

GOOD behaviour brings rewards



Professor Lynette Ryals, Dr Iain Davies and Russell Ward discuss the findings of their research into successful sales behaviours

Personality type is not crucial

Much research into sales success has focused on the personality types and attitudes of salespeople. A battery of psychometric tests has been used to profile salespeople, with the aim of uncovering the secret of successful selling. Companies think that, if they can identify what types of people are good at selling, they will be able to recruit more like them and – hey presto! – increase their success.

Although this work is very interesting, psychometrics measure only a certain predisposition to behave in a particular way. We have all come across people who ought, on paper, to make great salespeople, but don't. Even the best salespeople have bad times when they just don't seem to be able to close the deal, and the weakest salespeople sometimes have 'golden runs' when they can't put a foot wrong. These observations tell us that it is behaviours in the sales meeting that are important to success.

Recently, we found a unique data set of sales behaviours. Silent Edge, the sales performance authority, had collected observations of the behaviours of 802 new business sales, account managers, and telesales people. Analysing the data using a

powerful statistical technique called 'structural equation modelling' enabled us to see which behaviours were associated with sales success.

Six types of sales behaviours

Sales behaviours during selling meetings fell into six broad categories:

- Pre-meeting preparation
- Company presentation
- Sales pitch
- Customer interaction
- Rising to the challenge
- Story-telling

Strongly linked to sales success

Startlingly, only two types of behaviours were strongly linked to success:

- Pre-meeting preparation.
- Rising to the challenge.

Pre-meeting, salespeople who prepared for the meeting and who set an agenda were far more likely to succeed than those who did not. The lesson from this is: know what you are trying to achieve from the meeting, and do your research before you go in.

'Rising to the challenge' during the meeting was more strongly associated with success. This included adaptive selling techniques such as discussing value, negotiating throughout the meeting, objection-handling, and overall conduct. Our advice: sell value, not price, and stay flexible.

Negatively linked to sales success

Surprisingly, two behaviours were negatively linked to success – in other

words, made the sale less likely:

- Sales pitch.
- Story-telling.

Salespeople who did not know enough about their company's offerings, about the marketplace, or who managed the meeting poorly were (not surprisingly) unlikely to sell. Interestingly, so too were those salespeople who told a lot of anecdotes and stories. The problem seems to be that too clumsy or aggressive a sales pitch, or too many stories, can put the customer off.

Successful salespeople use these techniques just enough to help them move the sale forward, but prefer to use precious sales meeting time on engaging the customer in a discussion.

Unrelated to sales success

Two behaviours made no difference to success:

- Personal presentation.
- Rapport.

Much is made of these, but they are merely 'hygiene' factors. Without them the sale may fail, but done correctly, they are essentially invisible.

How to improve your chances

Whatever your role, there are crucial do's and don'ts in a sales meeting:

- Prepare well and set an agenda for every sales meeting.
- Focus on value, listen to – and deal with – objections, and be responsive.
- Make sure your sales pitch is well-informed, but don't overdo it.
- Use stories and anecdotes sparingly, and watch for signs that you are 'talking through the sale'.

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contributor

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