

WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL SALES BEHAVIOR?

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKETS IN THE UK

By Peter Brent and Beth Rogers

The role of the field salesperson, in the Business-to-Business sector has evolved over the years. Much of the research about direct professional salespeople has been in the areas of performance and control. Some research has been undertaken on behavioral expectations from purchasing managers, but this has been limited to aspects such as ethics and the effect of the supplier's market orientation. The purpose of this study was to explore which behavioral traits of direct professional salespeople are most required and appreciated by purchasing managers, and also to understand the expectations about their behavior from their sales manager's point of view.

Introduction

In an article in 2001, Betsy Cummings asks "Do Customers Hate Salespeople?" On the basis of interesting anecdotes, she identified six deadly sins of selling:

1. failure to do "homework"
2. being too pushy
3. pulling rank on buyers
4. not following up
5. being rude
6. being deliberately misleading

This is a populist view from the trade press. Cummings does admit that most salespeople are knowledgeable and trustworthy, but unfortunately the negative stereotypes are all too familiar. Obviously any salesperson behavior can fail to meet customer expectations and lose business, but sales managers have to do more than help salespeople avoid these bad behaviors. They need to pinpoint the behaviors which generate positive sales performance in order to coach and develop their team for success.

Early in 2002 some ad hoc research was conducted at a large international process manufacturing firm under the broad heading of 'what buyers want from salespeople'. A senior group purchasing coordinator agreed to involve his colleagues in purchasing around the world, and asked them for their opinion as to what constituted a good salesperson. The top five results (in order) were:

1. honesty
2. product awareness
3. empathy
4. effective communication
5. customer advocacy

As a footnote, an important point which emerged from later conversation was 'we will judge salespeople by what they do, as much as by what they are selling.'

This research was an attempt to explain why some sales people were more successful than others. This success seemed to be somewhat independent of sales training, experience and, in some cases, previous sales ability.

Previously, the author had examined the use of incentives and other reward systems, but these did not of themselves answer the question. Good sales results were not consistently driven by rewards in the B2B domain. A review of academic papers on the performance of sales people did not provide complete clarity either. Discussions with colleagues, senior staff, customers and others suggested that there might be particular 'behaviors' which were likely to lead to consistent success.

The authors considered that dyadic exploratory research on both the supplier and customer side of the sales process would be the best way to move forward. In order to understand perceptions, it seemed prudent to take a broad approach to uncover issues or problems before a quantitative program of study could be undertaken. It was necessary, due to the goodwill required to access companies for in-depth interviews, to examine only two industry sectors (manufacturing and information technology) where the authors had contacts.

In addition to asking a number of open-ended questions about the nature of success associated with the skills, attributes, qualities and behaviors of the salesperson, a number of questions were asked about the culture, size and performance of the respondent firms, to see if these were likely variables for success.

A study like this for the UK is timely. A recent international survey of 2,705 corporate buyers found that the sales profession in the UK had the lowest overall rating – 53% of 419 UK buyers rated the sales profession in the UK as “poor” or “fair” (Thomas et al, 2007).

Historical Research

Walker Churchill and Ford (1977) proposed that the sales performance of an individual salesperson depended on motivation, aptitude and role perceptions. Salespeople need to be able to estimate how much time to spend on which tasks in order to achieve performance and reward. Thus, success seems to depend on self-esteem, their perceptions of capability, understanding of the business environment, task-specific aptitude and accurate role perception (knowing what is required from the job).

In 1985, together with Hartley (Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker, 1985), they tested their model by performing a meta-analysis of 116 studies of salesperson performance, incorporating 1,653 observations, going back to 1918. They concluded that these studies struggled to find any strong predictor of performance.

Although none of the variables accounted for much variation they did find that accurate role perceptions topped the ranking, followed by selling skill and motivation. Aptitude and product type had some relevance in Business-to-Business selling. They concluded that there were multiple determinants of performance. The strongest indication was that a salesperson needs significant experience, knowledge and awareness in order to be motivated to achieve superior performance. The authors expected some of these factors to still be relevant, but that superior performance might be better explained by something defined by customers.

