Sales presentation skills and salesperson job performance

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine the relations between important sales presentation skills and salesperson job performance.

Design/methodology/approach – Data on each construct in the model was gathered and the relations analyzed using LISREL software.

Findings – Salesperson experience, and to a lesser degree training, underlie sales presentation skills. Salesperson skill at using adaptive selling techniques and closing are related with increased performance.

Research limitations/implications – Additional sales skills need to be considered and salespeople other than those in the B-B environment should be studied.

Practical implications – Sales managers are urged to ensure their B-B salespeople develop their skills in adaptive communication and closing as one means to improve sales performance.

Originality/value – The findings highlight the importance of salesperson experience and training in developing the skills that contribute to sales performance.

Keywords Sales, Presentations, Sales management, Personal selling, Skills, Sales training

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Due to its vital importance to both the firm and to individual salespeople, improving sales performance is of great interest to both managers and researchers. Towards this end, sales managers often emphasize properly recruiting, training, and managing their salespeople, while sales researchers continue to focus their efforts on developing effective frameworks to explain and predict this most important of all salesperson job outcomes. For example, Walker et al.’s (1977, 1979) expectancy theory-based model was one of the earliest comprehensive efforts to describe sales performance. Weitz (1981) suggested a significantly different means to explain salesperson job performance in his contingency model that is based on salesperson and sales situation characteristics. While these two explanatory frameworks have inspired the greatest amount of subsequent research, other methods to explain sales performance, including Plank and Reid’s (1994) hybrid model and Teas and McElroy’s (1986) attribution-based theory, continue to be explored.

Churchill et al. (1985) note that while differing sales situations, market conditions, product types, etc., all likely affect which factors contribute to sales success, one of the most striking and important commonalities across differing explanations of salesperson job performance is the importance each ascribes to selling skill. It is interesting to note that while sales researchers have examined many of the relations proposed by these models, the nature and role of selling skills and their relations with job performance remain ripe for extensive further investigation. The purpose of this paper is to improve our ability to explain salesperson job performance by more fully explicating the nature and relative effects of a set of specific sales presentation skills that sales managers perceive to be highly important. First, this set of specific sales presentation skills along with two salesperson characteristics that potentially underlie these skills is described. Next, the complete hypothesized model describing the relations between the characteristics, skills, and job performance is introduced and the method used to analyze it is explained. Lastly, the results of the analysis and their implications for both managers and researchers are presented.

The hypothesized model

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relations among salesperson characteristics, sales presentation skills, and job performance. In this model, two characteristics of the salesperson (i.e. years of selling experience and quality of the sales training he/she has received) are held to be positively associated with each of the important sales presentation skills. The sales presentation skills used in the model consists of the salesperson’s skill at using active listening, adaptive selling behaviors, handling customer objections, closing sales transactions, negotiating with customers, and identifying potential prospects. In turn, each of the presentation skills is hypothesized to be positively associated with sales job performance.

Antecedents to sales presentation skills

The hypothesized model contains two salesperson characteristics that may potentially underlie the entire set of sales presentation skills: amount of selling experience and the quality of sales training received. In describing the differences...
between high and low performing salespeople, Dwyer et al. (2000, p. 153) report:

The two groups of salespeople are primarily distinguished by their selling experience.

Regarding training, salespeople are often some of the most highly trained members of an organization, yet different salespeople with different firms likely receive varying quantity and quality of sales-related training. However, firms and salespeople engage in sales training precisely because they anticipate that it will increase the salesperson's performance-related skills. Accordingly, these two salesperson characteristics will be included in the hypothesized model as potential antecedents to the entire set of sales presentation skills.

Sales presentation skills

Churchill et al. (1997, p. 367) define selling skill as a salesperson's “learned proficiencies at performing job activities,” and describe two general types relevant to professional salespeople:

(1) **Vocational skills.** Job and company specific skills such as technical knowledge and vocabulary related to the firm’s product line, the company, and its policies.

(2) **Sales presentation skills.** Skills related to effectively conducting the personal selling process (i.e. the series of inter-related steps that salespeople commonly use to engage with and influence customers).

Moncrief (1986) observed that using sales presentation skills is broadly relevant and uniform across industries, products, and sales situations, while both salespeople (Chonko et al., 1993) and sales managers (Peterson and Smith, 1995) report that sales presentation skills are necessary for sales success. The particular skills widely held to comprise the sales process includes prospecting for new customers, arranging to meet with the potential customers identified, uncovering and understanding customer needs through proper questioning, developing a product solution based upon customer needs, presenting the solution back to the customer, handling customer objections and questions regarding the proposed solution, closing the sale, and negotiating the transaction.

