



## Those Who Can... Sell Professionally

By Howard Stevens

At The H.R. Chally Group, we have researched successful and unsuccessful salespeople for twenty-one years. We have a database of nearly 200,000 salespeople whom we have tested and tracked. From this database, we can identify the six critical success factors that account for success in retail sales. Average salespeople have learned to apply two or three of these factors; good salespeople manage four or five; and the superstars excel at five or six.

**If you're doing well at sales, these factors will confirm your own instincts and maybe remind you of a point or two you could polish. If you are still building your sales success, you might find these a useful "trip tic" to get to your goals.**

### ***Rule 1: Identify What Kind of Salesperson You Are***

**Sales is a skill (i.e., based on both talent and practice).** Like all skilled professions, from sports to medicine, there are distinct positions within the profession, and their skills are different. Allow me to use a sport analogy: baseball.

In baseball, at the most amateur level, say little league, only one or two criteria identify the kids who get picked for the team. If a child has coordination and isn't afraid of the ball, he/she will make it. At the next higher level, say high school or college, we tighten down the standards and select based on the traditional skills of baseball: running, throwing, catching (or fielding), and batting. Any athlete good enough in these skills will make the team. The best overall athletes will play several positions. At the *professional* level, however, these general skills confuse more than help because what a good pitcher has to do is so different from a shortstop that the positions aren't even interchangeable. In fact, a player who does both equally well is called a utility player, and you can't win the pennant with a team full of utility players.

The same is true in sales. **Retail sales, in particular, has at least three different "positions": Closers, Consultants, and long-term Relationship builders.**

**Closers** excel at finding new opportunities and closing the first transactions. They tend to focus on new products or concepts, present themselves as specialists, and are the first to establish these new products or services in the marketplace. Once a new product is established, they'll usually move on to the next product or service. As a result, only a few successful retail salespeople operate as new product "closers."

**Consultants** tend to focus on strategies to put together a full sales plan, often as advisors. They charge appropriately for their service but don't go back to the same customer until a major change in status requires a new plan for a customer with complex, if not sophisticated, needs. They position themselves as broader than just offering a product line and prefer to maintain expertise in the total circumstance of customers. They build functional relationships with their customers, and may not even socialize with customers unless they have a business reason.

**Relationship builders** are primarily continuous care givers (like family physicians) who build a permanent book of long-term customers and provide ongoing services in a variety of general categories at regular intervals, i.e., car needs may change every two to three years, as will special "add-ons," as a customer's personal needs increase, etc. They do focus on the personal needs of their customers and often know them socially, considering themselves as a long-term friend, as well as advisor. The important issue is that good closers fail if they are required to maintain and service long-term relationships. Making dynamic and persuasive presentations on new or "break-through" ideas are their key skills. The patient, consistent follow-up detail and discipline don't fit their style.

Good relationship salespeople will also fail if they have to depend on "pushing" certain products. Many even feel it's unethical or at least too self-serving to push any particular product or service. Their skills are the disciplined follow-up and management of detail critical to retaining long-term relationships.

We've listed below the common traits of each sales type. You'll probably recognize people you know in each group. Their success is based on how closely they focus on their skills . . . their lack of success is also explained by the "wasted" or misdirected effort of focusing outside of their primary skill area. **In short, top salespeople know who they are.** While it took some time during the early stages of their careers, they've learned to gravitate and **focus**, often exclusively on their own niche and strengths. They avoid the rest as unproductive.

## SALES TYPE SUMMARY

	CLOSERS	CONSULTANTS	RELATIONSHIP
<b>STYLE</b>	Theatrical & confident	Expert & competent	Dependable & loyal to customer
<b>PRIMARY SKILLS</b>	Build emotion, enthusiasm  Give "permission" to buy  Create urgency	Demonstrate technical competency  Professional credibility  Systemized & organized  Answer objections	Customer advocacy  Demonstrate product knowledge  Time & account management
<b>PERSONAL STRENGTHS</b>	Handle high failure rate  Handle personal rejection	Handle confrontation and negotiate  Handle personal rejection	Patience  Persistence
<b>PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS</b>	Extroverted  Energetic  Optimistic  Strong work ethic  Competitive  Success image but less likely to save frugally  "Positive mental attitude"  Highly self-confident	Career-oriented  Status and image conscious  More academic  Patient  Self-confident  Independent and self-developmental	Strong work ethic (feel guilty if doing nothing)  Self-sufficient  Independent (don't like to be bossed)  Cooperative  Patient--traditional, conservative, right-leaning  Strong and rigid value system (school of hard knocks)