The Adaptive Selling Behavior model (Weitz, Sujan and Sujan, 1986) might also be relevant to this study. Weitz et al (1986) argued that if salespeople are able to gather information to develop tailored propositions to customers, and adapt that proposition in the light of customer feedback, they are more likely to succeed. Many studies since have reinforced this finding, (e.g. Park and Holloway 2003, who found that Adaptive Selling Behavior had a significant positive influence on customer retention, opportunity conversion, sales volume, market share and profitability). They found that learning orientation was also linked to better performance.

Additionally, Reid et al (1997) conducted an extensive survey study of industrial buyers' assessment of sales behaviors, involving 568 members of the National Association of Purchasing Management in the USA. They found that salespeople needed to improve their understanding of customer needs and ability to create value by applying their products/services to the customers operations and processes. They concluded that the effective use of information to adapt the offering to provide the best solution for the buyer was "the bottom line".

Finally, other studies have had a more specific focus. For example, Trawick et al (1991) describe buyers' aversion to buying from unethical salespeople and Roman and Ruiz (2005) found that perceptions of ethical sales behavior improved customer satisfaction and commitment to the salesperson and their firm. In a separate study, Roman et al (2005) found that poor listening skills negatively affect salesperson performance, and that

commission based on sales volume negatively influences salespeople's listening behavior.

The market orientation of the firm positively influences salespeople's customer orientation, which improves customer satisfaction and trust. This satisfaction improves the manufacturer's financial performance (Langarak, 2001). However, Guenzi et al (2007) examined the relationship between selling strategy and key account management behaviors and found discrepancies between desired behaviors and actual behaviors. While account managers were able to adopt more customer-oriented selling, teamwork within their own organization was lacking.

In summary, the existing research would suggest that the authors should expect to collect comments about the application of experience and knowledge, being able to adapt offerings to customer needs and ethical behavior. The relationship between the salesperson's behavior and their company's "customer orientation" might also be a topic for concern. The reason for extensive discussion in this research was to identify other areas of interest and possible connections made by either sales managers or customer decision-makers.

Methodology

Even though the authors expected to find some sales managers and sales professionals with a comprehensive understanding of more successful sales behaviors such as adaptation to customer needs, with reinforcement from customer comment, it was decided to take an open question approach to allow respondents to explore their perceptions.

Due to the goodwill required to access companies for in-depth interviews, it was necessary to examine only two industry sectors (manufacturing and information technology) where the authors had contacts. Eighteen separate interviews were conducted with four suppliers: sixteen face-to-face and two by telephone. A further eleven face-to-face interviews were conducted with customers of these four suppliers.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were considered appropriate to ensure that in this early stage of investigation, the broad nature of the study and any unseen issues or problems could be uncovered. Thus allowing points which may have been missed to be exposed before any quantitative program is undertaken.

This exercise provided evidence of both the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research. While providing depth through extensive responses, it was also clear that terminology around the topic of sales behavior is loosely used. This was good preparation for the quantitative follow-up study, where definitions will be provided.

Developing a scoring system and grouping the results

It was decided that the best way to capture the successful behaviors was to classify and count the number of times specific behaviors were mentioned. During the analysis of the interviews the researchers noticed that many different words were used or expressed for essentially the same behavior. In addition, some terms like 'professional' were used as a "catch-all" for a variety of behaviors.

Key words were extracted from the transcripts and they were collated into six different themes. We have used the terms below to group the responses and then provide scoring of the frequency of use of these words or terms.

Immediate Behaviors (I)

(behaviors noticeable within a few minutes of meeting someone)

Polite, approachable, friendly, professional, helpful, appropriately dressed

Knowledge Possession (K)

Product knowledge, knowledge of the market and industry, knowledge of own firms' capabilities and services, knowledge of customer's business.

Personal Attributes (P)

Honesty/integrity, drive, proactive, interested, curious, dependable, enthusiasm, energetic, flexible, motivated, moral, ethical, transparent.

Personal Skills (S)

Communication skills, relationship-builder, problem-solver, team worker.

Application Ability (A)

(Ability to apply knowledge and skills to the customer's situation)

Entrepreneurial, able to understand and interpret customer needs, constructs creative solutions.

Competencies and Capabilities of the Firm (C)

Product and service expertise, technical support, customer service support, good logistics, timely and accurate responses.

The final grouping, 'Competence and Capabilities of the Firm', was at first eliminated because it did not emerge as a distinct area in interviews with supplier personnel. However, the responses from customers did refer to the competencies of the firm being instrumental in their impressions of salespeople, so it has been given a place in the analysis. It may be that the supplier respondents regard their company's capabilities as an implicit underpinning in any discussion of the behaviors and attributes of the sales people.