While some researchers have examined the relations between discrete selling behaviors and job performance (e.g. Brashear et al., 1997; Boles et al., 2000; Dwyer et al., 2000), it is important to consider that just because a salesperson engages in a particular behavior (e.g. prospecting, negotiating,
etc.) does not mean that he or she does so in a manner that contributes to improved performance. For example, while it is true that most salespeople prospect for new customers it is likely that only those who do so skillfully (i.e. in such a way that rapidly identifies a large number of highly qualified potential customers) enjoy improved job performance as a result. In addition, sales managers expend considerable time and effort towards improving sales presentation skills because they anticipate that increased skill will lead to improved sales performance. Because salespeople who are more skilled at completing sales presentation tasks are likely to perform at a higher level, research that focuses on sales presentation skills should therefore provide a better understanding and explanation of salesperson job performance.

Recognizing the importance of sales presentation skills, Marshall et al. (2003) gathered and ranked sales manager perceptions of “success factors” that contribute to salesperson job performance. They report that managers feel that six specific sales presentation skills: listening, adaptive selling, handling objections, closing, negotiating, and prospecting (in descending order of perceived importance) are highly important to salesperson performance. Accordingly, this group of sales presentation skills will be used at the heart of the hypothesized model.

Hypotheses

Sales experience and training quality
In the hypothesized model the two salesperson characteristics of experience and amount of high-quality sales training received are seen as primary antecedents to the entire set of sales presentation skills. After reviewing and interpreting their results, Ford et al. (1987) conclude that sales experience may not be directly associated with job performance, but instead that the relationship is probably affected by other related variables. Intuitively, sales presentation skills may very well serve in this role. The longer that salespeople work in the field the more chances they have to meet and interact with a variety of customer types the greater knowledge and understanding they develop (Mintu-Wimsatt and Gassenheimer, 2004). As salespeople develop this deeper and richer storehouse of knowledge and experiences it is likely that these enhanced schemas primarily serve to improve their sales presentation skills (Shoemaker and Johlke, 2002).

Likewise, high quality sales-related training is also likely to be associated with improved sales presentation skills. While much research has assumed a direct relationship between training and job performance (e.g. Farrell and Hakstian, 2001; Roberts et al., 1994; Roman et al., 2002) the reported relationship between the two is usually small. Similar to the relationship between experience and sales performance, the relations between training and performance may instead be indirect, via another variable(s), such as presentation skills. More explicitly, increased amounts of high-quality sales training is more likely to improve the salesperson’s presentation skills, which themselves, when utilized in the field with customers, are likely to directly impact the salesperson’s job performance. Accordingly, the first two hypotheses describe relations between the antecedent variables and sales skills this way:

H1. Years of sales experience is positively associated with salesperson skill at: (a) active listening, (b) adaptive selling, (c) handling objections, (d) closing, (e) negotiating, and (f) prospecting.

Active listening
Beyond simply listening or attending to customer comments, as important as these activities are, salespeople are often encouraged and trained to use active, or effective, listening techniques. Shepherd et al. (1997) found that effective listening includes creating a situation in which the speaker wants to share information, accurately adding meaning to the message being received, evaluating, the message, and providing feedback. Brooks (2003) suggests that active listening consists of focusing on the speaker as well as the message, not being preoccupied, analyzing the message, avoiding interrupting the speaker, providing feedback, asking questions, recording what is being said, and responding.

Marshall et al. (2003) found that sales managers rank salesperson listening skill as the most important skill of all, while Luthy (2000) reports that senior sales executives feel that listening skill is the single most desirable topic for sales training. Clearly, the salesperson’s ability to actively listen to customer comments, feedback, and complaints is seen as key to improving sales performance, especially when it comes to developing long term buying relations with customers. Shepherd et al. (1997, p. 319) observe that “a significant body of anecdotal literature suggests that effective listening skills can be learned through training and experience,” and they found that listening skill is correlated with salesperson job performance. Therefore, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H2. Training quality is positively associated with salesperson skill at: (a) active listening, (b) adaptive selling, (c) handling objections, (d) closing, (e) negotiating, and (f) prospecting.

Adaptive selling
Adaptive selling refers to “the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation” (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175). Weitz (1981) explicitly included adaptive selling in his model of job performance, and this skill is consistently associated with increased sales performance (e.g. Goolsby et al., 1992; Blackshear and Plank, 1994; Keilior et al., 2000). In addition, the salesperson’s ability to engage in adaptive selling may be particularly important in building long-term relations with customers (Jolson, 1997) and so could be a particularly important skill for improving sales performance. Marshall et al. (2003) report that sales managers rank the salesperson’s ability to engage in adaptive selling skill as the second most important sales presentation skill. Therefore, the following relationship will be tested in the hypothesized model:

H3. Salesperson skill at using active listening is positively associated with job performance.

