

The Emotionally Intelligent Salesperson

by Christopher P. Blocker, Ph.D.

Today's market offers home buyers and sellers an abundance of choices for selecting a real estate agent. In this increasingly competitive environment, communicating effectively and offering expert advice to clients can only take a salesperson so far. To go farther, recent studies show that a salesperson's *emotional intelligence* can make a real difference.

Just consider the following examples of how emotional intelligence can impact selling:

- Coca-Cola trained its leaders in emotional intelligence and found that these individuals exceeded their performance targets by 15%, while in contrast, leaders who did not develop emotional capabilities missed their targets by the same margin – a 30% gap!
- Hallmark Communities found that sales associates who developed higher levels of emotional intelligence were 25% more productive than their counterparts with low levels of emotional intelligence¹.
- American Express chose to provide a group of its salespeople with training classes to improve their emotional intelligence (EI). Subsequently, results showed that those who took the training significantly increased their sales performance relative to those who did not. The experiment was so compelling that now all incoming American Express salespeople receive several days of emotional competence training.²

Anecdotes like these are reasons why emotional intelligence has become a hot topic for salespeople in recent years. Yet, a clear understanding of EI and, specifically, how it facilitates effective sales interactions is still in its early stages. In response, this report on what it means to be an emotionally intelligent salesperson reviews the latest research to help answer several key questions.

What is emotional intelligence?

Emotional intelligence describes a set of individual abilities. In particular, an individual with high emotional intelligence can accurately recognize and express his or her own feelings, reflect on them, regulate their emotions, and even use emotions as mental input to effectively solve problems³. However, these abilities are not on equal footing nor are they easily mastered. The most basic level involves perceiving and expressing emotions. In other words, it is impossible to actively reflect on one's emotions or regulate them if you are unaware of them in the first place. As an individual masters the ability to perceive and express emotion, they can also begin to think through complex emotions, monitor them, and use emotion-based knowledge to help them make effective decisions.

Although emotional intelligence has been discussed alongside aspects of individual personality, the latest EI research frames its dimensions as a set of mental abilities that describe how well someone processes information, specifically emotional information.

Kidwell and his colleagues (2008) recently test this perspective in several large studies and find significant results. They find that EI contains four distinct abilities:⁴

- (1) Perceiving emotion: ability to perceive and express emotions accurately, meaning an individual is aware of their emotions, can distinguish between different ones, and can adequately articulate them.
- (2) Facilitating emotion: ability to generate and use emotions to facilitate one's thinking, which, for example, could involve an individual being able to weigh emotions against one another and allow emotions to direct their attention.
- (3) Understanding emotion: ability to analyze complex emotions and formulate emotional knowledge to help them reason through various problems.
- (4) Managing emotion: ability to regulate emotions to promote a desired outcome whether for oneself or with others, which, for example, could involve knowing how to relax oneself when anxious or alleviate the stress of others.



The big caveat to this framework, however, is that these emotional abilities are only truly effective when individuals are both (a) confident in their abilities and (b) correct in their application. Without both confidence and accuracy, individuals can be either cautiously under-confident or dangerously over-confident in the way they process emotions and act upon them. The bad news is that research shows people are wrong far too frequently when they believe they are right.⁵ The good news, however, is that salespeople who are determined to improve their EI have ample opportunity to differentiate themselves.

How can EI help salespeople interact more effectively with clients?

Throughout the buying process, clients rely heavily on their emotions. Some of this is conscious, meaning that buyers are actively appraising “how they feel about” an agent or a home as critical information for their decisions⁶. Yet, much of this emotion is subconscious.

This is where EI comes in. Specifically, research shows that when a salesperson has the ability to accurately appraise the emotions of other people, it amplifies their skills for adaptive and customer-oriented selling. This means that salespeople with high EI should be able to read clients' emotions better, use that emotional information to better adapt within the selling situation, help clients solve problems in a way that makes them feel valued, and as a result, improve their overall lead conversion rates. That said, although there are benefits to having a strong emotional ability, the reverse is also true. Salespeople with low levels of EI not only are limited in their ability to effectively use customer-oriented selling but research shows it can have a negative impact on sales performance.⁷

Beyond having a higher success rate for lead conversion, EI may help real estate agents make more effective use of their time by knowing when to invest more time with a client, allocate time to other clients, or even letting a potential client go elsewhere. Although it is critical for salespeople to spend time deeply understanding what customers' value⁸, as the time and resources to do so expand, this investment entails risk. Emotionally intelligent salespeople should be able to ascertain more quickly and effectively

whether they can establish a strong connection with clients or if clients are emotionally ready to advance through the sales process. All of these benefits should lead to more successful selling.

