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Creating Success through Sales Influence Tactics
Richard G. McFarland, PhD and Andrea L. Dixon, PhD

Salespeople are at the forefront of your firm’s interactions with customers, and the success of your business depends on how effectively those salespeople can influence these customers. Particularly in real estate, it is vital to understand how salespeople influence customers and how they can improve those skills. Our research provides additional resources for salespeople to better understand the full set of sales influence tactics at their disposal. We expand on and improve the definitions of the six known sales influence tactics (SITs) and identify a seventh, new influence tactic. Through understanding the seven SITs and their definitions, salespeople can increase their ability to influence customers and improve buyer-seller relationships.

Persuasion vs. Influence

The words persuasion and influence are often used interchangeably in society. However, with regard to the buyer-seller relationship, the meaning of each has different implications. Researchers state that persuasion is the broad umbrella term focusing on changing beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, and behaviors. Influence is much more narrowly defined, focusing on change in behavior resulting from a “direct request.” In sales, we use the term influence rather than persuasion to emphasize the seller’s ability to change the buyer’s behavior. Throughout our research, we regard salespeople as influence agents rather than persuasive agents.

Sales Influence Tactics: 6 Tactics Plus a 7th

The six sales influence tactics (SITs) are categorized into three groups: rational ITs, emotional ITs, and coercive ITs.

Rational ITs
Rational influence tactics alter the buyer’s beliefs about the decision that the salesperson is attempting to impact. Rational influence tactics include information exchange and recommendations. As a salesperson, both of these are vitally important to your ability to sell your product or service. Specifically, information exchange involves communicating data to and asking questions of buyers. The goals of information exchange is to gain information and shape the evaluation or decision processes of the buyer, without giving a specific recommendation.
Examples of information exchange include discussing a property’s features and benefits as well as asking questions about the buyer’s needs and wants. The second rational influence tactic is to provide recommendations. A recommendation tactic is used when the salesperson suggests a course of action to the buyer and asserts that this action would be beneficial to them. This tactic can include logical or rational arguments to explain the benefits of the recommended action including cost-benefit analyses and comparisons to competitive offerings.

**Emotional ITs**

Emotional IT can be divided into two domains: ingratiation and inspirational. Ingratiation involves communication between the buyer and the seller designed to enhance the salesperson’s interpersonal attractiveness and thus gain the approval of the buyer. In other words, the salesperson is attempting to influence by being more likable to the buyer. Salespeople can display ingratiation behaviors if they give compliments to buyers and find things they share in common with buyers. On the other hand, inspirational appeals is an emotional tactic that taps into the buyer’s emotions and emotional values (rather than rational) in their decision-making process by appealing to the values and ideals of the buyer. Additionally, enthusiasm from the salesperson can be contagious, which would elicit a positive effect on the buyer.

**Coercive ITs**

Coercive influence tactics change the overall nature of the decision-making process by including sanctions or promising positive effects. Previous coercive influence tactics can be divided into two subgroups, promises and threats; however, our research adds a third tactic to this category. The first tactic defined by previous research involves salespeople offering a future reward contingent upon the customer complying with the salesperson’s request. The stricter version of a promise is a threat in which sanctions are imposed. When salespeople use a threat influence tactic, they implicitly or explicitly state that sanctions will be applied to buyers if they do not comply with salespersons’ requests. Threats will likely place a strain and add additional stress to the buyer-seller relationship; therefore, threats are almost always an unfruitful choice.

