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The Skillset Needed for Sales Success: Setting the Sale
Charles Fifield, MBA

The goals in professional selling are to build relationships and to sell value resulting in win-win outcomes. To do so, certain critical skills are required, including: relationship management, effective communication, and value-adding capabilities. The final purchase decision is not controllable, but the salesperson can establish the needed conditions for the sale to be accomplished or set the sails to effectively and efficiently gain the desired result. The focus of this article is on the critical skill of relationship management.

Relationship Management Skills

Business is fundamentally driven by relationship interactions and orders or sales are derived from essential business flows. Therefore, a salesperson or real estate agent is constantly challenged by having to succeed at relationship management throughout a customer or client engagement. From the seed of a sale, prospecting for a lead, to the close of a deal or purchase decision, the salesperson’s or agent’s relationship management skills are tested. As the agent follows up to provide customer service and hopefully ensure client satisfaction, s/he continues to test these relationship management skills on the route to ultimately creating a loyal client. Without relationship-building capabilities, the road to sales success becomes either very narrow due to limited opportunities or very bumpy due to mistrust and misunderstandings.

Relationship Management Requires Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined in Wikipedia as “the ability to monitor one’s own and other people’s emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.” There are different models of EI, including the ability model developed by Peter Salovey and John Mayer, which focuses on an individual’s ability to process emotional information and use it to navigate his/her social environment. Dan Goleman proposes another model (the mixed model) where he defines EI as an array of skills and characteristics that drive leadership performance. Studies generally confirm that people with high EI have improved mental health, better job performance, and more effective leadership skills. EI became widely used after Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence – Why It Can Matter More Than IQ was published in 1995.

Howard Gardner’s book, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, introduced in 1983 the notion that traditional intelligence, such as IQ, fails to fully explain one’s cognitive
ability. Gardner introduced the concept of multiple intelligences: interpersonal intelligence (i.e., the capacity to understand others’ intentions and desires) and intrapersonal intelligence (i.e., the capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one’s feelings and motivations).

While the concept of emotional intelligence receives significant challenge and criticism, part of the controversy rests with the source of this EI, namely is EI innate or learned? Regardless of its source, an agent’s ability to successfully adapt within the context of interpersonal relations, to consistently remain aligned to the needs and wants of others, and to execute with agility the selling process despite the demands of an individual buyer-seller condition is an extremely valuable relationship-building asset. Without it, the relationship-building process operates without essential steering and navigational mechanisms. Quite simply, the emotionally intelligent agent can capitalize more fully upon changing moods to better fit the interaction’s situation and to achieve the desired purchase decision outcome.

(For additional reading on EI, please see the KCRR for August 2009, December 2010, and December 2014.)

**The Ability Model:** This model proposes that individuals vary in their ability to process emotional information and their ability to relate emotional processing to their cognitive processing. According to Salovey, Mayer, and Caruso (2004), the ability model claims that EI includes four types of abilities:

1. Perceiving emotions – detecting emotions in faces, pictures, voices, etc. and identifying one’s own emotions
2. Using emotions – harnessing emotions to facilitate cognitive activities, such as thinking and problem-solving
3. Understanding emotions – comprehending the language of emotions, including slight variations between emotions, which enhances appreciation for complicated relationships among emotions
4. Managing emotions – regulating emotions within ourselves and in others while progressing toward our goals

**The Mixed Model:** Goleman’s model focuses on EI as a wide array of competencies and skills that drive leadership performance, a valuable attribute for successful interpersonal exchanges such as professional selling. Goleman’s model offers five main constructs:

1. Self-awareness – knowing one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals; recognizing their impact on others while using gut feelings to guide decisions
2. Self-regulation – controlling or redirecting disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing conditions
3. Social skill – managing relationships to move people in desired directions
4. Empathy – considering other’s feelings especially when making decisions
5. Motivation – being driven to achieve for the sake of achievement

Relationship Management Requires Thoughtful First Impressions

You’ve heard it before: “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” First impressions can make or break an opportunity to create new relationships. A buyer’s first impression greatly impacts the effectiveness of the initial sales encounter, whether it be on the phone, via the internet, or in person. Essentially, you have no time to waste. In less than ten seconds, the buyer makes value judgments that shape what happens in the sales process and directs the final outcome: to buy or not to buy.

While common wisdom says, “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” research shows that clients not only can, but do, make decisions about an agent’s perceived competence, likeability, and trustworthiness early in a first meeting. Some research indicates the first impression greatly impacts the ultimate buy/no-buy decision (Lui 2004).

