



“Sales Is Different Today”

Exposing the Myth By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.

If even one more sales expert or sales-training firm tells me that sales is different today or selling has changed, I will scream. This statement is code for “We have a new solution (i.e., product or service) for you to buy.”

Sales has not changed since human-kind first started exchanging resources for reward or payment. People still buy from folks they know and trust.

Here’s what *has* changed: today’s buyers are far more educated than their predecessors. These better-educated buyers may extend the overall sales cycle time, but the basic sales process remains the same.

These educated decision makers still require the exchange of resources and still have the additional resources (i.e., money) available to pay for those exchange transactions. However, they are quite a bit savvier about the sellers of those resources and the actual resources available.

I recently downloaded yet another report, created by a noted leadership consulting group, about fatal flaws in sales and how to correct them. (The name is being withheld to protect the guilty.) As I read who had been surveyed, a big red flag popped up: the respondents were professional salespeople whose job consisted solely of following up on leads. These sales professionals came from organizations equipped with separate marketing departments. But 97.7 percent of the businesses here in the United States have fewer than 20 employees. Sales professionals in these firms must do their own marketing, because the majority of those small businesses do not possess the financial resources to dedicate a separate marketing department to bringing in all those new sales leads. This particular survey, like many other surveys, looked at the salespeople in firms with more than 100 employees. These firms represent the minority of businesses today in the United States.

The first problem with this report, then, is relevance: what works well for the big guys does not necessarily translate well for small businesses.

My suspicions awakened, I turned to the next page of the report and discovered the suggestion that today’s sales trends include customer-oriented selling. But that’s hardly a new concept. Common sense tells most salespeople (or those with any credible experience, at least) that the customer has always been the focal point of the sales process. After 30-plus years in sales, I believe in placing the client’s needs before my own self-gratification. My father, who was also in sales his entire life, probably was the person responsible for my commitment to the customer. This idea of customer-oriented selling as a new sales trend is for the birds!

As I continued to read about the other new sales trends of “creating and delivering value,” I almost gagged. In

the February 2014 issue of *NBIZ*, I discussed in extensive detail the idea that value creation is a myth.

Next, the report listed the key sales performance drivers. (A “sales performance driver” is a talent or skill that impacts other talents or skills and ultimately accelerates the end result of increased sales.) Would you believe the first listed performance driver was “building rapport?” Really? “Building rapport” is an outdated, lame descriptor for “being a relationship-driven sales professional.” Heck, it’s possible (even easy) to build rapport with a dog. The sales professionals who make their prospects uncomfortable through effective questioning and active listening are far more successful than those who merely have a shared affinity with their sales leads. Claiming “building rapport” as a performance driver is based upon the false premise that your buyers must like you. People buy from those whom they know and trust. Liking someone is frequently not part of the equation.

Most interestingly, the list omitted many of the key performance drivers I have seen operate when working with high-performance sales professionals. Possibly the number-one performance driver for those in sales, executive leadership positions, and even customer service and frontline roles is realistic personal goal setting. If people can consistently achieve their own goals, they can achieve organizational goals with far greater ease. Consistent goal setting and achievement are what separate average salespeople from top performers. When salespeople understand that goal setting is a process and employ that process day in and day out, incredible results are possible. They are now in the flow of continuous improvement, which propels them ahead of everyone who is satisfied with the status quo.

An additional benefit of a goal-setting and planning process is the further development of critical-thinking skills. When individuals take the time required to think about how to plan out the achievement of their goal, they invest wisely. As President Dwight Eisenhower said, “Plans are worthless; planning is everything.”

In sales, there are hunters and farmers. Both roles have significant personal accountability. Sales professionals know if they do not hunt or farm, metaphorically speaking, they will starve.



If I were to name a second performance driver, I would identify personal accountability. For years, it has been said, “Hungry people hunt.” This could be amended to “hungry people hunt or farm.” In sales, there are hunters and farmers. Both roles have significant personal accountability. Sales professionals know if they do not hunt or farm, metaphorically speaking, they will starve.

To be either a hunter or a farmer suggests that self-starting ability is another critical performance driver. Lazy people do not make

high-performing sales leaders or executives. The power of being able to jump in on one’s own without a sales manager or small business owner standing over one’s shoulder is, as they say, “self-explanatory.”

The fourth top sales driver is active listening. The report I read cited listening as a performance driver, but active listening is quite different. Active listening requires having a crystal-clear grasp of what the other person is experiencing and thinking throughout the communication exchange.

When I wrote *Be the Red Jacket in the Sea of Gray Suits: The Keys to Unlocking Sales Success*, I included this acronym for clear communication:

CLARITY – Separate the tangibles from the intangibles.

LEGITIMIZE – Legitimize the real problems, not the symptoms posing as problems.

EMOTION – Hear the emotions that are within the verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal communication.

AGREEMENT – Discover agreement by discovering common ground that will continue to build trust.

RETENTION – Truly hear and remember what the other person said—and probably told others who failed to listen actively.

What it takes to be a successful salesperson or small business person has not changed. Nor has the overall sales process changed.

We market ourselves, our companies, and our solutions to attract attention and start building relationships. When we find a qualified sales lead, our goal is to earn a sale. Finally, after we have earned the sale, we want the customer or client to repeat the buying experience with us—and, better yet, to make those coveted referrals.

What *has* changed is how we market to our now better educated target audience. Both outbound marketing (traditional) and inbound marketing (social media, websites) are now part of any integrated marketing plan.

We as sellers must deliver exceptional content quickly, including:

- Forward-thinking knowledge
- Testimonials
- Whitepapers

Our solutions or resources must be in alignment with the buyer's wants and needs. This may require us as sellers to be more flexible, more adaptable, and more willing to change than in the past. Henry Ford once said, "You can have any color, as long as it is black." In his quest to keep his cars affordable, he stayed with one color. His competitors saw the one-color solution as too rigid and began to offer different colors. Sure enough, buyers were willing to pay a little more for a red, white, blue, or green car rather than just having a black one. Ford's reluctance to diversify exemplifies how *not* to react to customers' wants and needs.

Many of today's buyers understand profitability better than in the past, due to the continued pressures of compliance, taxes, and technology that drain profits. When salespeople return to understanding the customer's business and how the company makes and keeps money better than its competitors, they will connect to the most consistent performance value for anyone in business: profits.

Understanding profitability for each customer does require additional research on the part of the salesperson. However, top sales performers have always researched their clients, and today's technology makes it easier than ever before. No longer do business people have to travel to the local public library. Instead they can open up their computers or smart devices, jump onto the Worldwide Web, and Google the information they seek.

Sales today is what it has always been. I encourage you to reflect upon your own thoughts about sales and selling. If you think they are different, ask yourself "How so?" **N**

Leanne Hoagland-Smith is the heurist for the next generation of talent management. Her ability to guide forward-thinking leaders in all industries facing new and repetitive problems, from people to operations, earned her inclusion in the 2013 Top 25 Sales Influencers by Open View Labs. Leanne looks forward to hearing from you at leanne@processspecialist.com.