Finally, to allow a direct comparison of the scores for both the supplier and customer groups, percentages of keywords have been used.

Research Findings -- Supplier Responses

The first behavior focused question posed to the sales managers and sales professionals had them describe the behaviors they expected of their current sales team. Their answers indicated that encompassed immediate behaviors, knowledge, personal attributes, skills and application ability with a focus on personal attributes (29% of mentions) followed by application ability (23%). There was minimal mention of immediate behaviors (8%).

When asked how they would define a successful salesperson, there was even more focus on personal attributes (39% of mentions). This was also evident when sales managers and sales professionals were asked to describe their most successful salespeople/colleagues (31% of mentions classified as personal attributes). Knowledge and their ability to

apply knowledge and skills were scored relatively low (17% and 9% respectively). Another follow-up question about what less effective salespeople lack also showed a focus on personal attributes (42%). When asked about salespeople who had left the company due to lack of success, the highest proportion of descriptors were personal attributes. So, sales managers were consistent across five different questions in correlating personal attributes with sales success.

When asked what they felt the customer expected of salespeople, descriptors focused on Applications Ability (24% of mentions) and Competencies and Capabilities of the Firm (27% of mentions). In response to a question about what expectations customers have of employees other than salespeople, the highest proportion of comments (nearly two thirds) was about immediate behaviors.

Respondents were asked whether the motivational package for salespeople included anything that was related to behaviors. They all commented that behaviors were discussed in appraisals, but there were no direct rewards tied to behaviors. Of course, "behaviors" are difficult to define, so measurement would also be difficult.

In summary, sales managers and sales professionals appear to consistently focus on personal attributes as the main behavior that relates to sales success. Even though this is a limited qualitative study, the tendency for all supplier respondents to rate successful sales people with a high mention of attributes of a personal nature such as honesty, integrity etc. provides face validity to the results.

In addition, when asked to assume the customer's point of view, sales managers and salespeople provided different keywords more often. This shift was from personal attributes to company competencies and the salesperson's application ability. The literature to date suggests that application ability (A) should be correlated with better performance, although the role of personal attributes (P) is also important.

Research Findings - Customer Responses

The customer decision-makers meet a variety of salespeople on a regular basis. They typically used more keywords than sales managers and sales professionals in describing their expectations of salespeople. In response to a general opening question about their expectations of salespeople, the responses were spread across a variety of categories, with Knowledge and Personal Attributes attracting 22% of mentions each. When responding to the questions that focused on behaviors, the customers initially focused on Personal Attributes (34% of mentions). The next questions asked about "best" behaviors from salespeople. This resulted in relatively few descriptors, however Application Ability emerged as the prominent behavior (29% of mentions). The customers appreciated the salesperson's abilities to apply their knowledge and provide benefits that meet their requirements. A follow-up question about the status of the suppliers whose salespeople demonstrated "best" behaviors indicated that they were usually "preferred" suppliers with long-standing relationships.

Customers were then asked for actual examples of "best" behaviors. Almost exclusively, they recalled good experiences of a personal nature. The supplier's sales person had 'gone the extra mile' or delivered something to the customers which stood out. For example, a senior IT buyer recalled how a particular salesperson was interested in his personal welfare following a round of cutbacks and redundancies. His humanity was a factor that the buyer remembered.

Despite some fond thoughts of salespeople, when describing other supplier personnel, customers commented that they were 'more professional' than the sales people and that their advice was likely to be more factual than that from other salespeople. Two respondents quoted that they found it difficult to believe that a sales person on a bonus or commission could give honest and objective advice.

When comparing supplier and customer responses, it is interesting that when the customers were asked about best behaviors in general, their interest in application ability was in line with sales managers' interpretation of their views, but when asked for examples of best behavior, they focused on demonstration of personal attributes. Overall, customers seemed to have a broad range of expectations of salespeople. Given the literature to date, the focus on application ability was consistent with what we know to date about sales behaviors associated with better sales performance. However, the "in extremis" need for personal commitment from the salesperson was an interesting and thought-provoking angle in the responses.