Lydia Ramsey, in “First Impressions: How Seven Seconds Can Make a Deal,” offers practical and sound advice which I’ve adapted below:

1. **Learn what people use to form their first opinion.** In meeting someone face-to-face, Ramsey reports that 93% of how you are judged is based on non-verbal data which comprises your appearance and body language. She reports that only 7% is influenced by the words that you speak. Yet, Ramsey says, “when your first encounter is over the phone, 70% of how you are perceived is based on your tone of voice and 30% on your words.” Clearly it’s not what you say, but it’s the way you say it.

2. **Choose your first twelve words carefully.** Although research shows that your words make up a mere 7% of what people think of you in a one-on-one encounter, don’t leave them to chance. Express some form of thank you when you meet the buyer. Perhaps, it is “Thank you for taking the time to visit with me today” or “Thank you for this opportunity to introduce our company to you.” Buyers appreciate you when you demonstrate appreciation for them, and you should commence this early in the buyer–seller exchange.

3. **Use the other person’s name immediately.** We love to hear our name. When you use the buyer’s name in conversation within your first twelve words and the first seven seconds, you signal that you are focused on the most important person in the room. Nothing gets other people’s attention as effectively as calling them by name. It goes without saying that you must be sure to pronounce it correctly.

4. **Pay attention to your hair.** Your clients certainly will. In fact, they will notice your hair and face first. Putting off that much-needed haircut or color job may cost you a valuable
opportunity. Very few people want to do business with someone who is unkempt or whose hairstyle does not look professional. Don’t let a bad hair day cost you the sale.

5. **Keep your shoes in mint condition.** People will look from your face to your feet. If your shoes aren’t well maintained, the buyer will question whether you pay attention to details. Shoes should be polished as well as appropriate for the business environment. They may be the last thing you put on before you walk out the door, but they are often the first thing your buyer notices.

6. **Demonstrate energy – walk fast.** Ramsey reports that research shows that people who walk faster and talk slightly faster than others are viewed as important and energetic – just the kind of person your buyers want to do business with. Pick up the pace and walk briskly and with purpose if you want to impress. You never know who may be watching.

7. **Fine tune your handshake.** Your first move when meeting a prospective client is to extend your hand. There isn’t a person anywhere who can’t tell you that the good business handshake should be a firm one, but not vise-like. Yet time and again, people offer weak hands to buyers. You’ll be assured of giving an impressive grip and getting off to a good start if you position your hand to make complete contact with the other person’s hand. Once you’ve connected, close your thumb over the back of the other person’s hand and give a slight squeeze. You’ll have the beginning of a good business relationship.

8. **Make introductions with style.** It does matter whose name you say first and what words you use when making introductions. Because business etiquette is based on rank and hierarchy, you want to honor the senior or highest-ranking person by saying his/her name first. When a client is present, he or she is always the most important person. Say the client’s name first and introduce other people to the client. The correct words to use are “I’d like to introduce to you…” followed by the name of the other person.

9. **Never leave the office without your business cards.** Your business cards and how you handle them contribute to your total image. Have a good supply of them with you at all times since you never know when and where you will encounter a prospective client. How unimpressive is it to ask for a person’s card and then have the person say, “Oh, I’m sorry, but I think I just gave my last one away.” You get the feeling that this person has already met everyone he wants to know. Keep your cards in a card case or holder where they are protected from wear and tear. That way you will be able to find them without a lot of fumbling around, and they will always be in pristine condition.
10. **Match your body language to your verbal message.** Ramsey shares what you intuitively know: A smile or pleasant expression tells your clients that you are glad to be with them. Make good eye contact because that says you are paying attention. Keep good eye contact because that says you are interested in what the client is saying. Leaning in toward the client makes you appear engaged and interested in the conversation. Use as many signals as you can to appear interested. [Adapted from: Ramsey 2015]

In sum, every time you walk out of the office, be prepared to make a powerful first impression!

**Relationship Management Builds on Likeability or the L-factor**

Salespeople and agents tend to forget one axiomatic principle of building relationships – customers do not like to do business with someone whom they do not like. Salespeople who get too focused on the effectiveness or productivity of an engagement can forget, or worse case fail to achieve, likeability with a prospective buyer. Likeability is truly our lifeline to developing a working relationship with a customer. Tim Sanders in his book, *The Likeability Factor*, says, “People who are likeable, or who have what I call a high L-factor, tend to land jobs more easily, find friends more quickly, and have happier relationships. People who are unlikeable, or who have a low L-factor, generally suffer from high job, friend, and spouse turnover” (p.20).

