

ACE IT WITH EFFECTIVENESS

RICHARD HIGHAM and ALAN TIMOTHY

discuss the keys to sales effectiveness

This feature continues our series on a data-led approach to improving sales performance. We looked first at goal-setting and ways of monitoring and analysing results. Since then we've focused on "ACE": getting the Activity levels right; Concentration of focus – talking about the right things, to the right people, in the right organisations; and here we look at Effectiveness – arguably the most difficult part of the ACE equation for sales organisations to get right.

We will divide effectiveness into two parts – the capabilities of individuals and the tools and processes that support individuals and teams. In this first part, on capabilities, we'll break it into five elements – Talent, Attitude, Skills, Knowledge and Style – that together give the heading TASKS.

TALENT - ARE SALESPEOPLE BORN NOT MADE?

Dictionary definitions talk about talent as the natural ability to be good at something, often without being taught. Ever since McKinsey's research in the late 1990s and the publication of *The War for Talent* in 2001, the focus has been on talent in and of the workforce as a critical success driver for businesses. Some have concentrated on talent as identifying and nurturing potential high performers, others have adopted the stance that the workforce as a whole is your talent. Here we are looking at the talent in the individual seller as

something innate, that comes from the very centre of their being and which has little to do with training.

What are the inherent characteristics that make successful salespeople? As so often in the new world of selling, we should turn to data rather than just experience and instinct.

One of the most powerful indicators of sales success is optimism. This is based on some fascinating work by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman and his colleague Peter Schulman developed a questionnaire to let people position themselves on a pessimism-optimism scale. They got nearly 100 MetLife salespeople to take the test and then tracked their success over the next 2 years. Agents who scored in the optimistic half sold 37% more insurance than those in the pessimistic half. Agents in the top decile sold 88% more insurance than those in the bottom decile. Optimism also seemed to affect resilience. Those in the bottom quartile were three times more likely to quit their jobs in the first year than those in the top quartile. So, optimism seems to be a really important trait or even talent – not blind optimism, but what Seligman describes as flexible optimism, or "optimism with its eyes open".¹ (To take this test yourself just search for the attributional style questionnaire – there are several free versions). You can read more about optimism in Daniel Pink's excellent book, *To Sell is Human*.

A piece of research by Steve Martin² looked at 1,000 top performers, and

revealed some interesting findings:

- 91% scored high on humility and modesty – the opposite of bombastic and aggressive sales behaviours. Humility is not the same as being unconfident, but carries an acceptance that one always has plenty to learn from others; that one needs to listen. Humility is essential to be focused on the customer
- 85% of top performers demonstrated a sense of personal responsibility for their results, making this a second indicator of sales success
- 84% had high goal orientation – continuously comparing their achievements against their goals
- 82% showed high levels of curiosity – one of the key attributes of successful sellers is a fascination with what makes businesses work; a desire to learn and understand better and more; to get beneath the surface and to ask "why?"
- Less predictably, top performers were 30% less likely to be gregarious than bottom performers.

ATTITUDE MATTERS

If talent is described as the raw material, then attitude could be described as what we decide to do with the raw material. Attitude is predominantly about choice. It clearly builds on talent, but it lies more within the control of the individual and the influence of those around them. Many of the required attitudes interconnect, but the top 10 we would look for in salespeople are:

1. Self-responsibility: The willingness to take responsibility for one's own >



actions; to refuse to blame external factors or others when things go wrong. This does not imply blindness to the situation one works in, but rather the recognition that one can play any given hand well or badly.

2. Resilience: This is what some have described as “grit”, the willingness to keep going in tough situations and, having faced disappointment, being prepared to start over again. When everything is going your way – or “whatever you touch turns to sold” – selling is exhilarating, but when you get rejection on deals you thought were in the bag, or when selling conditions are just very tough, then resilience comes into play. It’s a question of reminding yourself of past successes, but also examining yourself to see how you could adapt effectively to the new circumstances. Where others would retreat, the resilient seller goes on stepping forward.

3. Goal orientation: The best sellers are focused on the goal. Many of the experiments in goal motivation apply to sellers even more highly than most. High achievement matters to them. Goals are in themselves motivational, and it’s even better if they are seen as stretching but achievable, and better still if hitting a target brings recognition and reward.

4. Willingness to risk rejection: Selling involves willingly placing oneself in situations where rejection is the norm. In my 30s (writes Richard Higham) I had a selling job that involved making 100 completely cold phone calls a day to owners of small businesses. That took up Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. From those 300 calls I was supposed to generate 10 face-to-face meetings on the Thursday and Friday. If I closed 2 of those 10, the week was a success – more than two and it was stellar. So, for me to enjoy success I needed to accept 290 rejections a week on the phone and 6-8 to my face. The job nearly broke me, but it probably made my sales career. Rejection became the norm in sales life, not something to be feared and avoided.

5. Openness to learning: When I joined my previous firm (immediately after the experience described above) I was told, “In your first year here you’ll learn at least 5 years’ worth of what you’d learn in a normal sales job. In the second year x4, in the third x3, and in the fourth x2, and then it will settle down at a full year’s learning each year.” My boss was partly right. The only difference was that I just kept learning two or three times more than what my peers in other businesses seemed to be learning. I was lucky in

“The final aspect of individual sales effectiveness is very human – let’s not lose sight of the need for sellers with flair and style!”

having some great coaches and influences, but the continued passion to keep learning has to be one of the critical attitudes of top sellers.

