

Intelligent Design versus Evolution: Are the Best Sales People Born or Bred?

By
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After 30 wonderful years in sales and sales management, I am often asked what makes a good sales person a great sales person. Managers want to know what distinctive personality behaviours superstars possess and how are superior performers different from an underachiever? Here are some thoughts on this topic that will help you to recognize these features and perhaps develop your own talents towards becoming a maximum performer.

What are the key characteristics and traits of a great salesperson? We can all think of one or two truly great sales performers who either work for us or serve us. What is it that makes them stand out from the crowd and earn business?

Are these sales professionals' simply natural talents? Were they born with the god-given talents to be great sales people? Or, did they learn their skills and polish their talents to the levels that they are at today? Can just anyone become a superior sales person?

The answer may be best described as a hybrid of both perspectives. Sales people are both born and bred, at least the best ones.

They build upon an inherent DNA that provides them with natural traits that predispose them to the role of a professional sales person. They enjoy being in the service business and like to help others. Top performers truly like their customers and want to ensure that their well-being is protected at all costs. They treat them like close friends and family. These feelings are naturally available to them and they do not need to be taught or forced, they simply exist within them. Effective selling is all about relationships!

In addition, overachievers learn skills, techniques, and strategies that enhance the sales process and equip them to strive towards greater goals. Here is a check list of traits and characteristics of a professional sales person. Can you think of anyone that works at these high levels of performance?

Natural Traits

Social – Selling is a profession where relationship-building is crucial. Great sales people are outgoing, friendly, talkative and interested in their clients for more than just a sale. They love life and it shows. Every one of us wants to be surrounded by happy and positive people; customers are no different. If your view of the world is that the cup is half empty, then sales may not be for you. The business of selling is a people business and that means you must love people.

[Empathy](#) – This is the ability to place oneself in someone else's shoes. If you are selling someone something, you must be able to sense their need – and meet it with your product, if you can. Empathy is a crucial trait for a successful sales person. It might sometimes fool you and mislead you, but at the end of the day, you will be far more successful with empathy than without it.

[Caring](#) – This can not be faked, even though it is often tried. You may get away with pretending for awhile, but ultimately, it will be revealed whether or not you truly care for the customer and their needs. People can feel it and can intrinsically know when someone is pretending to care about them, their business issues, and their problems. To be successful in sales, you must genuinely care about people and their problems.

[Concern for others before themselves](#) – If you can say that you care about your customers and their problems, then, can you say as well that you place their needs before your own? The sales business is a service business. Service means placing the needs of the customer first, above all else. The customers are the top priority. All too often, only transparent lip service is given to this credo.

[Creativity](#) – The more complex the transaction, the more important creativity is. Selling new products and services makes creativity a must-have trait. A creative sales technique is one way to differentiate from the competition.

[Honesty](#) – In sales, there is often a thin line between fact and fiction. However, honesty is so important that even the slightest abuse of this trait can easily make or break an otherwise superior salesperson.

[Strength of Ego](#) – Often confused with arrogance, strength of ego is actually very different. It is all about having a strong and healthy self-esteem. A sales person must possess the ability to bounce back from rejection. Rejection is part of the sales process and superior sales professionals are not immobilized by failure. The simple equation for sales success is to have more acceptance than rejection.

[Ego drive](#) – Sales is all about winning the order. It is a competition and like every competition, there are winners and losers. A salesperson is a natural competitor. Like sports, you can always tell what kind of competitor a salesperson is by the sports and activities they perform in their life. Are they single players or part of a team? What role makes them feel good? An ego-driven person is all about getting the “yes”. Yes is equal to a homerun or sinking that difficult long putt. The best salesman is obsessive about being successful.

[Work Ethic](#) – Ever notice how some people succeed when others do not? Do you wonder why? A basic ingredient in all successful people is a disciplined work ethic. In this attention-deprived society that we all live in, life seems to be about the moment. But, sometimes, work needs to be done when other aspects of your life are demanding your attention. Being able to concentrate and doggedly grind away at a proposal or report is a secret of the best performers. How do you get a disciplined work ethic? It is hard to say.

But, it is vital that you do what needs to be done when it needs to be done - no excuses. Can a superior work ethic be learned or is it natural? Experience tells us that a person either has what it takes or does not. This may be a borderline trait that can be learned, but it is a big mountain to climb if you do not have the inner fortitude to drive yourself to success.

