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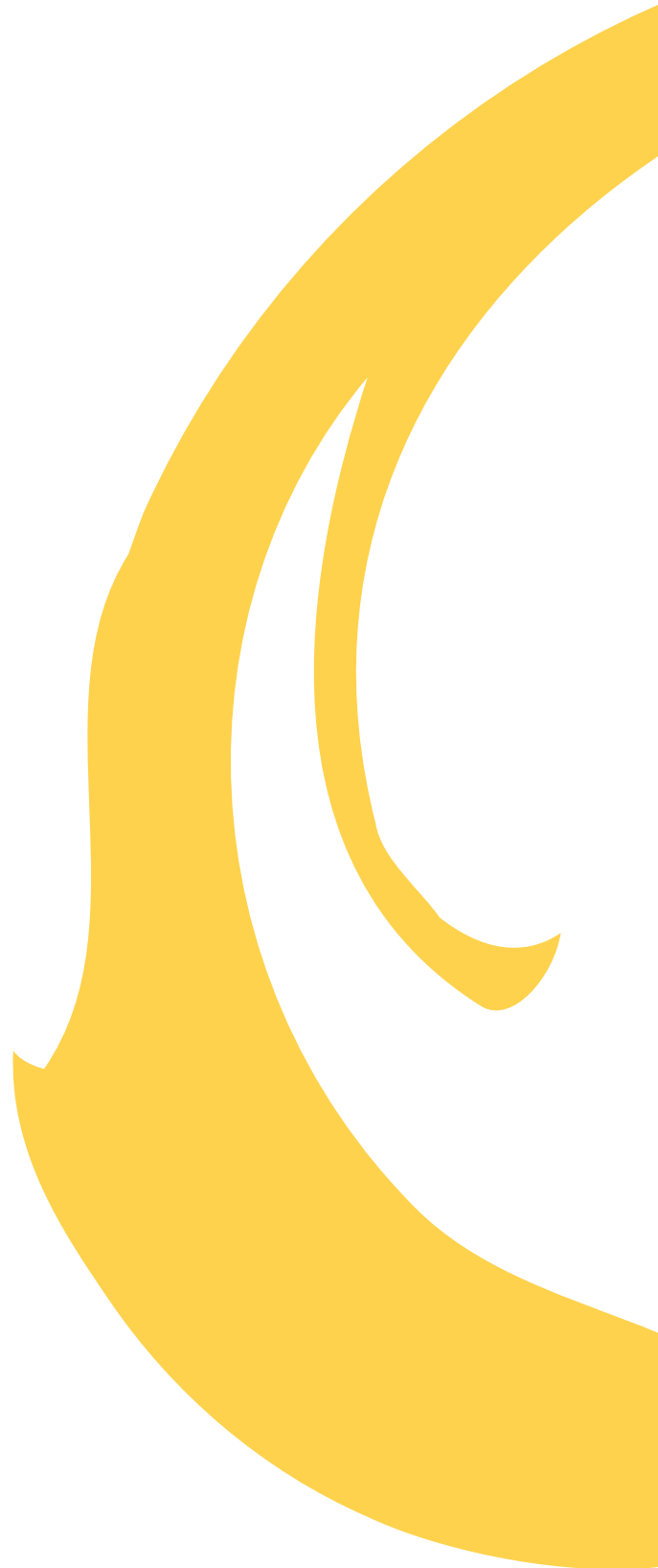
Intelligent Selling

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What makes the difference between a seasoned sales professional and a novice? Is it their superior product knowledge, or perhaps their depth of industry experience or strong customer relationships? Does your company have the latest and greatest sales process and the more experienced people are simply better at applying this? Are they older, wiser or more mature? Analysing individual sales effectiveness is no easy task, there are so many variables to consider and very few that can be realistically controlled. In any given sales environment with good products, great brand strength and loyal customers, why is it that some salespeople shine while others struggle? Clearly the reasons are many but one area of sales research that is delivering results is the work done in better understanding the role that emotions play in influencing others.

