showing their offerings' value, especially to such higher

standards, is a key cause of many salespeople's not landing the sales they should be landing at the prices they deserve. Moreover, as sellers keep experiencing declining revenue, many are reducing spending on marketing and sales. This can create a downward spiral as reduced selling further curtails revenue, which leads to further sales and marketing budget cuts, and so on until the business dies. Sellers' challenge is how to sustain and even grow sales despite reducing their revenue generation engine's budget and headcount.

Quite simply, the answer for sellers, buyers, and decision makers is the same: *Deliver solutions that provide real ROI Value which is convincingly calculated and communicated.*

Because sellers' revenue is directly dependent on showing value and sales is a more defined community, sales has paid perhaps more conscious attention to value than buyers and decision makers. For instance, many sales methodologies refer to "Selling on Value," "Value Selling," or similar terms. However, despite such attention, sellers (as well as buyers and decision makers) continue to be challenged by difficulty demonstrating value, with seemingly the biggest difficulties related to reliably quantifying value with ROI.

Value comes from meeting the customer's REAL business requirements, which take skill and effort to discover.

~ It's often no longer enough just to claim value. Now the customer has to see, believe, and care about the value. ~

Value Selling Maturity Model

Unfortunately, a lot of the conventional wisdom about Value Selling often doesn't adequately help identify or sell REAL Value; and much of the widely-accepted advice about Selling on Value actually may be much less help than presumed.

Value Selling Maturity Model

Our analysis of the Selling on Value space suggests that Value Selling approaches tend to fall into five major groupings. Moreover, we suggest these groupings can be depicted as a progression of levels, which provide increasing sales effectiveness with each successively higher level.

With apologies to more formal and elaborate usages of the term, we're going to refer to these progressive levels as the "Maturity Model" for Selling on Value. The usual, better-known maturity models tend to concentrate on big gains from applying practices described at more mandatory lower levels, while reserving higher levels for more idealized practices that few organizations bother to attain.

This model is different in that moving from Level 1 through Level 4 provides only modestly increasing advantages; whereas breakthrough sales increases can occur for organizations that move to using Level 5 practices.

Frankly, despite talking about "Selling on Value," many sales organizations have taken their eyes off the Value ball. They may use Level 2 – 4 practices without explicitly relating them to Value. Some may get distracted by shiny lures, such as Sales Force Automation (SFA) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology, which focus on operational efficiencies that are important but don't address the Value content needed to attract and close customers.

Selling on Value principles are common sense, which of course is not all that common. It's more than just using the "Value" buzzword. Truly understanding value and selling based upon value are more difficult than many realize; but the effort pays off. *Without suitably selling on value, sales efforts always risk being ineffective wastes of scarce sales time and resources.* Value is the key element binding sales operations management and product development with marketing and sales methodologies to generate revenue effectively.

True Selling on Value means getting in sync with your customer's desire to Buy on Value, showing that your solution is their solution because it's most worth their time, money, and risk. Price is only half the Value story, so more is involved than merely selling the least expensive alternative. Benefits are the other half of Value, and that's more than just pushing customers to buy what you're selling.

Value Selling Maturity Model

Levels 1 – 4: Conventional Selling on Value

Regardless of whether it refers to “Selling on Value,” every sales methodology tells you to know and communicate your offering’s value. Knowing your value is not easy. Few if any of the methodologies tell you reliably how to determine your solution’s value. Similarly, many sales methodologies further advise supporting your sales pitch with financial figures that purport to prove your solution’s value; but again they don’t adequately tell you how to do it.

Many sellers claim their offering provides savings and other benefits to the customer without backing them up. An offering actually may provide superior value; but often even suppliers who do try to document the claim do it in ways that customers nonetheless may dismiss as fluff. It is extremely difficult to craft value propositions that resonate with customers.