Handling objections
Sales managers in the Marshall et al. (2003) study rank salesperson skill at handling customer objections as the third most important sales presentation skill. Schurr et al. (1985) describe objections as customer statements reflecting objection, indifference, or skepticism, while Hunt and Bashaw (1999) advise salespeople to be prepared to handle
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objection statements as well as counter-arguments to the claims they make. Regardless of their exact form, all salespeople will experience objections and reasons (both real and contrived) to not complete a transaction. Objections that are not handled to the customer’s satisfaction remain as obstacles to completing a transaction, while salespeople who are highly skilled at handling customer questions and objections are able to remove these obstacles and so should perform at a higher level. Accordingly, the fifth hypothesis states that:

H5. Salesperson skill at handling objections is positively associated with job performance

Closing

Jolson (1997, p. 79) described closing as “asking for, and obtaining, the order, as appropriate to the job.” Put another way, closing simply refers to the salesperson asking the customer to buy. The ability to properly and persuasively ask for the sale is one of the primary strengths of personal selling, compared to other methods a firm may use to influence customers. It is interesting to note that the little research that has been conducted in this area suggests that closing is negatively associated with life insurance salesperson job performance (Brashear et al., 1997) and purchasing agent trust in the salesperson (Hawes et al., 1996). Regardless, these limited findings do not outweigh the fact that salespeople across industries and product types must be willing and able to not only give customers reasons to buy but also properly ask them to do so. Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) report that national account salespeople consider their closing skill to be highly important to their sales success, while Jolson (1997) states that proper closing is an important part of proper relationship selling. Furthermore, Marshall et al. (2003) found that sales managers rank salesperson skill at closing sales as the fourth most important sales presentation skill. Therefore, the following relationship will be tested:

H6. Salesperson skill at closing is positively associated with job performance.

Negotiating

Closing the sale is concerned with whether a prospect buys but negotiating is concerned with how the prospect buys. As a sales presentation skill, negotiating is often used simultaneously with handling objections and closing even though these three skills are clearly distinct. For example, customers will often provide objections in response to the salesperson’s attempts to close the sale, so the two parties will engage in negotiating the particulars of the potential transaction. Only if the salesperson can satisfactorily address the prospect’s objections and if the two parties come to an agreement via negotiating is the transaction likely to be consummated.

Kozubská (1986) and Lidstone (1986) note that the salesperson’s ability to negotiate mutually beneficial solutions greatly impacts sales performance. Alexander et al. (1994, p. 27) describe the coordinative negotiating strategy as “reliance on a problem-solving orientation, wherein the party is seeking to engender trust and mutual support. The focus is on seeking an integrative solution that is achieved via open and accurate informational exchange, mutual concessionary behaviors and mutual respect for individual goals,” as well as to (Ibid) “minimize the use of any deleterious influence tactics (e.g. threats, promises).” This strategy clearly requires greater negotiating skill, and they found that its use is associated with greater negotiator satisfaction with the process as well as improved levels of agreement. Lastly, sales managers (Marshall et al., 2003) rank negotiating skill as the fifth most important sales presentation skill. Reflecting these findings, the following relationship will be tested in the proposed model:

H7. Salesperson skill at negotiating is positively associated with job performance.

Prospecting

The final sales presentation skill that sales managers rate as highly important is prospecting. Jolson and Wotruba (1992, p. 59) describe prospecting as “a fundamental step in the personal selling process” that involves the salesperson identifying a sufficient number of quality prospects to be directly contacted. They also noted that its primacy in the sales process (i.e. that prospecting is often considered to be the first step in the sales process) denotes its extreme importance to sales success. Szymanski and Churchill (1990) report that more successful salespeople are better able to identify and classify prospects as more or less desirable. Likewise, Macintosh and Gentry (1999) found that higher performing salespeople are better able to focus on key characteristics of high quality prospects. Reflecting the importance of identifying potential customers, the final hypothesis states that:

H8. Salesperson skill at prospecting is positively associated with job performance.