We know that effective salespeople have superior influencing skills. But how do they acquire these? Is it inherent in star individuals or is it something that can be developed? Most sales organisations invest heavily in product, industry and sales process training. Account management plans and various customer engagement strategies are designed and implemented. These are all essential activities and often deliver outstanding business results. Yet in an increasingly complex sales environment many companies are under-leveraging the full potential of their sales force. Great salespeople share one thing in common and it's not superior product knowledge or superb sales process execution, it's mastery of emotions in the sales environment.

Any sales professional knows that selling and emotions go hand-in-hand. Who hasn't felt the slightest anxiety when first cold-calling for new sales opportunities? Or the frustration you sometimes feel when a customer attacks your company's product when you had previously urged a more appropriate solution? Or finally the feeling of disappointment when you've worked hard to land a large deal and the client signs up with the competition. To many salespeople these feelings are real and range from minor distraction to major distress. To seasoned veterans these feelings may still be there, on occasion, but their impact is negligible. This ability to deal effectively with emotions goes to the heart of intelligent selling.

The case for Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to our ability to understand and manage emotions. The concept has been around since the 1980s but has only recently been used to explain the relationship between interpersonal effectiveness and success in sales. For example, insurance sales agents who were very strong in a number of key emotional abilities sold policies with an average premium of \$114,000 compared with \$54,000 for agents with weaker emotional abilities (Goleman, 1998). Financial advisers at American Express who completed an EI training program improved their sales results by 18.1 per cent compared to 16.1 per cent for those who did not attend the program. This small difference contributed tens of millions of dollars in revenue (Richman, 1994). Finally, sales agents at L'Oreal selected on the basis of EI abilities outsold salespeople recruited under the previous selection process by \$91,370 for a net revenue increase of \$2,558,360. In addition, these people had 63% less turnover than those selected under the previous process (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Spencer, McClelland & Kelner, 1997). The research supporting EI and sales effectiveness is encouraging and suggests a wide application across a range of industries and a variety of products and services.

EI and selling

One of the challenges in relating EI to selling skills is the discrete nature of such abilities. How can you identify someone who has a high level of interpersonal sensitivity, for example? EI can be viewed as a set of related abilities that underpin higher order behaviours. For example, most salespeople understand the importance of active listening skills. A sales manager can directly observe the use of such skills, for example, paraphrasing, nodding and eye contact. But how can the manager be confident that the salesperson is 'listening' for the customer's buying signals? This skill is harder to observe directly yet it indicates the salesperson's ability to understand the customer's emotional state. Experienced salespeople listen for the emotional content, novices will often miss this vital information and therefore make errors in judgement, for example, they may push too hard too early or they may waste their efforts on a prospect who is clearly

not interested. The ability to accurately assess the customer's emotional state, for example, is clearly an essential skill in achieving sales success.

Most sales processes follow the standard stages of opening the call, understanding customer needs, presenting information and closing the call. In addition, the sub-processes designed to handle customer concerns, for example, indifference, misunderstandings, scepticism or objections, are incorporated somewhere within the main sales process. Higher order skills are needed to successfully execute these processes, for example, active listening, questioning and presentation skills are essential prerequisites. All sales training concentrates on developing these higher order skills. However, very few programs focus on the EI abilities that underpin such skills. Traditional sales training programs produce competent salespeople who can follow a process and employ higher order skills, but they fail to develop the EI abilities critical to long-term sales success. High performers develop these through trial and error over a period of time, or have some inherent EI abilities that make them more suited to the sales profession. So what are the EI abilities so crucial to selling?

Critical EI abilities

The ability to quickly establish rapport and build an ongoing customer relationship is fundamental to sales success, particularly in complex sales involving intangible products or services. For a new customer this is often initiated in the opening and understanding stages of the sales call and in many cases starts as early as the cold call during the prospecting stage. Relationship building happens on every call and during each stage of the call, yet the skills most commonly taught emphasise personal appearance, listening, questioning and organising skills. For example, dressing well, smiling, a firm handshake, small talk, nodding, paraphrasing and using open and closed questions.