Too often such claimed measures lack context and can confuse customers rather than help tell the story of why they should want to buy your product. When vendors lack clear understanding of value, they often take a “shot gun” approach by adding more and more variables trying to take credit for anything and everything, which actually can work against them by further obscuring any possible links to what the customer really values.

Level 1 – Not Selling on Value

Since practically all sales methodologies would say they focus on value, it’s hard to imagine any sales organization that doesn’t at least try to sell on value in some way. Yet, many sales efforts essentially do not sell value. Think of all the supposed sales calls that are nothing more than, “I’m selling this product. Would you please buy some.” Or, “I’m from this organization. Please buy from us.”

Except for fortuitous coincidence and wanting to help the seller, such as high school bands that finance trips by selling overpriced chocolate bars, not many sales are going to occur without identifying the value of buying the offering.

Level 2 - Differentiating Features

The fundamental technique salespeople use to show value, which is encouraged by essentially all sales methodologies, is to concentrate on their product or service solution’s differentiating features. Differentiating features indeed do set your solution apart from competitors’ features. The pitfall is implicitly assuming that the features alone are what customers need and value.

Features are ways *how* the product/service solution works. Features provide no benefits themselves to the customer. Rather, product/service solution features

Value Selling Maturity Model

provide benefits, if and only if they satisfy the customer's REAL business requirements—deliverable *whats* that provide value when met.

Although a seemingly logical approach, describing differentiating features requires some knowledge about competitors but actually little knowledge about customers. The more a seller focuses on their own solution, as much conventional sales wisdom encourages, the less likely they are to learn what the customer really needs and values.

Those same sales methodologies that emphasize differentiating features also all say to listen to your customer; but most really describe a form of lip service--listening for an opening so you can talk about your product. Effective sales people actually do listen, but in a far different way. They get in the mind of the customer, hearing and understanding what the customer values, which is seldom the product or service solution itself that the sales person is selling.

Without adequately understanding the customer's REAL requirements and what the customer feels it's worth to fulfill them, sellers may fail to focus on the right features; and they easily may stress features that seem important to the supplier but deliver relatively little value to the customer. Moreover, even if the features may meet customer needs, simply describing the features doesn't get to the issue of how much value they provide. That too must come from the customer.

A further subtle but insidious issue is that simply describing the features leaves the burden on the customer to figure out whether, which, and how the product's features actually do meet their requirements. There's no assurance the customer (or sales person) will make that linkage to customer value from a mere description of the solution's features.

Level 3 - Benefits

A second commonly-recommended approach to selling on value involves listing all the benefits the seller believes their solution may deliver to target customers. Emphasis is on quantity, the more benefits the better. Since value and benefits are somewhat synonymous, to many, listing presumed benefits is what they mean by "Selling on Value." Value indeed comes from benefits, which puts this technique on the right track; but it has a number of seldom-recognized pitfalls that often derail it without the seller's knowing what's happened.

The obvious weakness of listing benefits is that there's no assurance the customer will consider them to be benefits. Even if the customer does agree they are benefits, there's no telling whether or how much the customer values receiving the benefits.

Widely-recommended variations on listing benefits involve listing your experience with comparable companies, quotes from satisfied customers, and success stories describing how previous purchasers have used your products and services. While

Value Selling Maturity Model

testimonials and the like can be very helpful to making a sale, their persuasiveness is largely dependent on their similarity to the prospective customer's own needs. Too often, dwelling too much on other customers' situations that aren't really pertinent to the prospect can signal that the seller doesn't actually understand, or care to understand, the prospective customer's needs, which can have a counter-productive effect and kill a prospective sale.

Simply listing presumed benefits, including success stories and client references, is a very positive up-beat approach that sales people are comfortable with. It's largely a one-time one-size-fits-all approach. It also can be very passive, requiring little sales effort, little knowledge of competitors, and surprisingly little actual knowledge of customers, which understandably can add to making it a favored sales approach. In fact, this approach relies on customers to care enough to dig through the benefits list and hopefully sell themselves on the product by relating to some of its claimed benefits.

