Helping Buyers Find Courage in Uncertain Times
A Conversation with Ted McKenna

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Introduction

Sales isn't about pushing products. It isn't about discounts, clever closing lines, or filling pipelines with more leads.

At its core, sales is about helping another human being — your buyer — make a decision they can feel confident about. And that is much harder than it sounds.

In my recent conversation with **Ted McKenna**, co-author of ***The Challenger Sale***, ***The JOLT Effect*** and ***The Activator Advantage***, we dive deep into what millions of sales conversations reveal about how great sellers create confidence, reduce indecision, and activate buyers. You can find links to these books and the full podcast in the Resources Section of this article.

What follows is a detailed look at the key topics we covered, the lessons to take away, and the specific actions you can apply right now.

Why ***Confidence*** is the Real Currency in Sales

One of the most striking ideas Ted brings forward is that **buying decisions aren't about information — instead, they're about confidence**.

Think about it. In complex B2B deals, your buyers are swimming in information. They've read analyst reports, combed through G2 reviews, asked peers for recommendations, and sat through demos. Buyers don't need *more* information.

What they need is a way to believe:

- **Belief in the decision itself** — that moving forward won't sink them personally or the organization in general
- **Belief in themselves** — that they can defend this choice to their boss, their board, their team
- **Belief in you** — that you'll be there to deliver on the promises you're making

When indecision shows up — and it always does — the natural reaction for many sellers is to double down on more information, more demos, more ROI slides. But Ted's research shows that rarely works. ***What works is building confidence***.

The JOLT Effect: How to Break Through Buyer Indecision

Ted and his co-authors studied **2.5 million sales conversations**. What they discovered is that most deals stall not because buyers prefer the status quo, but because they're paralyzed by fear of making the *wrong* decision.

They're afraid of losing political capital — losing the promotion, the bonus, or even getting fired. They're afraid of upsetting the organization — moving from BAU/status quo to something worse!

This is where the **JOLT framework** comes in:

- **J: Judge the indecision.** Don't assume all buyer hesitation is the same. Figure out if it's fear of missing out, fear of messing up, or fear of the unknown
- **O: Offer a recommendation.** Stop being "solution-neutral." Buyers want guidance. They want you to tell them what works
- **L: Limit the exploration.** Help them avoid analysis paralysis by curating the options
- **T: Take risk off the table.** Share proof, guarantees, or low-risk ways to start

As Ted says, great sellers don't just manage the sales cycle. They manage the **decision cycle**.

In fact, another one of my podcast guests, author and sales guru Jeff Lipsius says "The point of selling isn't selling — it's buying, and the salesperson's job is to help the customer make better buying decisions!

The Activator Advantage: Moving from Passive to Proactive

In his newest book, *The Activator Advantage*, Ted and his co-authors push this idea further.

Many, perhaps most customers struggle to know what's coming next, and become paralyzed with indecision.

The highest-performing sellers don't just reduce fear — they **create forward momentum and help buyers see around corners**.

Ted calls this approach the *Activator Advantage*. These sellers know how to:

- Spot hesitation early
- Insert confidence at the right time
- Activate buyers into taking the next step

And here's the key: they do it without pushing. Activation isn't about pressure. It's about empathy, insight, and timing.

Lessons for Today's Seller

The conversation with Ted is full of nuggets and gems. Here are a few that stand out for me:

1. **Discounts don't build confidence.** They often signal desperation and erode trust
2. **Sellers need to be teachers.** The best reps curate, guide, and educate — not overwhelm
3. **Confidence comes from simplicity.** The more options you put on the table, the harder it is for a buyer to decide
4. **Empathy is a sales skill.** Understanding your buyer's fear is more important than showcasing your product's features
5. **Indecision is universal.** Don't take it personally — but don't ignore it, either

Actions You Can Take Today

I always want my readers or listeners to walk away with practical steps. Here are specific things you can do in your next sales cycle to apply Ted's insights:

- **Start by diagnosing indecision.** Ask directly: "What's holding you back from moving forward?" Listen deeply

- **Offer a confident recommendation.** Instead of saying "Here are five options," say: "Based on what you've told me, I recommend we start here"
- **Limit the rabbit holes.** When buyers start chasing endless research, bring them back to the essentials
- **De-risk the decision.** Use pilot programs, proof-of-concepts, or clear implementation plans to take risk off the table
- **Coach yourself to stay calm.** When a buyer hesitates, don't rush to fill the silence with discounts or pressure. Hold the space. Build trust

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Why This Matters Now

The environment we sell in today is full of uncertainty: economic pressure, layoffs, budget freezes, and risk-averse executives.

In that environment, the temptation is to **push harder**. Ted's research makes it clear: the winners are those who can **activate confidence** in buyers, not push them to the finish line.

That requires a mindset shift. You're not just a salesperson. You're a **confidence guide**.

Final Reflections

As I reflect on this conversation with Ted, I'm reminded that the very best sellers don't just chase quotas. They leave buyers better than they found them.

They reduce fear
They build clarity
They create momentum

That's the **Activator Advantage**. And it's something we can all practice — starting today.

So, here's my challenge to you: in your next sales call, don't try to close the deal. Instead ask yourself: *What can I do in this moment to help this buyer feel more confident?*

Do that consistently, and not only will your results improve — your buyers will thank you for it.

Key Takeaways

- Indecision is the #1 deal killer
- Buyers need confidence more than they need information
- The JOLT framework is your playbook: Judge, Offer, Limit, Take risk off the table
- Activation is about empathy, clarity, and timing — not pressure
- Your role is to be a guide, not just a closer

Closing Thought

In *The Activator Advantage*, Ted McKenna and his co-authors show us what the data already proves: the sellers who thrive are those who help buyers overcome their fears.

That's not just good salesmanship. That's good leadership.

Resource Links

🎧 Listen to the full conversation on *Thoughts on Selling* here: **Apple Podcasts**, **Spotify**, or **YouTube Videos**.

📚 Add these to your personal library and read (or listen to):

- ***The Challenger Sale***
- ***The JOLT Effect***
- ***The Activator Advantage***

The investment will pay off many times over!

And then go put these ideas into action!