Discussion

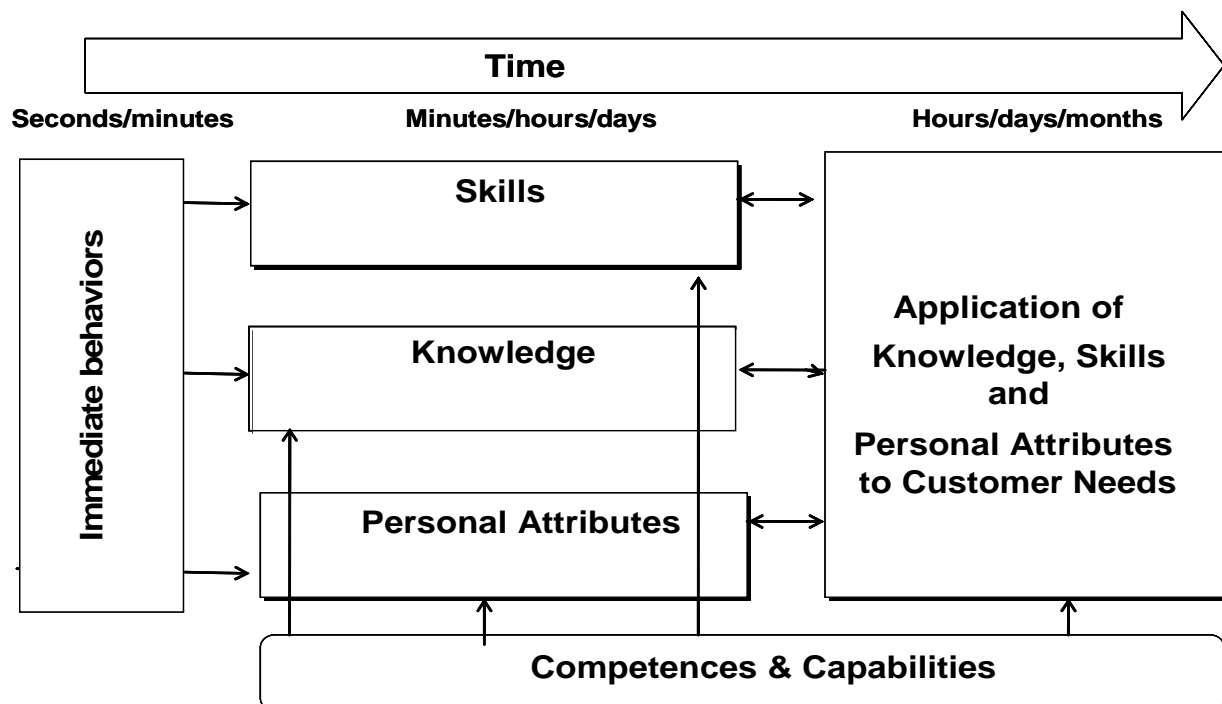
It was immediately apparent, both on listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts that there is much confusion in both the supplier and customer groups of understanding and usage of the words behaviors, qualities, attributes, knowledge and skills. Questions about “behavior” solicited responses including references to factual knowledge and communication skills. Dictionary definitions of “behavior” suggest it is the manner in which people control themselves, the way in which they respond to stimuli. Customers commented that the initial appearance and manner of the first or early meetings with the sales person is important (what the authors classified as ‘immediate’ behaviors). Poor “immediate behaviors” on first meeting would make it difficult for a sales person to begin a successful call or

relationship. In the perception of respondents, “behavior” also encompasses the way that, over time, a salesperson demonstrated their knowledge, skills and qualities, and how they apply them.

In order to capture all the themes emerging from these discussions, the following diagram is provided to help illustrate the breadth of “sales behavior”. It appears that the acceptance by the customer of good “immediate behavior” at an initial meeting allows the sales person to successfully pass onto the next stage. From the responses, it is clear that customers think that the knowledge, skills and personal attributes of the salesperson are important, and that they would expect demonstration of these attributes within a fairly short period of time.

There seems to be a message from customer responses that “best” sales behavior involves

Proposed Model



the sales person demonstrating their ability to apply knowledge, skills, and personal attributes, to solve the customer's problem. This, arguably, is underpinned by the core capabilities and competencies of the firm which customers expect to follow through from the salesperson's activity.

There seems to be a degree of co-dependency between these six factors of success. Thus there might be a comprehensive approach to training or coaching successful sales behaviors.