For complex sales, the customer probably is buying confidence in the seller as much as the seller's product/service solution; and seller passivity doesn't create confidence. In addition, the bigger the list, the more advantages are being claimed that the customer probably doesn't care about, which in fact can dilute the solution's net perceived value of benefits that do relate to the customer.

Level 4 - (Ostensible) ROI and Calculators

The third commonly-recommended approach to selling on value is to indicate your solution's Return on Investment (ROI). ROI compares the Return (benefits) to the Investment Cost of achieving those benefits. ROI typically is expressed as an annual percentage, which allows comparison with returns from alternative investments. While ultimately ROI is the appropriate measure of value, many sellers' ROI claims tend to be suspect and often are not believed by buyers.

The biggest impediment, of course, is that buyers have learned to be skeptical about any sales claims, especially those involving money. For instance, many buyers distrust the typically large financial returns which sellers, and especially their online ROI calculators, invariably predict for their products.

Such fears frequently are warranted. In general, buyers and decision makers, as well as sellers, have difficulty determining ROI. In fact, most have more difficulty than they realize, typically having no awareness that they've fallen into one or more of the ten traps that can result in relying on unreliable, irresponsible, and wrong ROI.

Sellers are especially prone to common ROI pitfalls, such as failing to know and address what the customer really values, failing to include factors other than those which justify a previously decided upon outcome (i.e., their solution) rather than objectively evaluating the full set of factors affecting investment alternatives, and failing to quantify both tangibles and intangibles.

Value Selling Maturity Model

Claiming an inappropriate ROI not only may fail to convince a customer of your solution's worth but actually can actively undercut a sale by inadvertently raising questions about the seller's trustworthiness.

Level 5 - REAL Customer Value Selling Proposition

In contrast to the relatively modest gains that may accompany moving up from Levels 1 to 4, advancing to Level 5 can produce breakthrough sales results performance. Buyers want Value and want to do business with sellers who:

- Fully grasp the customer's critical business issues and REAL business requirements that provide Value by adequately addressing those issues.
- Deliver a REAL Customer Value Selling Proposition that clearly shows
 - How their solution addresses the customer's important needs and REAL business requirements; and does so with
 - Right, reliable, and responsible financial Return on Investment (ROI) Value that is superior to next best alternatives.

This entails several key elements that may sound similar to but in fact differ appreciably from the Levels 1 – 4 conventional approaches to selling on value.

Identify what the customer truly values – The focus needs to be first on what the customer needs, from their perspective, rather than the typical emphasis on what you're selling and then hunting for ways you think the customer ought to have a use for it.

When, and only when, the seller understands and satisfies what the customer truly Values does Selling on Value dramatically increase sales of the seller's proposed solution.

Much more than is recognized, both sellers and customers too often mistakenly presume they understand the customer's needs when they don't. At How to Dominate Local Markets, we help sales and marketing people use powerful Problem Pyramids™ and other concepts and techniques described in Robin Goldsmith's recent book, *Discovering REAL Business Requirements for Software Project Success*, to identify the customer's REAL business requirements that provide value when met.

These methods can be used to increase sales in three ways. First, the methods enable using quick customer persona profiles to create initial generalized customer Value marketing messages that open more doors to attract more prospects.

Value Selling Maturity Model

However, once contact is established with a qualified prospect, then it's essential to apply the techniques in the second way to adjust the general Value proposition to what that particular customer values most. For most product solutions, the general value message usually is close to what the prospect values; and this additional more specific zeroing in on Value can pay off many times over by increasing sales closing rates.

The third use of REAL requirements discovery is vital to successful sales of complex customized solutions. Not only are the generalized Value approaches unlikely to pertain sufficiently to the individual customer's situation, but it's also common that the customer has not adequately discovered their REAL business requirements either. They may be acting on unreliable presumptions about their needs and solutions, which can lead a seller to focus on a product or service solution that isn't right and will fail to deliver the Value the customer really needs.