**The 7th Influence Tactic: Personal Appeals**

Our research adds personal appeals as an additional influence tactic to the coercive SITs. Interpersonal relationships are often formed between buyers and sellers outside of their business relationship. An interpersonal relationship between buyers and sellers can provide an advantage for the seller. In our research, we define personal appeals as the salesperson making an appeal to the buyer’s “loyalty and friendship toward him or her when” making a request. The personal appeals tactic is a part of the coercive influence tactics because buyers believe that their personal relationship with the salesperson will be harmed if they do not comply with the salesperson’s request and that they will likely be rewarded in the future if they do comply with the request. Overall, personal appeals allow the buyer and seller to foster a deeper connection which coincides with the sales influence tactic framework.
Real Estate Implications

All communications salespeople use with buyers can be viewed as influence tactics. Our research builds on the existing framework for influence tactics (which includes information exchange, recommendations, ingratiations, inspiration, promises, and threats) by adding a 7th tactic, personal appeals. In addition, we improve the definitions of these SITs and improve the measurement for these SITs, which can be helpful in training situations or in observing salespeople’s interactions with customers. This research also provides evidence regarding the effectiveness of each of these tactics in influencing customers and on their effects on trust of the salesperson. In general, both rational and emotional influence tactics are effective and have a neutral or positive effect on trust, while coercive tactics should generally be avoided, with one exception: if the interpersonal relationship between the salesperson and customer is very close, the use of personal appeals can be effective in achieving influence without harming trust. Due to the nature of buyer-seller relationships in the real estate industry, understanding how to use these tactics can help improve outcomes with customers. It is up to the discretion of salespeople as to which tactic best fits their individual preferences.

Recommended Reading


References


About the Authors

Richard G. McFarland, PhD
Professor and Department Head, ESSEC Business School (Paris)
Dr. Richard G. McFarland (PhD – Georgia Institute of Technology) is on the permanent faculty as a Full Professor of Marketing at ESSEC Business School. Previously, he was a tenured faculty member at West Virginia University and at Kansas State University where he held the L. L.
McAninch Endowed Chair of Business Administration. His research and teaching interests focus on inter-organizational relationship and marketing strategies. More specifically, his research focuses on the role of institutions in driving marketing channels relationships and behaviors; influence tactics and persuasion in personal selling and business-to-business contexts; building trust and trust recovery in business-to-business relationships; and the role of emotional intelligence within sales organizations. His research has appeared in a number of leading journals, including *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management,* and *Marketing Letters.* He also serves on the editorial review boards of the *Journal of Retailing,* and the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* where he was twice awarded the best reviewer of the year award.

Dr. McFarland has won numerous awards for his research and teaching, including the Ralph Reitz award for the single best teacher of the year in the Business College at Kansas State University, the best single researcher award in the Business College at Kansas State University on two occasions, The Louis Stern Award in 2016 for the most long-term, impactful research in inter-organizational research, the 2020 James M. Comer Award for best contributions to selling & sales management theory, among other awards.

**Andrea L. Dixon, PhD**

**Frank M. And Floy Smith Holloway Professorship in Marketing and Executive Director of the Center for Professional Selling, Baylor University**

Dr. Andrea Dixon (PhD – Indiana University) has an industrial background in research, planning, and advertising, and her research interests embrace behavioral issues related to sales, service, and client satisfaction. Dr. Dixon has published in the *Journal of Marketing, Harvard Business Review, Organizational Science, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Leadership Quarterly, European Journal of Marketing,* the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, Journal of Marketing Education,* and other journals. Dixon's research in the *Journal of Marketing* was the 2002 award-winner. She co-authored *Strategic Sales Leadership,* and her work on customer selection appears in *The Oxford Handbook of Sales Management and Sales Strategy.* Dr. Dixon serves on the Editorial Review Boards for the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* the *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice,* the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* and the *Journal of Marketing Education.* She is also an Ad Hoc Reviewer for the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science.*

Dr. Dixon has won numerous teaching awards, including the Excellence in Teaching Award from the American Marketing Association Sales SIG, the Hankamer School of Business Teaching Excellence award, and Baylor University’s Cornelia Marschall Smith award. In addition to teaching PhD, master- and undergraduate-level students, she shares her research through both keynote addresses and executive trainings. As a member of Duke University’s
Global Learning Resource Network for Executive Education, Dr. Dixon has addressed executives in London, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Mexico City, Dubai, Hyderabad, Paris and throughout the United States. Dr. Dixon currently serves as President of the University Sales Center Alliance.