Recommendations and Further Research

This exploratory research has identified that there is confusion among respondents from both supplier and customer organizations about what a behavior is, how good behavior from sales people is judged and how good behaviors can be linked to measurable success. This study has used in-depth interviews to discover how sales professionals and sales managers and customers express their requirements and expectations, it has given us some pointers and food for thought, but the subject needs to be tested in a larger, closely defined quantitative study. The authors are approaching professional institutes representing salespeople as well as purchasing decision-makers in the UK to achieve this end.

References

- Churchill Jr., A., Ford, N. M., Hartley, S. W. and Walker Jr., O. C. (1985) "The Determinants of Salesperson Performance: A Meta-Analysis", *Journal of Marketing Research*, May 1985, Vol. 22, Issue 2, pp. 103-118.
- Cummings, B. (2001), "Do Customers Hate Salespeople?", *Sales and Marketing Management*, June 2001, Vol. 153, Issue 6, pp. 44-51.
- Guenzi, P., Pardo, C. and Georges L. (2007), "Relational selling strategy and key account managers' relationship behaviors: An exploratory study", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 36, pp. 121-133.
- Langerak, F. (2001), "Effects of marketing orientation on the behaviors of salesperson and purchasers, channel relationships, and performance of manufacturers", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. 18, pp. 221-234.
- Park, J-E. and Holloway, B. (2003), "Adaptive selling behavior revisited: an empirical examination of learning orientation, sales performance and job satisfaction", *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 239-251.
- Reid, D. A., Plank, R. E. and Minton, A. P. (1997), "Industrial buyers' assessment of sales behaviors", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, pp. 1-13.
- Roman, S., Ruiz, S. and Munuera, J. L. (2005), "The influence of the compensation system and personal variables on a salesperson's effective listening behavior", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 25, pp. 205-230.
- Roman, S. and Ruiz, S. (2005), "Relationship outcomes of perceived ethical sales behavior: the customer's perspective", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 58, pp. 439-445.

Thomas B, Mitchell S and Del Rossa J (2007), "Sales: strategic partnership or necessary evil? 2007-2008 Global sales perceptions report", *Development Dimensions International*, Pittsburgh

Trawick, I. F., Swan, J. E., McGee, G. W. and Rink, D. R. (1991), "Influence of buyer ethics and salesperson behavior on intention to choose a supplier", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Winter 1991, Vol. 19, Issue 1, pp. 17-24.

Walker Jr., O. C., Churchill Jr., G. A. and Ford, N. M. (1977), "Motivation and Performance in Industrial Selling: Present Knowledge and Needed Research", *Journal of Marketing Research*, May 1977, Vol. 14, Issue 2, pp. 156-168.

Weitz, B. A., Sujaan, H. and Sujaan, M. (1986) "Knowledge, Motivation, and Adaptive Behavior: A Framework for Improving Selling Effectiveness", *Journal of Marketing*, October 1986, Vol. 50, Issue 4, pp. 174-191.

management" reached the amazon.com top ten "hot new releases" in its category in September 2007.

Peter Brent is a partner of Mathieson Brent, which offers integrated sales and marketing consultancy to B2B companies in a variety of sectors. He has over 30 years marketing and sales experience in substantial companies such as Kodak, Letraset, W R Grace and, most recently, as Sales Director of a division of National Starch & Chemical.

Beth Rogers runs the MA Sales Management at Portsmouth Business School. She also chairs the UK National Sales Board. She has a sales and marketing background in the IT industry. Her book "Rethinking sales

Northern Illinois University

Table 1. Summary of supplier outlook						
	Immediate behaviors	Knowledge	Personal Attributes	Personal skills	Application skills	Company-wide capabilities
General expectations	8%	20%	29%	20%	23%	
Successful salesperson	2%	9%	39%	28%	22%	
Most successful	14%	17%	31%	29%	9%	
What less effective lack	8%	17%	42%	29%	4%	
What customers expect	5%	17%	22%	5%	24%	27%

Table 2. Summary of customer outlook						
	Immediate behaviors	Knowledge	Personal Attributes	Personal skills	Application skills	Company-wide capabilities
General expectations	9%	22%	22%	18%	16%	13%
Expected behaviors	19%	15%	34%	13%	17%	2%
Best behaviors		12%	21%	25%	29%	13%