In such complex situations, the high-maturity salesperson acts in an advisory partnering with the prospect to discover together the customer's REAL problem/challenge/opportunity and the REAL business requirements that will provide value by solving the problem, meeting the challenge, or taking the opportunity. Not only does this discovery enable successful solution, but it dramatically changes the salesperson's role into a trusted relationship. It does take even greater skill and effort but is key to landing these typically much larger and higher margin sales.

Explicitly link differentiating features to what the customer truly values – The seller has to know and clearly communicate how their product or service solution specifically addresses the customer's REAL business requirements that the customer values most. The seller must make this linkage actively and cannot rely passively on the customer figuring it out.

At How to Dominate Local Markets we use ROI Value Modeling™ to create ROI Value Statements™ which explicitly describe how each of the solution's differentiating features satisfy the customer's various REAL business requirements and thereby provide value. This linkage provides the buyer a believable basis for choosing your solution over next best alternatives.

Determine the REAL ROI™ of providing what the customer truly values – Starting with identifying and linking the proposed solution to satisfying the REAL business requirements that the customer values most, and quantifying both tangibles and intangibles of all relevant factors using the customer's own figures, at How to Dominate Local Markets we determine REAL ROI™ that avoids the 10 common ROI pitfalls.

Customers recognize that such ROI is right, reliable, and responsible. It meaningfully measures and convincingly conveys the Value of the seller's solution to the customer; and it provides a supportable basis for making sound decisions about buying and implementing proposed solutions.

Value Selling Maturity Model

REAL Customer Value Selling Propositions tell the story of how the seller's solution provides Value by meeting the customer's REAL business requirements and convincingly quantify that Value with REAL ROI™ using the customer's own financial figures.

It takes greater skill and commitment to develop REAL Customer Value Selling Propositions; but the added effort to perform at Level 5 can pay off handsomely. Not only can sellers increase their sales yield by producing persuasive proposals for solutions customers want to buy; but also the seller's status improves.

Customers have confidence in the seller and want to buy from them. When the seller truly understands the customer's needs, the seller can make sure success stories and testimonials are relevant to and resonate with the customer. It should be easy to understand why the different, truly Customer Value approach represented by Level 5 high-maturity Selling on Value can so dramatically improve sales revenues while reducing sales effort and costs.

Value Selling Maturity Model

Level	1	2	3	4	5
	Not Selling on Value	Differentiating Features	Benefits	(Ostensible) ROI, Calculators	REAL Customer Value Selling Proposition
Consist of	Requests to please buy whatever the seller is selling without indicating value	All of the product's features the seller thinks differentiate his product from the competitors	All the potential benefits the seller can think of	Factors and figures that make the seller's solution look good and seemingly justify buying it	Links showing how key differentiating features address what the customer values and its believable superior REAL ROI™
Answers the Question	What is the seller selling?	How is the seller's product different?	What benefits does the seller think a buyer might want?	What is the best financial case the seller can make?	What does the customer value most, how does the seller's solution satisfy it, and what's it worth quantitatively?
Requires	Perseverance in face of frustration with little likelihood of reinforcement	Customer must figure out whether and which, if any, differentiating features do something of value for them	Customer must figure out whether and which, if any, benefits are of value to them	Customer's belief that the claimed ROI is trustworthy and reflects value the customer will receive	Customer must confirm what they value, that the solution satisfies it, and there is REAL ROI™ Value using their own financial figures
Pros	Takes negligible seller skill or knowledge	Identifies and emphasizes seller's product's presumed strengths	Positive, seemingly emphasizing value	Quantified financial figures can be persuasive and help support buying decisions	Customers buy the solution they want and truly need; sellers sell more with less cost and effort
Cons	Produces sales only when customer obviously needs the product or wants to help the seller	Requires some knowledge of competitors' products but little knowledge of customer's needs	Customer may not see the value; extra claimed benefits can dilute message	May not relate to what customer values most, may leave out critical factors unfavorable to seller, and may actually raise question of seller's trustworthiness	Not the conventional wisdom approach; takes greater skill and seemingly more effort (but actually less total effort for higher payback in the long run)

