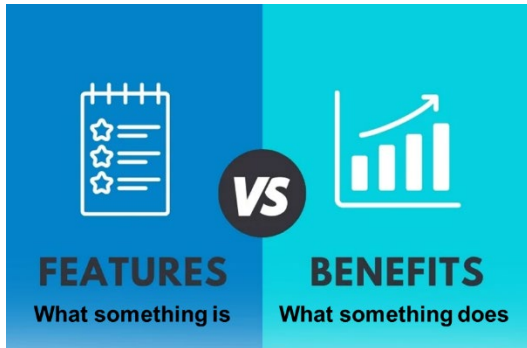


Selling Features versus Benefits

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



You may not think of yourself as being in sales, but everyone sells. We sell ourselves when trying to get a job, community role, or place on a team. We sell when trying to persuade coworkers, friends, and family to adopt our ideas. At some point, we sell our cars, houses, and other assets. Sales may not be in our title, but the act of selling is something we all do.

So, think about the last time you tried to sell an idea, product, service, or yourself. What was the basis of your message?

Did you focus on yourself, the product, or the service? If you did, you are in the majority. Most people, including many sales people, leaders, parents, and others in positions of influence focus on their idea or offer as opposed to the benefit of their idea or offer. But generally, emphasizing “what is” instead of “what does” isn’t the most effective way to influence or sell.

Think about this: would you rather buy a feature or a result? For example, would you rather have a camper trailer with a queen-size bed in it or an amazing camping experience in the mountains next to a babbling brook? Or would you rather have a list of meal ingredients or the best meal you ever ate? A spouse or an extravagant relationship? The end result, not the means to the end result, is what most people would say matters most.

Why then do people in positions of influence focus on the “what is” instead of the “what does” when first attempting to gain buy-in for something? In other words, why do people talk about solutions instead of the problems their solutions solve or the opportunities their solutions leverage? Why don’t people emphasize the benefits and the desired end-result? The reason is pretty simple. When people figure out how to solve a problem, they move their attention from the problem to the solution. People become immersed in the details of the solution. As a result, by the time others get involved, people take for granted they are at the same place in the problem-solution-implementation process.

Being focused on solutions isn’t inherently bad. Nor is focusing on the implementation of solutions. Solutions solve problems. At some point people need to move from problem to solution and then to implementation. But when trying to gain buy-in for a solution from others, buy-in for the problem comes before discussing the solution. People need to be bought into the end result that the solution enables. People need to believe in a desired outcome before they believe in the method of achieving the outcome.

Solutions are part of our lives—professionally and personally. We buy them at work and home. We implement them at work and home. We spend most of our days doing activity that is solving some problem or leveraging some opportunity. But we can get so focused on what we do that we forget the problem we are solving. Then we talk about what we do instead of the vision or goal which we are working toward. This is fine as long as we are not trying to get others to join our vision or be part of our goal.

If you are thinking about this in a business context, you may be thinking about your marketing messaging. If so, you may be thinking about your organization’s [value proposition](#). If you have a compelling value proposition, you probably include your competitive differentiation in it which very likely includes features. Having differentiated features in a value proposition is common practice and often compelling. However, an even better addition to a value proposition is to emphasize desired outcomes.

Selling Features versus Benefits

The list below is a test to help you reflect on how you normally position your ideas, products, or services. This list applies whether in informal discussions or on your organization's website. Which of the following do you typically refer to when promoting your ideas, products, or services?

- Cost or price
- Timeframe
- Functionality
- Design, materials, or construction methods
- Performance details
- Technology or technical details
- Usability, upgradability, maintainability, supportability, dependability, or other "ilities"
- Customer service
- Product quality
- Packaging or aesthetics
- Experience or longevity

All of the items listed above are features. They contribute to a desired outcome, but none articulate the desired outcome. Desired outcomes, in contrast, are the benefits and desired results these features enable. Outcomes might be peace of mind or some type of desired experience. They might be more financial independence or profit. Or more efficiency. Or making something easier or more convenient.

When involving others, leading others, or influencing others, first emphasize the desired outcome you are inviting them to experience. Focus on what something does, not what it is. Features, performance specifications, and capabilities matter, but only in conjunction with people's buy-in for what the features accomplish.

If you want to be as effective as possible in selling an idea, product, service, or yourself, start with the result you are enabling. When communicating with the intent to influence, start your discussion, presentation, email, or meeting with the benefit to be gained, not the means by which it is gained. As the late [Stephen R. Covey](#) said in his famous *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, start with the end in mind.

PDF version of this article: https://alpinelink.com/docs/Selling_Features_versus_Benefits.pdf.

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