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Sales Skills

Overcoming FEAR in Salespeople

SOME PEOPLE BLAME LAZINESS OR INCOMPETENCE FOR POOR PERFORMANCE IN SALESPEOPLE. BUT THE TRUE CAUSE MAY BE FEAR OF SELF-PROMOTION—MORE WIDELY KNOWN AS SALES-CALL RELUCTANCE.

Judy seems to have all of the necessary qualities to be a successful salesperson. She's outgoing, intelligent, and motivated. Yet, in her first six months of selling computer equipment, her performance has been disappointing. If her performance doesn't improve soon, she probably will be fired. Judy's supervisor, Beth, has been trying to find the key to Judy's poor performance. The company for which they work has one of the best training programs available on selling skills and in-depth product knowledge. The training department gives Judy high marks in simulated sales presentations. Beth, who has seen the videotapes of those simulations, agrees that Judy seems to have what it takes to do the job. So, why isn't Judy performing to her potential?

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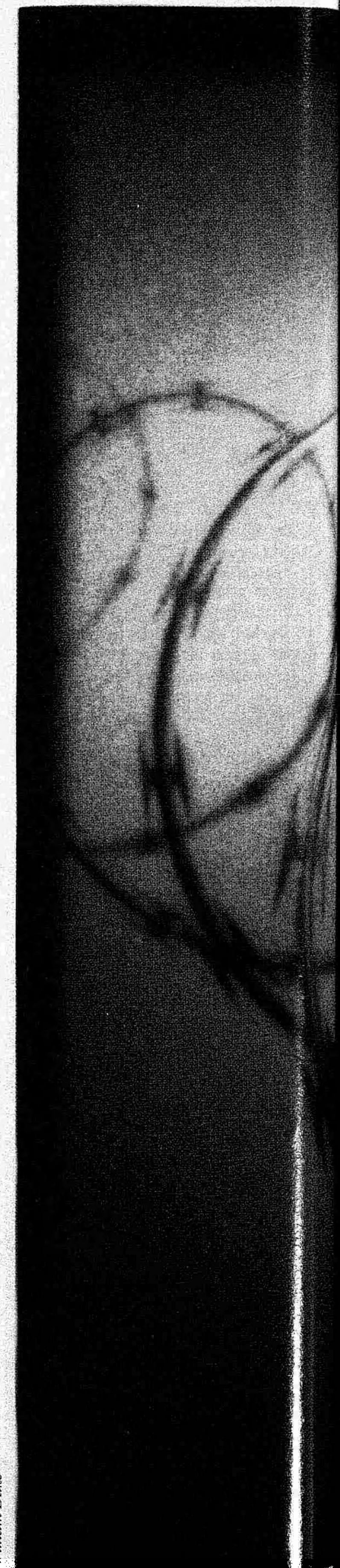

William Duke

As a sales manager, you may have experienced the same frustration Beth feels. For some reason, apparently motivated, talented, and capable members of your sales staff fail to meet expectations. And when you provide traditional training, the programs don't help. When the typical causes of poor sales performance—a lack of selling skills, product knowledge, or motivation—don't apply, the reason could be fear.

Salespeople must sell themselves. They must be willing to engage in self-promotion, to let others know what they do, and to solicit recognition for what they do. A hesitation to display such behaviors is called the fear of self-promotion. That fear can limit the number of contacts with prospective buyers that a salesperson feels comfortable initiating. When that happens, the fear of self-promotion becomes sales-call reluctance. Simply put, sales-call reluctance defines how much a salesperson will do in the areas of self-promotion and prospecting for new business.

Sales-call reluctance stems from a basic fear of self-promotion. It represents several conditioned fears expressed through a salesperson's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors—some of which may be more critical to the selling process than others, depending on the nature of the sales position and the cultural climate in which the salesperson works. The beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors aren't always logical or consistent. But they usually are specific to a particular object, concept, or situation.