Consider someone who has the seemingly natural ability to put someone at ease, they strike up a comfortable conversation and don't appear to be selling you anything. Contrast this with the novice who can often come across as following a script, or perhaps as insincere or even pushy. You might feel like you haven't been listened to or worse still the victim of an interrogation. Salespeople with high levels of interpersonal sensitivity (or empathy) excel in relationship building. They have the ability to 'put themselves in someone else's shoes' and display behaviours that suggest agreement and shared understanding. Interpersonal sensitivity is concerned with understanding both verbal and non-verbal messages with a particular focus on the emotional content. Salespeople high in interpersonal sensitivity can readily interpret the customer's values, perspectives, fears and aspirations. Good listening and questioning skills provide you the raw data, but interpersonal sensitivity helps you unlock the meaning.

Interpersonal sensitivity also provides the salesperson with vital information that informs their decision making process. Intuitiveness is the ability to make clear decisions when faced with incomplete, ambiguous and emotional information. A salesperson high in interpersonal sensitivity understands both the rational and emotional perceptions of key issues that impact the customer. This facilitates quick decision making and often describes salespeople who are able to think on their feet, are street smart or have a gut instinct. The very term gut instinct describes the emotional response one gets when they are confident in a decision. Customers don't always say what they feel, salespeople high in interpersonal sensitivity and intuitiveness are able to read between the lines and make the best decisions for both the customer and their company.

For many, selling can be a high pressure occupation. Competition can be fierce, it takes time to learn to sell new products and customers aren't always cooperative, friendly or easily influenced. Add to this the pressure to meet budget and those occasional supply hiccups outside your control and one can quickly begin to feel overwhelmed. Such events can be distracting and can have a major impact on the salesperson's ability to stay focused, develop relationships and close sales. We all know people who respond well to pressure and those who don't. Salespeople with high emotional self-

awareness have the ability to recognise their feelings and the confidence to manage and control their impact. This is a critical EI ability since low self-awareness is the most common factor contributing to strained customer relationships. Experienced sales managers often recall examples of salespeople who have clearly become frustrated with a customer during a sales call but will strongly deny this after the call.

Repeated exposure to challenging sales situations can evoke strong emotions, for example, customer rejection can reduce self-confidence and increase anxiety sometimes leading to call reluctance, customer criticism can fuel feelings of frustration or anger, and losing a profitable account to a competitor can be demoralising. Such emotional responses are normal, however, when they occur with increasing frequency, duration and intensity they can begin to impact individual sales effectiveness. Such environments require salespeople high in emotional resilience which is the ability to perform consistently when under pressure. Effective salespeople are constantly self-monitoring for any signs of emotional damage. When affected, they can modify their behaviour on the spot to maintain the customer relationship and work towards a constructive outcome. Those with low self-awareness or emotional resilience often let their emotions get the better of them and become a real liability to their company. Most of us can recall at least one example where a salesperson was removed from an account because of a perceived 'personality clash' with the customer.

The ability to effectively influence the customer occurs during the understanding and presenting stages of the sales process. Salespeople high in this ability are experts at persuading others to change their point of view, adopt a certain interpretation or agree to a particular course of action. Most would recognise this as the essence of selling – all salespeople need to influence to sell. Accordingly, influence, is a foundation or base-level EI ability. Rarely does it distinguish seasoned professionals from those new to sales. Likewise, motivation, the drive and energy to achieve clear results and make an impact, and conscientiousness, the ability to display a clear commitment to a course of action, are needed by all salespeople but alone do not distinguish high performers from average performers.

The significant EI abilities that support superior sales performance are interpersonal sensitivity, intuitiveness, self-awareness and emotional resilience. Traditional sales training does not focus on developing these abilities – seasoned sales professionals develop these through exposure to various sales situations and the process of trial and error. This hit and miss approach takes time and risks losing valuable clients as they become de facto training aids for new salespeople.

Developing EI

EI abilities underpin higher order skills and can therefore be developed independently from an established sales process. For example, the ability to accurately understand the customer's emotions underpins active listening skills which are a prerequisite in every sales process. Likewise the ability to manage one's emotions underpins objection handling which forms a sub-process to most sales processes. Hence, EI development needn't be integrated within a sales process, it can be delivered separately as an enhancer to sales capability. The sales process and higher level skills provide a foundation level of sales effectiveness while EI development supports a level of skills mastery. Skills mastery is not achieved through traditional sales training programs. A learning process involving EI measurement, feedback, development and re-measurement is a proven way to create superior salespeople in the shortest possible time.

