

# Sales and Service Excellence

ESSENTIALS

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Essentials of  
team leadership

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# Never Be Closing

## Sales conversation; a relationship in three acts

By Tim Hurson and Tim Dunne

As it turns out, the most useful structure for facilitating commercial transactions owes a lot to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In 335 bce, Aristotle observed that the best of Greek drama employed a three-act structure -- presenting a story with a beginning, middle, and an end.

Almost every play you attend, movie you see, or story you hear relies on this same three-act structure -- from *A Christmas Carol* to *Toy Story* to *Star Wars*. It's used in novels, comic books, short stories, and even video games. The three-act structure builds on the way human beings naturally process complex information. It's as old as mankind's need to communicate.



Act I introduces the characters and their situation, and then presents a turning point, often called a plot point that forces the protagonist to take some action. This usually takes the first 20 to 30 percent of screen time. Act II throws up challenges to the hero, leading to a make-or-break crisis, which is the second major plot point, and drives the story into the final act. This generally takes up the middle 50 percent of the story. Act III plays out the resolution of the crisis, with the protagonist winning (or losing) the battle. This usually takes up the final 20 to 30 percent of the film.

*Star Wars* producer Gary Kurtz described how he learned about the three-act structure this way: "I took a master class with Billy Wilder once and he said that in the first act of a story you put your character up in a tree and in the second act you set the tree on fire and then in the third you get him down." Here's a graphic representation of the three-act story structure:

Like the best films, fairy tales, and fiction, the most productive sales meetings also use a three-act structure -- with a beginning, middle, and an end.

The three acts of the sales conversation are:

I: Earning the Right to Ask

II: Exploration

III: Demonstrating Usefulness

To drive the meeting forward, the first and second acts contain turning points, just as in a drama, that signal the beginning of the next phase of the interaction.

**Here's how it works:**

In Act I, you work to earn the credibility to ask probing questions. Once you cross the credibility threshold, you propel the meeting into its second act. In an hour-long meeting, Act I may last from ten to fifteen minutes.

In Act II, you explore your client's needs by asking a series of carefully designed questions that help both you and your client better understand the issues and challenges that need to be resolved. Its turning point is the catalytic question -- the question that provokes genuine interest, clears away the fog, motivates a desire to act, and opens the door to novel solutions. This turning point drives the meeting into its third act. In an hour-long meeting, Act II may last about thirty minutes.

In Act III, you demonstrate usefulness to your client by offering resources and insights, matching your client's needs to your products or services, and establishing the basis for a continuing relationship. In an hour-long conversation, Act III may last about fifteen minutes (however, if you're really being useful to your client, your meeting may go beyond its original end time).

Like many dramas, the sales story often has a Prologue -- an opening scene that takes place before the main story and gives background details that help in understanding things as they unfold. And, like many plays, the sales story may also have an intermission.

There's one other crucial element in any story or sales meeting -- the people involved. Whether in stories or sales, every character has unique interests, traits, hopes, and fears. They take in information in different ways and express themselves in different ways. The better you understand the characters in a story, the more you can appreciate the story itself. Similarly, the better you understand the people in your sales meeting, the more productive you can be. **SSE**

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**Tim Hurson** is founding partner of ThinkX Intellectual Capital and has delivered productive thinking programs throughout the world.

**Tim Dunne** is a consulting partner with ThinkX, KnowInnovation, and New & Improved, firms that offer leadership, innovation, and sales training to companies worldwide.

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