

Pay attention: Soft skills can produce sales

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The word “soft” is enough to turn off any hard-driving business executive. After all, doesn’t it indicate a salesperson who can’t stand their ground, is in touch with their inner child and can’t negotiate the tough business deals? NOT.

Research supports the power of soft skills, often referred to as “emotional intelligence” skills. They’re the new weapon for companies competing in a global, information-loaded world. It’s no longer enough to hire a person with the highest IQ, unless that IQ is accompanied by high emotional intelligence.

What is emotional intelligence? It’s a person’s ability to perceive their emotions, understand why they’re feeling an emotion and to adjust their actions to achieve desired outcomes.

Here’s the business case for “return on emotions”:

- In analyzing data from 40 corporations, the differentiator between average and star performers was the level of emotional intelligence versus pure intellect and expertise.
- American Express Financial Advisors sales increased 18 percent after attending an Emotional Competence Program.

- The U.S. Air Force found that by using emotional intelligence to select recruiters, they improved hiring practices, which provided a gain of \$3 million annually.
- People with high emotional intelligence make more money — an average of \$29,000 more per year, according to the latest book by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves, “Emotional Intelligence 2.0.”

There are several emotional intelligence traits to examine. Here are three that make a real difference in sales results.

(1) **Emotional self-awareness** — This is the foundational skill for emotional intelligence.

Many well-intentioned sales managers invest hours in sales training, only to have the salesperson buckle under pressure from a tough prospect or client. That’s when the sales manager needs to understand that it’s no longer about sales technique; it’s about teaching their team to manage emotions being triggered by tough prospects.

When a salesperson allows emotions to run wild, the brain freezes up, resulting in a transactional sales meeting versus a value sales meeting.

Research shows that highly successful people excel at managing their emotions. Take the profession of trial lawyers, such as a litigators or prosecutors. Is it knowledge of the law that wins trials, or is it the lawyer’s ability to manage the many dynamics that occur in the courtroom, from the judge to the opposing attorney?

The same applies to sales. Is it expertise that wins deals, or the ability to manage all the dynamics that occur when interfacing with multiple buying influences and personalities?

Help your sales team become more self-aware by slowing down and debriefing the sales call. Analyze any nonproductive emotions experienced during a tough sales call and figure out the root cause of the emotion. Was the salesperson intimidated? Were they too concerned about themselves and not the prospect?

Here's the rule: no awareness, no change, same outcomes.

(2) **Assertiveness** — The assertive salesperson knows how to state what they need without becoming aggressive or pushy. They're good at moving the call forward and disqualifying poor opportunities early in the sales cycle.

A salesperson scoring low in assertiveness often ends up in chase mode because they aren't comfortable setting firm agreements for the next step. Or they do a lot of practice proposals because they're not assertive enough to ask for a meeting with all the decision makers.

It's the "knowing and doing" gap. The salesperson knows what to do because the sales manager has taught them the strategies and tactics for all of the above. The lack of doing comes from poor skills in assertiveness.

Sales managers often misdiagnose this problem and continue to provide even more sales skill training when the salesperson really needs focused attention on assertiveness training or reassignment to another department.

(3) **Empathy** — Ever heard the expression, "I feel your pain"? In other words, I am empathetic to your situation. Empathy is the ability to step in another person's shoes and see things from their perspective.

Wonder if that skill is of value to customers. Regarding empathy, the biggest problem companies face is the inability of salespeople to focus and be present. This ability, or lack of it, often is taught by senior management.

Think of the last company meeting you attended? How many participants were really present? You know, no one checking their BlackBerry while a colleague was speaking? Anything that's repeated often becomes a habit, and the habit of not being present shows up during sales meetings.

Many salespeople are losing the ability to focus on the prospect for one hour without checking something electronic or thinking of the next thing on their to-do list. We all know when a person isn't fully engaged, and so do your prospects.

Teach your team the lyrics to an old song, "Love the One You're With." Quit worrying about what just happened and what's going to happen, and be present.

So get soft this year and start working on the right end of the sales problem. Incorporate soft-skills training with consultative sales training — because soft skills do yield hard sales results.