

SALES STAR



Julie Thomas: The Visionary Behind ValueSelling

[By Akbar Ali]

Julie Thomas is president and CEO of ValueVision Associates, one of the world's leading sales agencies. It also happens to be the home of the much-heralded ValueSelling method, which has found many disciples since it was first developed and implemented in the industry.

Thomas attended the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she majored in finance and minored in accounting and from which she holds a bachelor's degree in business administration. Her first job out of school was in accounting, which she recalls as a complete disaster.

"I *hated* it. I was just bored out of my mind," she says.

Shortly thereafter she ended up at a company called Gartner Inc. in a sales operation group working as an accountant on order entry and calculating commissions, essentially performing the back side of sales for the company and reporting to the vice president of sales.

It was at this time that she realized a career in sales would be an ideal fit. But since she was an accountant, getting her boss to give her an opportunity to get her foot in the door proved to be more of a challenge that she expected.

"For six months I bugged them, saying, 'I can do what these salespeople are doing, I can do it, I can do it! Lo and behold, he finally said, 'Okay, I'm going to give you a shot,' and promoted me into sales. From then on, my career was in sales and ultimately [went] into sales management."

Thomas was running the Southwestern region for Gartner, traveling from her home in San Diego to Phoenix, Sacramento, or Los Angeles every day, when she realized she needed to come off the road. She was just starting a family, and the schedule was simply too overwhelming for her.

"I was a total road warrior. We were going through massive expansion. The company vice president informed me that he was looking for someone with the actual sales experience to figure out how to train sales staff and get them up to speed quickly."

The timing was perfect. Thomas was able to assume a more stable position and at the same time move her career in a direction that would take her to the leadership position she desired.

"It was a migration into a staff position, which allowed me to come off the road for personal reasons, but I was able to take all of that wealth of experience and make a contribution to the company in a different way. It was a really fun transition for me, and that's how I ended up in sales training," she affirms.

"It was interesting because, at first, I was a little nervous about it because I had always been in sales, engaging with customers," she adds. "But it was so rewarding as a manager to watch new salespeople get up to speed quickly and get to a level of success faster because we were able to create much more relevant and practical programs for them to do so."

So how did Thomas go from Gartner sales manager to the face of ValueSelling?

"I was a customer of theirs. We used

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I have two young children, aged five and seven, and I love to spend time with my kids. I live in San Diego, so I love to be outside, bike riding. If I wasn't a working mom, I'd love to be a working mom-tennis player whenever I could. And we *love* to entertain! We're wineys and foodies!

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. Chris Daughtry — and Brownie songs for my daughter.

Q. What was the last magazine you read?

A. *Cooking Light*.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. *The Office*.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My mom. I was raised by a single, working mom. We didn't have much, but we didn't know it. She, my sister, and I were — and continue to be — very close.

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ValueSelling at Gartner. I often use the analogy that I'm kind of the Victor Kiam of the sales industry. He was the man who years ago bought Remington Razor. He had a commercial in which he said, 'I loved this razor so much I bought the company.' That's kind of how I felt. I believed in ValueSelling so much that when I left Gartner after 16 years I approached them to work for them, and — to my surprise — the two founders were actually seeking an exit strategy from the business. One was retiring, and the other one didn't want to take over the company on his own. My husband and I put together a plan, and we actually acquired the company."

Since acquiring the company, Thomas has tirelessly promoted the method of ValueSelling, which she says works for one reason: it is a very simple, intuitive sales process which teaches the skills associated with executing that sales process.

Thomas describes the method as simple but not simplistic:

"I use the word 'simple' in that it's *different* from easy. Golf is simple. You can understand that game very easily, but if you've ever played golf, you know it's not easy to acquire the skills to do it well. The same is true of ValueSelling. Because it is simple to understand and simple for salespeople to internalize, you don't get pushback from salespeople. And there are so many sales training programs out there that, in my opinion, just overcomplicate the situation by creating [so much] extra busywork for the salespeople (filling out forms, spreadsheets, workbooks, etc.) that it's an excuse to never actually engage the customer."

"At ValueSelling, we're all about engaging the customer, and when you do, how do you make the conversation as productive and effective as possible? That's what ValueSelling

teaches people. So if you're brand-new into sales, it's a great skill set to acquire. And if you've been in sales for 30 years and reached certain successes, you'll also love the program because we're not trying to undo everything that's worked for you in the past. We're building on it within a consistent framework and process so that now you can be consciously competent in what you're doing. Plus, when things go wrong, you'll have a mechanism to diagnose it, figure it out, and then move forward again. People who have been in sales for 20 or 30 years will come up to me and say, 'This is the best sales training I've ever been through because it's so practical, and I wish I would have had this years ago!'"

Having taught and trained hundreds of professionals over the years, Thomas has pinpointed some of the most common (and avoidable) mistakes she sees salespeople committing. The first mistake they make, she says, is thinking that they can do it and be good at it simply because they've graduated college.

"Sales is an interesting profession because there's very little education to prepare people for sales jobs. If you look at colleges today, you'll know that almost 50% of college graduates will end up in some kind of sales job, but there's no sales curriculum in the universities. People are going into this profession completely unprepared for it. This whole sales training industry was created out of necessity because corporations knew that universities were not preparing people for this profession as they were for accounting or finance or even marketing," she asserts.

Another common mistake is assuming that product knowledge will be enough to make a salesperson successful even if the salesperson makes no attempt to connect with the client. Thomas describes this half-blind approach as leading to what she calls the "show up and throw up."