## ***Rule 2: Segment the Type(s) of Customers You Are Best Suited to Service and Target Them***

Customers are not all alike. This statement sounds obvious, but most naive or failing salespeople tend to treat customers as if they are all alike, or they classify customers on trivial issues.

### **Top salespeople classify customers on just two basic dimensions:**

1. How much detail and complexity they want to handle on their own, and
2. How much they want to understand and make the "technical" decisions on their own.

The type of sales approach best suited to a customer depends on the answers to these two questions.

### **"Hi-Touch" to Reduce Complexity**

Customers who don't want to struggle with all the complexity and details need a lot of hand-holding to guide them completely through the purchase decision. Top salespeople call this "Hi-Touch" selling.

### **"Hi-Tech" to Clarify Technical Issues**

Customers who want to make quality decisions but don't have the time or interest to teach themselves the technical aspects will need technical help, explanations, examples, etc. Top salespeople call this "Hi-Tech" selling.

## **Customer Segments: The Three Types That Top Salespeople Target**

### **Customers Who Buy from "Closers"**

Customers who want to be "closed" are sophisticated customers who plan to handle all the details themselves. They will want a Hi-Tech explanation of a new product or service but don't want someone else administering or handling "their personal business" (a Lo-Touch approach). "Closers" focus on this group, which includes more sophisticated hi net worth individuals, small company entrepreneurs, and individuals who consider themselves to be financially savvy. These individuals pick and follow their own priorities and invest in special opportunities, including specialty vehicles, new features, and even specialized new products. They understand technical jargon and don't rely on any one single advisor.

### **Customers Who Buy from "Consultants"**

Customers who want to be "consulted with" are successful but not technically sophisticated. They want a *consultive* approach, i.e., both Hi-Tech help (to learn more) and Hi-Touch personal service (to work through all the details). *Consultive* salespeople are best suited for middle and upper income prospects who usually work for medium or large companies and are advancing their careers and earnings. As a result, they don't have the time to focus on and handle all their own "requirements" single-handedly. In addition, because of their familiarity with managing or delegating, they are comfortable with a trusted outsider having access to their personal business. Consultive salespeople behave the same way key staff people in a business or government organization would. They research solutions, provide options or suggestions, but let the boss (customer) make the decision, which they "take care of" for them.

### **Customers Who Buy from "Relationship" Salespeople**

Customers who focus on security and protection seek long-term "relationships". They don't place financial matters at the top of their value system. Security and transportation are a means to an end. They may be more interested in their family, their own skills, talents, or business. Going to a game, a wedding, or a neighborhood party may be more important to them than a car or any other product or service. Security is, however, a necessary part of the American dream. And while they don't often pay attention, they do worry whenever a problem comes up. They want someone they know and trust to turn to in times of need. Like a family physician, who isn't thought of until someone is sick, *relationship* salespeople are only thought of as friends or acquaintances until a need arises. As a result, top relationship salespeople tend to focus on middle class "typical Americans," retirees, and more cautious buyers.

### ***Rule 3: The Single Most Frequently Used Skill of Successful Salespeople: Networking to Develop Quality Contacts***

For most salespeople, you need only to measure the length and quality of their list of personal and business friends and acquaintances to predict how well they are doing. This skill and discipline of building a strong network depends on three principles:

#### **1. Networks are built by making a point of meeting people in a non-selling environment.**

*Good* networkers get involved in as many social, volunteer, or business groups as possible. While the need to network never stops, the first 5-8 years of a salesperson's career are most critical. The most successful independent salespeople selling directly to personal or business consumers target three to five networking activities a week. Depending on their target market, they volunteer for charitable drives or campaigns, join golf clubs, participate in business clubs, and attend key social events and a host of other gatherings. The most successful networkers go one step further. They find a reason to be invited to present themselves to new people. For example, luncheon and dinner clubs are constantly looking for "speakers" who have interesting and fresh topics that are not direct sales pitches. In fact, developing a knack for public speaking is a favorite technique to guarantee continual invitations, but successful speakers make sure the topics stay fresh and interesting. Top salespeople know that networking is a numbers game. The more they do, the more contacts they make and the more sales opportunities they'll ultimately have.