1. Measurement

Most salespeople are goal or achievement orientated – commission and bonus systems rely on this attribute. Contemporary self-measure and 360-degree surveys have been developed to reliably measure the EI abilities critical to sales success. Such tools can be used to give people an indication of their current level of ability. This is an effective way for salespeople to set their own development goals and acts as a powerful self-motivator. Such tools provide individualised feedback on EI strengths and development areas. This helps achieve buy-in to EI development because it makes it highly relevant to the salesperson's individual learning needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach common

to most traditional sales training programs.

Measurement can also assist in the recruitment process. Some successful sales candidates already possess high levels of EI and bring this existing ability to any formal sales training. Identification and selection of candidates with these EI abilities will further improve collective sales effectiveness and minimise recruitment errors and in the longer-term reduce staff turnover. Such data can assist in developing EI profiles that differentiate high performers from average performers. This can be used in future recruitment activities as it provides a ready made benchmark for understanding the essential factors necessary for sales success in that particular company.

2. Feedback

Individual EI development reports are generated from the data collected through self-measures or 360-degree tools. This information forms the basis for personalised development plans and needs to be effectively interpreted. EI reports are highly contextual, they are not all encompassing judgements of 'what is' but more tentative theories on 'what might be'. Respondents need to consider their results in the context of their work environment and their relationships with others. Feedback is best delivered by a qualified facilitator who can assist in report interpretation and clear up any confusion or misunderstanding. Major issues arise when feedback, particularly 360-degree, is not independently facilitated. Misinterpretation can damage report acceptance and destroy any commitment to personal development. Feedback is an ideal opportunity for further developing buy-in since a skilled facilitator helps the person identify areas where their EI abilities are failing to achieve the results they're seeking. A facilitator can then help establish an action plan that is executed during the development stage.

3. Development

Most traditional sales development focuses exclusively on group training activities paying scarce attention to the measurement and feedback stages. These preliminary steps help establish individual learning objectives as well as focus participants on relevant learning activities. Effective EI programs introduce proven behavioural strategies that help people understand the relationship between their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. These strategies have considerable power in helping them gain control of their emotions and therefore improve their sales effectiveness.

The effective use of video can help develop interpersonal sensitivity and emotional self-awareness in what would otherwise take weeks of in-field coaching. Well designed and customised workshops incorporating workplace specific case studies, behavioural modelling, simulations and work specific role plays are proven methods for developing EI abilities. One-to-one or small group coaching is an ideal review and reinforcement mechanism to help apply new behaviours in the workplace. Coaching has been underutilised as a workshop reinforcement activity yet has a major role to play in developing EI. Major behaviour change can be gained in as few as four one-hour coaching sessions.

4. Re-measurement

Establishing a base-line measure is an effective way to monitor progress and act as a motivator for salespeople. Consolidated sales team reporting can also be produced to validate the effectiveness of any EI development project. In addition, team profiles can be developed and provide companies with a benchmark of EI abilities essential to sales force effectiveness. Effective re-measurement relies on well designed EI tools which highlights the need for valid, reliable and well researched instruments. Any variation in EI ability needs to be attributed to individual development rather than variations in the reliability of the tool.

The final word on EI

Success in sales depends on more than just product, industry and customer knowledge. Sales professionals are faced with more challenges as markets become more competitive and customers more sophisticated and demanding. Traditional sales training provides only a foundation level of capability. Sales mastery is gained when critical EI abilities are sharpened to meet demanding sales situations. Superior results are achieved by those who consistently perform under pressure whilst maintaining customer relationships. Such results are gained less through standard selling skills and more through one's ability to work with the emotions of selling. These EI abilities are interpersonal sensitivity, intuitiveness, self-awareness and emotional resilience. They can be identified and developed through a non-traditional sales training approach that involves measurement, feedback, development and re-measurement. Effective EI development can prepare salespeople for ongoing success rather than exposing them to a learning environment based on 'sink or swim' criteria.

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