Value Selling Maturity Model

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2026 ADDENDUM

Level 5 continues after the buying decision

Anthony Sarno · ValueLogics.ai · September 2026

This addendum extends the application of Level 5 to AI ROI, measurement, and renewal. The original 2015 paper by Robin F. Goldsmith and Anthony Sarno, including its five levels and conclusions, remains unchanged on pages 3–14 of this edition (original pages 1–12).

The original Level 5 asks the seller to discover what the customer truly values, link the solution to the customer's real business requirements, and quantify a right, reliable, responsible ROI with the customer's own figures. That same customer value case can guide decisions after purchase. Before deployment, the customer and seller should agree on the Business As Usual (BAU) baseline, the Goal, the Goal Measure, the assumptions, and the projected Business Impact. They should also agree on how and when the result can be measured.

At renewal, the original case becomes the point of comparison. The team can review what was projected, what actual measures are available, what changed, and which sources support the finding. If the Goal changes, the earlier baseline and assumptions should remain visible so the next case has an intelligible history.

Renewal is an application of Level 5, not a sixth maturity level.

Measurability is an attribute of Level 5: the customer and seller define the baseline, measurement source, review period, and test of success before claiming value. A phased rollout also determines when benefits can start; projected value should follow the rollout schedule rather than assume a full run rate from day one.

AI ROI must be tied to a business outcome

An AI agent may perform many tasks without producing the customer outcome that justified its purchase. Task counts and usage can help explain activity, but the business case needs a Goal Measure that the customer recognizes. A financial result also needs an explicit, approved method for converting a measured change into Business Impact. The seller should preserve the link between the agent's work, the customer's business requirement, the measure, and the value claim.

A renewal report has two evidence states

PROJECTED CASE

A saved BAU, Goal, assumptions, and projected Business Impact can support a renewal planning conversation even when actual results are unavailable. It does not prove that the projected value occurred.

MEASURED REVIEW

When actuals exist, the review can compare them with the Goal and cite the source, measurement period, and material variance. This is the basis for a claim about observed performance.

The report must label projected and realized value separately. The current Phase I Renewal Report uses projected Business Impact; actual measures and ROI Replay evidence require the later measurement capability.

AAEI v1.2 and the evidence record

AAEI (AI Accountability Evidence Interchange) v1.2 is a public proposed specification for a portable evidence record. Its 12 fields include the role served, problem, BAU measure, Goal Measure, desired result, and evidence integrity references. It can give another system a consistent way to inspect what an AI system was meant to deliver and what evidence is associated with the outcome.

AAEI does not prescribe the ROI formula, generate the actual measure, or certify a renewal result. Those results must be produced by the implementing value calculation and measurement process. AAEI v1.2 was submitted as a request for consideration by the Object Management Group; it is not an adopted OMG standard.

Level 5 review questions

- 1 Did the customer confirm the problem, BAU, Goal, and Goal Measure?
- 2 Can the projected Business Impact be traced to customer inputs and explicit assumptions?
- 3 Was the measurement source and review period agreed before deployment?
- 4 At renewal, are projected results separated from actual results?
- 5 Can the customer inspect the evidence behind any realized value claim?

Sources and status

Goldsmith, Robin F., and Anthony Sarno. Value Selling Maturity Model, 2015. Original pages 1–12, pages 3–14 of this edition.

ValueLogics.ai LLC. AAEI v1.2 MOF Metamodel Specification and Request for Consideration, August 23, 2026. github.com/ValueLogicsAI/AAEI.

Put Level 5 to work, from the first call to renewal.

ValueLogics.ai helps sellers and buyers build customer-confirmed ROI cases and carry them through delivery and renewal.

valuelogics.ai/value-selling-maturity

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