How can I assess my emotional intelligence and improve it?

Given the popularity of the topic, there is no shortage of books or consultants that help individuals and teams assess and enhance their EI.⁹ Yet, it is important to know that several competing models of EI exist. For example, many books are based on models that think of EI as residing within an individual's personality, such as the EQ test, EQ Map, or Bar-On EQ.¹⁰ These models are arguably more popular in the public eye but (although helpful) they have been criticized more in recent research that questions their validity.¹¹

Other books and training models view *EI as a set of abilities*, as discussed above.¹² The most widely tested ability model of EI is called the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), named after its developers. The ability based models of EI assess individual's competencies by having them work through emotionally-laden situations as well as testing how accurately individuals perceive emotions through facial expressions. To this end, many of them imply that training to help understand emotion through reading facial expressions can be quite useful.¹³ Several websites and books are listed in the reference section for those interested in learning more.

Further questions about emotional intelligence we are trying to unravel

Our understanding thus far regarding EI in the context of successful selling and consumer behavior is largely prescribed as emotional intelligence for the individual. What remains uncharted is how exactly a salesperson's EI impacts buyer-seller interactions through the eyes of consumers – or how varying levels of emotional intelligence for both salespeople and consumers interacts to help develop important “emotional connections.” We are currently exploring many of these questions in the Keller Center for Research and would enjoy hearing your comments about these topics or including you in our research.

In summary

There is mounting evidence that the successful salesperson in the 21st century is one who has an expansive emotional intelligence. While there are many unknowns to be explored about this topic, real estate agents can be encouraged to learn as much as they can about their own emotional abilities and take steps to improve them over time.

References

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- ⁴ Kidwell, Blair, Hardesty, David, M., and Childers, Terry L. (2008) “Consumer Emotional Intelligence: Conceptualization, Measurement, and the Prediction of Consumer Decision Making,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, (35), June, p. 154-166; Kidwell, Blair, Hardesty, David, M., and Childers, Terry L. (2008) “Emotional Calibration Effects on Consumer Choice”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, (35), p. 611-621.
- ⁵ Alba, Joseph W. and J. Wesley Hutchinson (2000), “Knowledge Calibration: What Consumers Know and What They Think They Know,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (September), p. 123–56.
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- ⁸ "Blocker, Christopher P. (2008), “Want to Convert More Leads into Clients? Dig Deeper into What Customers Value,” *Keller Center Research Report*, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- ⁹ The following website lists a wide variety of EI tests, resources, and links for individuals wanting to learn more or receive emotional intelligence training: www.eiconsortium.org
- ¹⁰ Examples include: Bradberry, Travis and Greaves, Jean. (2005). *The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books; Boyatzis, R., Goleman, D., & Rhee, K. (2000). Clustering competence in emotional intelligence: insights from the emotional competence inventory (ECI). In R. Bar-On & J.D.A. Parker (eds.): *Handbook of Emotional Intelligence* (pp. 343-362). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Bar-On, R. (1997). *The Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i): a test of emotional intelligence*. Toronto: Multi-Health Systems.
- ¹¹ Mayer, J.D., Salovey, P. & Caruso, D.R. (2008). Emotional Intelligence: New ability or eclectic traits, *American Psychologist*, 63, 6, 503-517.
- ¹² See Caruso, David R. and Salovey, Peter (2004) *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager: How to Develop and Use the Four Key Emotional Skills of Leadership*, Jossey-Bass. The following website also discussed resources and training around an ability based model of EI: www.emotionaliq.com
- ¹³ For an example of a resource for learning to better read facial expressions see the following website: www.mettonline.com

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Chris completed his Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee in marketing. His research focuses on understanding the dynamics of customer value and its implications for important strategies like relationship management and segmentation. Prior to pursuing a Ph.D. in marketing, Chris held various marketing/sales positions in the high-tech sector, including work in professional services and as a global account manager for AT&T and in business marketing at Sprint. He has published research in respected journals such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, *The European Journal of Marketing*, *The Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, and in the proceedings of several international marketing organizations.