"They think, 'All I have to do is acquire all this detailed product information so I can get the appointment.' Ten minutes into the call their prospect has completely tuned out because they haven't made any kind of connection."

She also faults naïve sales professionals for not understanding how businesses operate and how the people in businesses make decisions.

"They underestimate the politics in the organization and the role of the procurement or finance organization and all those levels of complexity that come when they're selling big-ticket items to companies," she says.

With so much successful experience under her belt, Thomas has been the recipient of numerous industry accolades, including the 2005 Entrepreneurial Star Award from Business Women's Network and Microsoft in November 2005, a distinction bestowed upon those who have "blazed the trail on behalf of women as well as minority entrepreneurs in the workplace."

So what does the trailblazing Thomas think of women in the sales profession and the unique challenges they face?

"Women are naturally very good at creating and maintaining relationships purely because of differences in gender, and that becomes very critical in a sales job. Women are also able to put their egos aside maybe sometimes a little better than men. [They] are in the situation to try to get things right in terms of the business communication, as opposed to just *being* right," she observes.

She recalls that despite the success she has had over the years, there were several factors working against her when she started out.

"When I was in sales early on, I had two things

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going against me in a lot of ways in the early 90s: A, I was very young, and B, I was a woman. Almost all of my prospects were old enough to be my father! At the time I used to think that because of my youth and inexperience (and to a certain extent my lack of confidence) that I could conduct a business dialogue and add value to that relationship; I was very successful at it, maybe because I knew I had to work harder to achieve credibility and maintain that credibility in those situations.”

Thomas offers this story as an example of some of the challenges she faced as a young, single woman that her male counterparts did not have to contend with:

“I remember my boss at the time had two season tickets to the Celtics, and he wanted us to use them for entertaining. He didn’t want us to just give them to the client because that was a missed opportunity to build relationships. So here I was, a young single woman in my 20s, and almost all my clients were married. Who was going to go out for an evening with *me*? Whereas a guy could easily say, ‘Hey, let’s go to the Celtics game.’ There were certain things I couldn’t leverage because it was inappropriate, so I had to find other ways to build those relationships. It’s different when you’re female and your customers are male. But I think you work harder and you overcome that.”

In addition to her consulting and training duties, Thomas has taken up the responsibilities of an author in writing *ValueSelling: Driving Up Sales One Conversation at a Time*, published in November 2006.

“We’re really excited about the book,” says Thomas. “It has been very well received in the marketplace, and it’s had great success. We see it as twofold. One, we’ve got a number of sales executives, leaders, and professionals

who have used ValueSelling professionally, and they were asking for a book, for something they could use as a reference. And two, the other thing that we’re seeing with the book is that it’s opening doors to new clients. It’s been a great way for people to look at ValueSelling as a methodology and get a good understanding about how they might bring it into their organization.”

“What I like about it is that it’s not a textbook on sales,” she adds. “It’s based on the practical experience we’ve learned over the years implementing ValueSelling — and it’s a nice airplane read. It’s concise and a great book to read when you’re stuck on a plane or in an airport or while you’re on a train. It’s not going to bog you down like a textbook. There are so many sales books out there — I’ve read through them, and to me, they’ve worked like NyQuil because I just fall asleep in my chair. We’re very pleased with the early sales and how quickly people have been picking it up.”

Thomas acknowledges that several individuals have been instrumental in her success, serving as mentors as she made her way to the top of the industry.

“Early on, my mentors were my parents. I remember when I was going to college my stepfather (who was a CPA) gave me what I think ended up being really good advice, which was ‘Get a business degree in the finance and accounting area because no matter what you end up doing in life, accounting is the language of business, and you need to understand that language no matter where you go in business.’”

She also recognizes a couple of managers who served as role models in her early sales career.

“One was a woman I learned a ton from, and

she saw great potential in me. She was one of the hardest bosses I ever worked for — she was tough, she had high expectations, higher than I had even for myself, but I learned so much from her. She gave me the opportunity to excel, and I will forever be in her debt. Today, she remains a good friend.

“Another mentor of mine is my husband, who I met years ago. He is the CEO of his own company today. From a business perspective, I learn a lot from him every day. He and I approach problems and business very differently, so he’s a great resource for me as we’re building and growing and managing ValueSelling Business Associates. He has wonderful insights and plays the devil’s advocate with me. He’s my biggest fan, but he has a contrarian perspective on a lot of issues, which forces me to think things through and reflect on them.”

For the emerging sales professional, Thomas offers not only invaluable advice but also perspective:

“Sales is the best profession in the whole world because if you are good at it, you can make a *ton* of money. It really is like running your own business in so many ways. It provides you a lot of freedom and flexibility.

“My advice is to think of yourself as a sponge. What can you learn about your prospects and their businesses? How can you add value to their business? And do you *really* understand your competition? One of the mistakes young salespeople often make is that they discount the competition and the competitive alternative. There’s always an alternative for your prospect to do nothing at all. In many cases, that’s the main thing we’re competing against: the status quo, keeping things the same, not changing or implementing anything. Position yourself as that resource to your potential prospects.”



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Thomas adds, "If you are genuinely interested in helping somebody solve business problems and that comes across, you're going to build more trust and rapport than if you are perceived as the slick used-car salesman that

doesn't care what the client's needs are. It's really thinking about how you can serve your customers and prospects and how you can help them first through your capabilities and being resourceful."

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