6. Ability to cope with both isolation and social engagement: There is a lot of talk about salespeople’s introversion or extroversion. To be an extrovert is not entirely about being the life and soul of the party – being outgoing. A lot of it is to do with how we validate ourselves. Extroverts validate themselves against what other people think of them, whereas introverts validate themselves against their internal compass. So, an extrovert salesperson might be driven by being top of the leader board and getting “salesperson of the month” or by getting great feedback from a customer. The introvert salesperson will be more motivated by how they performed compared with their own expectations or how close they are to hitting their personal, private sales goal. In either case, successful salespeople can cope with both internal and external measures and are also happy with their own company as they travel or prepare, and equally happy being with customers and colleagues.

7. Curiosity: The best salespeople are continually curious. Their attitude is one of genuine interest in their customers and their businesses. They want to know things not just because it helps them sell but because they really care. When they are offered a factory tour, they are happy to engage. They like to understand “why?”. Of course they need good skills, but without the underlying attitude of curiosity the skills will come across as mechanical.

8. Discipline: Successful sellers have an attitude of self-discipline and team discipline. They take responsibility for their own actions and they have a determination to see things through. Some may seem better organised than others, but all demonstrate self-discipline. They are usually their own harshest critics and they push themselves to see tasks through even if they are not natural “completer finishers”. They also show team discipline. While in the past the maverick, rule-breaking “lone wolf” may have been successful, selling today requires team discipline and compliance with rules and processes. As in successful sports teams, the best managers are able to engender this team discipline without constricting individual flair.

9. Courage: A courageous selling attitude takes many forms. It shows itself in resilience, in coming back from a disappointment. It shows itself in challenging the customer or colleagues when they lose sight of the right path or are settling for second best. It shows itself in taking tough decisions, either to keep pursuing a difficult sale when others doubt it can happen or in deciding to stop selling to a lost cause.

Part of having a courageous attitude is to sell with integrity; to behave ethically in a way that goes beyond compliance with the business's required standards.

10. Design-thinking: The last attitude that makes salespeople stand out is encompassed in design-thinking. This includes an attitude of being a creative problem solver. It involves something before that: being a creative problem finder. It is attitude that checks we are asking the right questions in the first place. This attitude of wanting to be a "sense-maker" with the customer is utterly different from the attitude of product pushing. It is an attitude that allows the seller to add real value for the buyer.

Many of these 10 attitudes are interdependent, such as courage and resilience. Some of them depend on innate talent. All of them can be worked on and developed by individuals and those who coach them. Attitude underpins skill and allows the seller to add significant value to their own careers, their customers' success and their company's results.

SKILLS – THE ABILITY TO DO

Some selling skills are specific to a particular role or market situation; some may be specific to a particular company at a particular time. The following is not intended as a comprehensive list of selling skills, but as a summary of the core skills of adaptive selling.

Self-organisation: The skills of building or applying a personal selling plan, of organising time to optimise selling activity; to conduct administrative tasks efficiently and effectively; technical skills.

Preparation: The skills of planning for meetings. The skilled seller prepares more effectively than the unskilled. The skilled seller prepares by placing themselves in the customer's shoes (the so-called "Ben Duffy" approach) and uses the skills of mental preparation.

Pre-contact: Setting up sales meetings by phone or email.

Engaging: The skills of handling the first few minutes of the meeting; building rapport; capitalising on "rapid cognition"; building trust; creating and using a positioning statement; managing the "chat gap".

Understanding: Create openness; ask appropriate, flowing questions; listen actively; summarise to confirm and challenge.

Proposing: Form solutions that match the customer's requirements. Demonstrate the links between what they need, your offer and the benefits they will gain.

Resolving issues: Identify your customers' spoken and unspoken concerns; handle



RICHARD HIGHAM (FISM) and **ALAN TIMOTHY** are directors of SalesLevers. Together with co-director Martin Allison (FISM) they cover the art, science and business of sales. For more information, email Richard. higham@saleslevers.com or call +44 (0)7712 588757.

objections; deal with price challenges.

Gaining commitment and follow-up: Gain agreement to specific next steps; manage the process from verbal "yes" to full engagement.

KNOWLEDGE IS KEY

While talent, attitude and skills will get you a long way, they are clearly not enough by themselves. Knowledge that underpins the right talent, attitude and skills will be highly effective, so sellers need a good knowledge base. Sales knowledge can be broken into seven headings:

1. Global "big picture": Having an awareness of the world our customers operate in: PESTEL – the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal framework.

2. Sector specific: Being familiar with the sector(s) in which we operate: trends, major players, big names, KPIs, jargon, calendars, benchmarks, hot topics...

3. The customer's business: Understanding the customer as a business (more than just their requirements for this purchase): finances, structure, strategy, key people, culture, future, competitors, markets...

4. Competitors: Knowledge about the competition we face – their claims, the reality, their pricing, their strengths and weaknesses, their people...

5. Product/application: Knowledge of our own products, how they are being developed, how and why they are priced, how they work...

6. Own company: Understanding of our own company: strategy, structure, key people, finances, KPIs...

7. Commercial awareness: Sound knowledge of financial matters and how businesses work.

STYLE – THE HUMAN FACTOR

That leaves us just one heading in the acronym TASKS: Style. Thus far we have been quite specific and hard-edged. This final aspect of individual sales effectiveness is very human and personal. It is often intangible, but it matters. Style is what makes us individual. It allows space for all our talent, attitude, skills and knowledge to come across in a way that makes us individuals. It might include our appearance, our humour, our beliefs, our social lives. It might reflect previous careers, artistic interests, sporting achievements. In everything we've talked about in this article about effectiveness let's not lose

1. Martin Seligman and Peter Schulman (1980). Explanatory style as a predictor of productivity and quitting among life assurance sales agents. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (4).

2. Steve Martin teaches at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. For more details of his research, read Heavy Hitter IT Sales Strategy: Competitive insights from interviews with 1,000+ key information technology decision makers, or an overview published in *Harvard Business Review*, June 2011.