Twelve varieties

Twelve types of sales-call reluctance are exemplified by these types of salespeople:

- Doomsayer. Prepares for low-probability catastrophes and habitually worries about worst-case scenarios.
- Overpreparer. Overinvests in analyzing at the expense of sales prospecting. Typically knows an encyclopedia of technical information but has no audience for his or her presentations.
- Hyperpro. Overly concerned with the mannerisms and appearances of success instead of actual prospecting, which is viewed as unprofessional hustling. Often drops names and overuses professional jargon.
- Yielder. Fears being perceived as pushy or intrusive. Often misinterprets or misapplies consultative selling techniques, emphasizing relationship building rather than client building.
- Stage-Fright Sufferer. Avoids opportunities to make sales presentations to groups. Other forms of prospecting may be unaffected.
- Role Rejecter. Because of unresolved guilt and shame at being in the sales profession, tries to appear positive even when circumstances are negative. Role rejection is highly contagious.
- Self-Conscious Socializer. Hesitates to initiate contact with upscale prospective customers. Is intimidated by wealth, power, and prestige. Often disguises fear with an exaggerated, cavalier attitude toward people of status.

SALESPEOPLE MUST SELL THEMSELVES

- Separationist. Resists mixing business interests with personal relationships. His or her unwillingness to talk even casually about work around friends can have adverse effects, even in industries in which it isn't considered necessary or appropriate to make sales calls to friends.
- Unemancipated Emotionalist. Resists mixing business with family. His or her unwillingness to talk about work even casually around family can have adverse effects, even in industries in which it isn't considered necessary or appropriate to makes sales calls to family members.
- Referral Averter. Is emotionally uncomfortable asking for referrals from existing clients. Referral aversion may not affect prospecting or closing sales.
- Telephobic. Fears using the telephone to make sales. Telephobia may not affect other forms of prospecting or making personal calls.
- Oppositional Reflexive. Needs to be correct at all times. Reflexively criticizes, rejects, argues, and blames others. Is emotionally unable to allow him- or herself to be coached, advised, managed, or trained.

Each type of sales-call reluctance refers to a specific source of distress. Each also limits the kind and amount of sales contacts call-reluctant salespeople make when they aren't detected as call reluctant and managed as such.

In a study we conducted for a residential real-estate firm, the agents with sales-call reluctance suffered losses of $4,475 to $19,162 annually, depending on which type of call reluctance they exhibited. Those with referral aversion—the hesitation to ask for referrals—experienced the greatest losses in income.

Among new salespeople, the fear of initiating contact with prospective customers is especially evident. Many beginning salespeople know how to prospect for new business but are unable to translate what they know into actual prospecting behavior.

Our research suggests that, among new salespeople who lose their jobs during the first year of employment, sales-call reluctance is the cause in 80 percent of cases. Among veteran salespeople, almost 40 percent say they suffer from call reluctance at some point during their careers, seriously enough to threaten their jobs, regardless of their income level or experience.

Whether salespeople are new or experienced, sales-call reluctance can cause low production levels that persist no matter how well the salespeople have been trained, how much they believe in the product, and how committed they are to their companies.

A study we conducted for a major insurance company shows significant differences between the commissions earned by call-reluctant salespeople and those earned by salespeople who are not call reluctant. In the study, one group had an average of eight years' sales experience; another group had an average of one year's experience. Call-reluctance levels were measured using a standardized test designed to detect prospecting distress.

In both groups, significant differences in earnings were found. Among the more experienced sales reps, those with extreme call reluctance earned an average of 42 percent less than reps with little or no call reluctance. Similarly, among the less experienced sales reps, those with high levels of call reluctance earned an average of 67 percent less than reps with little or no call reluctance.

Overcoming the fear

An effective approach to controlling and eliminating sales-call reluctance should involve these steps: awareness, acceptance, assessment, and application.

Step 1: Awareness. This step consists of determining whether performance problems exist. Typically, organizations monitor and measure the activity and productivity of their salespeople. Low numbers in revenue, commissions, and so forth may reflect performance problems.

Step 2: Acceptance. If performance problems related to sales-call reluctance are found, a trainer or sales manager must admit that some salespeople experience call reluctance, before remediation and retraining can occur. Acceptance may not be easy, but it is necessary to motivate the salespeople who are affected to fix the problem.

As a trainer or manager, you should present sales staff with evidence of their sales-call reluctance and initiate an open discussion of the possible causes. During the discussion, look for signs of call-reluctant attitudes.