To better connect with others and achieve a higher L-factor rating, Tim Sanders suggests four pieces of advice on being likeable:

1. **Check yourself.** Have you listened to the message on your answering machine? Have you looked at your own promotional picture? Are you able to step outside your body and listen to the tone of your voice when you talk to your wife, your kids, or co-workers? In other words, can you be friendlier to the people around you? Friendliness is your ability to communicate liking and openness to others.

2. **Try to matter to other people – be relevant to them.** If you care only about what others can do for you and not what you can do for others, then the clients will soon feel that you simply don’t care about them. The number one cause of business relationship dissolution is buyers basically feeling underappreciated. You need to improve your capacity to connect with others’ interests, wants, and needs.

3. **Develop your capacity for empathy.** If you want others to like you, you are going to have to take an interest in their feelings. Tim Sanders paraphrased Dale Carnegie, “You will win more friends in the next two months developing a sincere interest in two people
than you will ever win in the next two years trying to get two people interested in you.”
You need to recognize, acknowledge, and experience other people’s feelings.

4. **Get real.** This is the integrity that stands behind your likeability. Likeability doesn’t work if you have to pretend to like or appreciate others. People will sense sincere versus insincere people. Virtually everyone is likeable some of the time. Find out what is truly likeable about your personality and develop it, or as Tim Sanders says, “Bask in it.”

When you work to develop these factors in your life, you amazingly bring out the best in others.

**Nurture, Nurture, Nurture**

Please see the *Keller Center Research Report, March 2015* article on *The Mindset Needed for Sales Success*.

**Relationship Management Requires a Focus on Customer Satisfaction and Being Journey-Minded**

It has often been stated that you can’t manage what you fail to or ineffectively measure. Customer satisfaction is a term frequently used in marketing and sales, and a key performance indicator of how well the buyer-seller relationship is working. It is generally considered a measure of how well a supplier is meeting or possibly surpassing customer expectations. The performance of products and services that a company provides to buyers is often the focus of satisfaction evaluations; however, in today’s highly competitive business world, the overall experience of the buyer-seller relationship is taking customer satisfaction precedence.

Furthermore, since we want to think long-term, businesses must address the keeping of customers for life. A customer’s long-term relationship or journey can span many elements of a business relationship. We need to be less individual interaction-oriented and more cumulative experience-minded. In a competitive marketplace, customer loyalty and being more journey-minded is a powerful key differentiator and increasingly becoming a key element of business strategy.

McKinsey Company noted in a recent research report, “It’s not enough to make a customer happy with each individual interaction. Our most recent customer-experience survey of some 27,000 American consumers across 14 different industries found that effective customer journeys are more important: measuring satisfaction on customer journeys is 30% more predictive of overall customer satisfaction than measuring happiness for each individual interaction. In addition, measuring satisfaction with customer journeys has the potential not only to increase customer satisfaction by 20% but also to lift revenue by up to 15% while lowering the cost of serving customers by as much as 20%.” (McKinsey 2014)
McKinsey further states that becoming a company that delivers customer-journey excellence requires many things to be done well, but there are three priorities:

1. Take a journey-based approach
2. Fix areas where negative experiences are most common
3. Do it now

**Summary**

Highly productive sales results requires essential relationship-building skills: being emotionally intelligent, delivering a powerful first impression, being likeable, employing a nurturing, servant spirit toward each buyer relationship, and working with valued customers in a journey-minded manner. If you think of successful selling as doing what is necessary to connect and then lead or guide a buyer to a value-adding purchase decision, then each of these relationship-building skills has a significant role. Without them, the salesperson’s ship will have great difficulty setting its sales.

**References**


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About the Author

Charles Fifield, MBA
Senior Lecturer and Sales Coach, Baylor University’s Center for Professional Selling

Chuck Fifield is a Senior Lecturer for Baylor University’s Hankamer School of Business, Marketing Department and serves as the faculty coach to Baylor’s Sales Team and Uproar Music and Entertainment Group, a student-managed business. He joined the faculty at Baylor University in 2001, teaching in the Graduate Business School (Operations Management), the Management Department (Negotiations and Conflict Resolution) and the Economics Department (Principles of Macroeconomics). Chuck has taught or guest lectured at other Texas-based Universities in the fields of sales, international business, money and banking and finance/investments. Professor Fifield has conducted sales research and training for several organizations, including most recently State Farm Insurance. Prior to joining Baylor, Chuck was a financial consultant for nearly thirty years to businesses located throughout the U.S. He owned and operated several financial service businesses in the fields of securities, real estate, oil and gas and insurance.