Patience – They say that patience is a virtual. This may be true as it is a gift that is a valuable asset for a sale person. Sometimes, simply outlasting the competition will make the difference. Patience almost seems to be in conflict to other characteristics, like Sense of Urgency and Assertiveness described later. But, if managed in balance with other behaviors this harmonious Zen-like quality is highly prized.

Learned Characteristics

Skills – Rudimentary and expected skills for performing the responsibilities of a sale are essential. Preparation of a clear and concise proposal is a basic skill that every sales professional needs to master. Yet, computer literacy and the ability to make effective use of selling tools to define the solution on paper are lacking with many sales people. Just as a carpenter must know how to use a hammer, so does a sales person need to know how to use a computer. The more skills that a sales person possess then the better equipped they are to present winning proposals. This rule includes public speaking and presentation skills.

Knowledge – All too often, sales people do not know their products or how they can be used by the customers. Sales people need to be subject matter experts, or at least have timely access to subject matter experts. The sales person who fails to learn about what they are selling always excuse lost sales with the response that the competitor dropped the price and undercut them. Sometimes, this may be the case, but more than often, the competitor did a better job at communicating the features and benefits of their products.

Inquisitive and questioning – Why? This one word is essential to understanding the problems and issues at hand. Asking questions and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the customer's problem is vital to finding the best solution "fit" for them. The best sales people understand the customer's problems, as well as the customer themselves.

Logic, reasoning and strategic thinking - This is the ability to understand abstract concepts and ideas. Selling is becoming more complex so it is imperative for sales staff be able to sell customers on ideas. Abstract reasoning skills help them sell something that is intangible. Selling intangible items is far more difficult compared to selling tangible products. Analogous examples are the best tool when communicating about intangible products or services.

Persistence – Great sales people are persistent and consistent in their approach. They pursue business and do not wait for it to fall into their laps. A top sales person has a clear roadmap that they follow to best serve the customer.

Focus – It is important to remain focused on the goal and work towards the objectives that you set for your roadmap to earn your customers business. Poor sales people jump all over the map and lose focus about what they are there to do for the customer.

Negotiations – Top sales people are trained negotiators that always pursue a win / win solution with the best interest of all parties in mind. If the transaction is lopsided, then this will be realized either at the time of the transaction or later in the relationship. A lopsided transaction is a poor foundation in which to build a long-term business partnership between the sales person and the customer.

Assertiveness – The ability to be firm in one-to-one negotiations, to lead the sales process, and to get the point across confidently is critical for sales success. However, this does not mean being overbearing and aggressive, which turns people off.

Leadership – Just like a CEO or a Manager, a salesperson must understand leadership. A sales person can not force someone to buy, but they can use leadership skills to help them buy or lead them to want to buy. Leadership is all about motivating customers to follow you.

Trust – A superior salesperson is a trusted ally. Without trust, the customer / sales relationship is broken and can not work. Trust is earned over time and is not to be treated lightly. Too often, trust is confused with friendship. They are different things. You can be a friend of a customer and still lose the order to another salesperson that is more trusted by the customer.

Skepticism - A good salesman has the tendency to view people with a little bit of suspicion and a little lack of trust. This makes them alert, questioning and thorough when it comes to the sales process. Skepticism is all part of the “questioning” mindset.

Sense of urgency – Top performers are always pushing sales to completion quickly. There is always someone waiting to take your place if you do not get your customers everything they need, right when they need it.

Risk-taker – A great salesperson is willing to innovate, to try something risky. This is even more important now, as new products and services call for new modes of selling. Sales staff cannot just take orders. There is an element of chance in every sale. You can never be sure what you are doing is right. A salesperson has got to be willing to innovate, and they are sometimes going to be wrong.

Conclusion

Does every sales person possess all of these traits and characteristics? No, not likely. But, it is important to understand what is needed and what one should be working on developing in order to compensate for identified weaknesses. Besides, a sales person

needs to be more like a chameleon and adapt to the situations they are facing. So, not every tool is needed in every circumstance. A sale is a dynamic process.

Is this list complete? No. For every salesperson and for every customer there are unique requirements that demand different traits and characteristics to win the day. But, this check list is a firm foundation that is useful as a starting point to audit your own situation.

Finally, the single most important ingredient for success in sales is “respect”. Without respect for the customer, salesperson, manufacturer, profession and all those involved in the sales stream; success will be highly elusive. If respect is not present, then it may be time to rethink your career strategy regarding sales. Customers who do not respect the sales process, people and profession are also short-changing themselves and their ultimate business success too! The coin always has two sides.

About the Author:

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