

Top Sellers: Characteristics of a Superior Salesperson¹

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Introduction

A "plaid suit and hard sell tactics" do not define superior selling. There are many determinants impacting sales performance that distinguish superior salespeople from inferior salespeople (Sardar and Patton, 2002). As a salesperson, you have hundreds of competitors, and customers will choose you on the basis of how well you present your product to them.

This document will focus on the benefits of being a top seller, the attributes of a top seller, the difference between tellers and sellers, and how to define a top seller. Also, this document will provide a better understanding of what really makes a great salesperson and the tools to help you obtain the characteristics needed to be a top seller.

The Benefits of Being a Top Seller

A top salesperson clearly has the competitive edge over other salespeople; they have the characteristics needed to sell their products and create important relationships. Twenty percent of all salespeople make eighty percent of all sales, which means eighty percent of a sales force fights over the remaining 20 percent of business (Greenberg &

Greenberg, 1983). This statistic reinforces how important it is to be in the top twenty percent of sellers. These top salespeople possess personalities and abilities that best fit selling as an occupation. In addition, 55 percent of salespeople have no ability to sell, and 25 percent have sales ability but are selling the wrong product or service (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983).

Improving a salesperson's performance will increase both the organization's profitability and the salesperson's income. When using personality profiling techniques, a peak performer will be recruited over mediocre and poor performers and will move up the promotional ladder quicker (Sardar and Patton, 2002). The benefits of being a top seller are excellent incentives to learning the attributes of a successful salesperson. The good news is that top sellers are not born; anyone can become a top seller by studying, practicing, concentrating, and focusing on his own performance (Basis International, 2002).

The Attributes of a Top Seller

Successful salespeople possess common attributes. This paper presents three sets of attributes that researchers have identified for top sellers.

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1. This document is SN004, one of a series of the Food and Resource Economics Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date March 2002. Reviewed October 2008. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Common Attributes: Set 1

The first set of common attributes comes from a recent study by the Harvard Business School. The study found that highly successful salespeople do not take “no” personally; take 100 percent responsibility for results; possess empathy; have above average ambition, empathy, and willpower and determination; are intensely goal-oriented; and can easily approach strangers (BASIS International, 2002). In addition, the study found that knowing how to sell effectively is not always second nature; these attributes can be learned and incorporated into a personal development plan for reaching top seller status.

Authors Patton and Sardar (2002) define five related qualities that they feel describe a successful salesperson: high energy level, self-confidence, hunger for money, well-established habits of industry, and the ability to see obstacles as challenges. They believe that top sellers possess a compulsive need to win and hold the affection of others (Sardar and Patton, 2002).

Common Attributes: Set 2

The second set of common attributes were identified by Drs. Jeanne and Herbert Greenberg. They suggest that a salesperson needs three basic traits to be successful: empathy, ego drive, and ego strength (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983).

Empathy is defined as the ability of the salesperson to relate to customers effectively. An example of empathy is where a salesperson making a lot of money is selling insurance to less fortunate individuals. If the salesperson understands that the customer can only afford the bare necessities, he is more likely to make the sale by not pressuring the customer into buying something the customer cannot afford. In other words, being able to understand the customer's financial situation. Empathy is the guidance mechanism that allows the salesperson to follow the prospect through evasions and objections until the prospect's real needs are targeted and the sale is closed (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983).

Ego drive is defined as gaining personal gratification by persuading another individual to do

what you want him to do. The Greenbergs believe that the ego-driven individual is only satisfied when victory (the sale) is achieved. An example of ego-drive is where a salesperson is on the road visiting prospective customers, but he keeps getting rejected. In other words, the ego-driven individual will not be happy until he has made the sale. Ego drive is the motive force launching the salesperson toward the potential customer (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983).

Ego strength is defined as the resilience to move onto the next sales situation after being rejected. An example of ego strength is where a salesperson pursues the customer until the sale is finished. In other words, "never give up." Ego strength is having the stamina to follow the prospect through evasions and objections until the sale is closed (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983).

While deficiencies in empathy, ego-drive, and ego-strength can guarantee sales failure, possessing them does not automatically guarantee sales success (Greenberg and Greenberg, 1983). In addition, having the ability to deal with complex ideas and concepts, make quick analyses and judgments, negotiate systematically and persistently, and manage/organize time are also traits that can improve sales performance.

Common Attributes: Set 3

The third set of common attributes that a top salesperson may possess are listed in the article, *What Makes a Great Salesperson? Links Between Our Heritage and the Future*, by Sardar and Patton (2002). These include the following:

- job commitment
- strategic orientation
- intellect
- mental alertness
- sociability
- authoritative

- dependability
- persistence
- courage
- ability to improvise
- inquisitiveness
- forcefulness
- tenacity
- straightforwardness

Combining some of these qualities with those that you already possess may be the perfect fit for you in your sales situation. However, having these qualities do not automatically guarantee success.

The Difference between Tellers and Sellers

Are you a teller or a seller? What is the difference between a teller and a seller? A good source for determining the difference is *The Top Ten Ways to Know You are a Teller or a Seller* by Terri Levine (2000). Terry Levine, a business coach for sales and marketing professionals, has been the number one salesperson in two different national organizations and bases his teller or seller list on personal experiences. Although many people in sales title themselves “sellers”, in reality they are just “tellers”. To be a top performer in the sales industry, you need to be an effective seller not an effective teller. Figure 1 distinguishes tellers from sellers (Levine, 2000). Which one are you?

How to Define a Top Seller

In a recent survey conducted by a management company, 365 CEOs were asked what they thought were the key factors that separate high performing sales professionals from low-performing sales professionals (Gitomer, 2000). Their top answers were self-discipline, motivation, product knowledge, customer knowledge, and innate talent and personality. When an analysis of this survey was conducted, it was discovered that these executives are not the ones who actually go out and make the sales.

Tellers	Sellers
Give information	Solve problems
Leave decision to the prospect	Gain conviction
Present features	Translate features into benefits
Avoid rejection	Risk rejection
Try to win by showing knowledge	Win by closing sales
Use rational level	Use emotional and rational levels
Reactive	Proactive
Want structure and stability	Accept uncertainty as the norm
Identify needs	Intensify needs and wants
Everyone comes to your door	You go to everyone's door

Figure 1. How to distinguish tellers from sellers.

The characteristics they indicated do not separate superior performers from inferior performers. The study then identified and concluded that the following characteristics, if mastered by a salesperson, will make him rise above the rest. How do you measure up to these qualities?

- Unyielding belief in the company, the product and yourself
- Creativity to differentiate yourself from the competition
- Sense of humor that builds deep rapport
- Ability to promote yourself
- Ability to maintain price integrity
- Unyielding personal values and ethics
- Reliability and dependability
- Passion and desire to excel and be the best
- Exciting presentation skills
- Ability to generate profit and loyal customers
- Selling for the love of helping others get what they want rather than for the love of money
- Perpetual positive attitude and enthusiasm

Conclusion

Now that you know the benefits of being a top seller, the attributes of a top seller, the difference between a teller and a seller, and how to define a top seller, hopefully you will be on your way to being the best of the best in sales. Sales is a strenuous, challenging, and demanding occupation, and being a top salesperson is not easy. Having an idea of the attributes needed to be a top salesperson will help you achieve top seller status. So get rid of the plaid suit and start selling!

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