#### **2. The "quality" of networking is a measure of how closely the demographics of the groups they target match the demographics of the best potential prospects for their services and products.**

If they're targeting professionals in need of high end vehicle plans, etc., then golf clubs, stock clubs, and business and professional clubs, such as the Young Presidents Organization, create the most valuable targets. If their focus is on family transportation, then PTA's, scouts, and other family-oriented groups are most frequently followed. Regardless of the line of products or services they choose to focus on, the most successful salespeople spend their time with prospects, not peers or others who aren't in need of their services.

#### **3. Meeting people is only the first step.**

Remembering names (often through a card system) and following up (again through a non-direct selling approach) are the real keys. Top salespeople keep files, send thank-you notes, remember birthdays, send congratulations, and use a host of other techniques in a systemized, disciplined approach to remind people who they are. They want to be "top of mind" in the car category so that potential customers automatically think of them when an interest or need arises.

***Rule 4: Positioning as a Professional Depends on Demonstrating Personal Character Competence and, Most of All, "Caring" BEFORE a Sales Call***

Top *Consultive* and *Relationship* sales professionals sell themselves first, their services second, and only include the specific product as a step in offering a solution. Their service is responsive; that is, they "suggest" only after the need or problem has been carefully identified. They spend more time learning about the customer and researching more "tailored" solutions than presenting products. In a sense, they position their approach to customers as professionals who solve problems rather than high pressure salespeople who "push" products.

***Rule 5: Most Customers Can't Evaluate Products, but They Can and Do Evaluate the Representative***

As with most products or services, car customers have no way to make a sophisticated test drive or watch the product work. They judge by analogy. If the representative is judged reliable, competent, and trustworthy, they'll trust the product. If they can't evaluate the person, they won't be able to evaluate the product. Various sales tools, like test drives, comparison tables, and others are useful but only to educate customers. If the salesperson is trusted, the sales tools are trusted. Top salespeople keep in mind, however, that customers are jaded. They've seen too many commercials that promise too much. They've read so many conflicting ads that they don't trust the media. In this context, top salespeople consciously, or unconsciously, rely on two principles to establish and maintain their own credibility--the most important personal asset they have.

1. They always deliver more than the customer expects and more than they promise.
2. When they don't know an answer or when they make a mistake, they admit it and fix it as quickly and completely as possible.

They understand that people who admit mistakes and under-promise or under-promote are perceived as more competent and trustworthy.

## ***Rule 6: Customers Don't Want More Choices, They Just Want Exactly the Right Product or Service for Them***

Top salespeople focus on simplifying their customers' decisions. Technically-oriented mechanical types, marketers, and even some salespeople can be overly impressed by the breadth and depth of the product-line. But to most potential customers, cars are too much like computer software. There are too many options and too many features, all claiming wonderful advantages. The average customer doesn't want to have to go to school to learn how to pick the right "package." Like buying a suit of clothes, they want to be measured and fitted and walk out with exactly the right outfit. Top salespeople focus on telling customers what time it is, not how the clock was made. The bottom line they focus on is "sell the benefits they've tailored to fit the customer, *not the features and options*" of the product. Beyond the benefits, they only "teach" as much as that particular customer wants to know; but they'll keep on teaching, if they're selling consultively, for as long as the customer wants.

### **The Bottom Line**

As you might have predicted, the critical skills of top salespeople are few and simple. The challenge to master them can only be won with guts, focus, discipline, and effort. **And maybe that's why at least in sales, those who can...do, and those who can't...**

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