Step 3: Assessment. This step involves determining the kinds of call-reluctance problems that exist and their causes.

Ask salespeople to share any unpleasant emotional and physical feelings they have about certain

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tasks, people, and situations associated with their jobs. Be specific. Try to ascertain whether their feelings cause them to exhibit unproductive avoidance behaviors.

In order to obtain objective data, trainers or sales managers might want to use a standardized test specifically designed to identify sales-call reluctance and its various forms.

Step 4: Application. The final step involves implementing appropriate techniques for managing or eliminating sales-call reluctance.

The strategies for dealing with sales-call reluctance should focus on behaviors, not character. Call reluctance isn't a character flaw; it is a set of behaviors that can be detrimental to sales success. It's important to understand the underlying fears, but the strategies for dealing with call reluctance shouldn't center on those fears.

Trainers and sales managers should focus on changing behaviors and controlling the conditions under which salespeople exhibit call-reluctant behavior. In other words, the techniques for overcoming call reluctance should enable salespeople to identify the specific, observable cues that evoke their fears of sales prospecting. The training should show salespeople how to neutralize their fearful reactions and replace them with more productive, beneficial reactions.

One technique clinical psychologists often prescribe for neutralizing fearful reactions involves the use of a large rubber band. The trainee puts the rubber band around his or her wrist so that it fits loosely but doesn't hang. Then the trainee snaps the band hard whenever he or she has a fearful or negative thought, being careful to snap the band only on the top of the wrist, to avoid nerve damage. The snapping action interrupts negative thoughts and their associated feelings, giving the person the opportunity to substitute more positive thoughts and feelings.

Putting the steps into action

The four-step approach of awareness, acceptance, assessment, and application can be demonstrated through the example of a very common form of sales-call reluctance, telephobia—the fear of using a telephone to contact people for business purposes.

To determine whether a salesperson has a performance problem associated with telephobia, take a look at his or her job activity. If the company requires salespeople to conduct several hours of telephone prospecting every day, a low number of phone contacts is a red flag. If a person isn't making enough phone calls, begin eliminating such causes as environmental distractions, a lack of motivation or clear goals, and poor training in calling techniques.

Next, watch the salesperson for signs of stress associated with telephone use—other than the salesperson's complaint that using the phone to prospect is unpleasant. Observe whether such physical symptoms as sweaty palms, dry mouth, shaky hands, flushed skin, and speaking difficulties occur during phone use.

URGE SALESPEOPLE TO REPLACE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS WITH SUCH STATEMENTS AS, "I CAN DO THIS"

Finally, watch to see whether the salesperson avoids using the telephone. Does he or she perform other tasks, take breaks, or talk with co-workers during scheduled telephoning periods? Low numbers of phone calls, symptoms of stress associated with using the phone, and avoidance behaviors during scheduled telephoning periods strongly suggest telephobia.

You can suggest that the telephobic try the rubber-band technique whenever he or she has such negative thoughts as, "I don't want to make this call" or "The prospect probably doesn't want to talk to me." Suggest that the salesperson replace negative thoughts with such statements as, "I can do this" or "This is going to be a great call."

Our own research indicates that formal training that emphasizes the four steps of awareness, acceptance, assessment, and application is effective in helping salespeople overcome the fear of self-promotion and sales-call reluctance. Typically, salespeople who have participated in such training subsequently show significant increases in numbers of sales appointments, opportunities to close sales, numbers of sales, and commissions earned.

It's not just for salespeople

Because the four-step approach does address the underlying fear of sales-call reluctance, a fear of self-promotion, the techniques can have applications for other people whose work involves contact with and dependence on others—such as lawyers, bankers, and entrepreneurs.

In fact, in almost any field, success involves the ability to market oneself effectively and solicit recognition for one's work. Whether it means asking for a raise or getting budget approval for a new training program, self-promotion plays a vital role in one's effectiveness and success.

Boxing promoter Don King, billionaire Ross Perot, and entertainer Madonna—to name a few—didn't necessarily get where they are today because they're the most knowledgeable, competent, or talented people in their professions. They know how to make themselves highly visible, and they don't hestitate to do it. They also provide a valuable lesson: Don't let the fear of promoting yourself hold your potential for success hostage. ■

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