Methodology

Measures

Following a procedure commonly used to develop sales-related scales (e.g. Mehta et al., 2000; Verbeke and Bagozzi, 2000), items to measure the sales presentation skills were developed as part of this study. First, the applicable literature was reviewed and operational definitions of each construct derived. Based upon these definitions, an initial group of potential items to measure the five constructs were developed. Next, focus group interviews with two sales managers and three marketing academicians familiar with personal selling issues were conducted during which the respondents examined the items and completed an early version of the questionnaire. Based upon their reactions, several of the items were omitted, modified, or combined. Two such cycles of review-and-revise were completed until no additional revisions were suggested and, based upon their high degree of face validity, the final set of items was agreed upon. The final questionnaire contained one item to measure active listening skill, three items to measure skill at handling objections, three items to measure salesperson skill at closing, one item to measure negotiating skill, and four items to measure prospecting skill. Each of these items asked respondents to compare themselves to other salespeople and to rank themselves into one of five groups ranging from the “first 30 percent,” “second 30 percent,” “third 30 percent,” “top 10 percent,” and finally the “top 1 percent” of salespeople. Selling experience was measured by asking respondents to report their years of professional selling experience. Adaptive selling was measured using the five items

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suggested by Robinson et al. (2002), and quality of salesperson training was measured using three items adapted from Roberts et al. (1994). Salesperson job performance was measured using six items adapted from Behrman and Perreault (1982). Items to measure these three constructs utilized seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Appendix contains the items used in this study.

The sample

To test the hypothesized model, data were collected from a sample of industrial, business-to-business salespeople. Ford et al. (1987) report that sales presentation skills are most relevant to explaining industrial salesperson job performance so the applicable sample included only salespeople working in the B-B area. One of the researchers attended the Sales and Marketing Executives International annual meeting and discussed the proposed research project with mid- and upper-level sales practitioners in attendance. In return for a summary of the findings, five sales managers from different firms agreed to distribute questionnaire forms and a stamped return envelope directly to their salespeople. Throughout the actual data gathering process, these salespeople were clearly informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 236 were returned directly to the researchers (59 percent response rate). The salespeople from each of the five firms were then compared in terms of mean age, years of selling experience, and years with the current firm, as well as gender, type of pay plan, and educational level. As no significant differences were found between any of the groups, the entire set of respondents was pooled for analysis. The average respondent was a forty-one year old male with a college degree and ten years of selling experience compensated using a salary-plus-commission pay plan.

Analysis

The measurement model was tested on the full data set using the covariance matrix (derived using PRELIS 2.53) as input to LISREL 8.53. All items measuring model constructs exhibit acceptable fully standardized loadings (>0.66) and significantly load on their assigned construct (t-value >4.0), thus indicating convergent validity. The full measurement model fits the data very well: $\chi^2 = 419.32$ ($p = 0.00$), CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.99, standardized RMR = 0.039, RMSEA = 0.043. Accordingly, this set of items was used to examine the hypothesized structural relations. Table I contains the construct inter-correlations, means, and standard deviations as well as the reliability estimates and variance extracted for each multiple item construct.

The relations comprising the hypothesized model were likewise found to fit the data extremely well ($\chi^2 = 477.04$ ($p = 0.00$), CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.99, standardized RMR = 0.047, RMSEA = 0.049) and ten of its 18 paths (55 percent) are significant. Examination of the MI and SEPC values given in the LISREL output did not suggest any additional relations among the variables, thereby supporting the overall structure used in the hypothesized model. Table II contains the completely standardized estimates and corresponding t-values for each of the paths in the hypothesized model.

Next, non-significant paths were dropped from the model one at a time and the data reanalyzed. This procedure also failed to suggest any structural changes to the hypothesized model. As to be expected, the trimmed model fits the data extremely well ($\chi^2 = 486.29$ ($p = 0.00$), CFI = 0.99, NNFI = 0.99, standardized RMR = 0.049, RMSEA = 0.048) while explaining 81 percent of the variance in listening skill, 23 percent of adaptive selling skill, 95 percent of skill at handling objections, 87 percent of the variance in closing skill, 86 percent of negotiating skill, 69 percent of salesperson skill at prospecting, and 50 percent of the variance in job performance. Based on these results, it is clear that the general structure of the hypothesized model (i.e. that experience and training underlie skills, which in turn are related to job performance) accurately describes the relations among these variables.

Managerial implications

Most major frameworks for explaining salesperson job performance explicitly note the importance of selling skills. This study contributes to our understanding of both the nature of these skills and their relations with salesperson job performance by introducing and testing a model suggesting that two specific salesperson characteristics underlie an entire set of important sales presentation skills, each of which is associated with sales performance. Results from analyzing the model shows that one of the salesperson characteristics, sales experience, underlies all the sales presentation skills and that the other, training, is associated with both adaptive selling and prospecting. While all the sales presentation skills are positively correlated with job performance, after rigorously testing the entire set of relations only the industrial salesperson's ability to close sales (completely standardized path estimate: 0.55) and to properly engage in relational, adaptive behaviors (0.17) are found to be significantly associated with improved performance.

Unquestionably, many factors affect sales performance, both controllable (e.g. skill level, territory quality) and uncontrollable (e.g. environmental and customer factors, luck). However, the overall conclusion to be drawn from these results is that one means to directly impact salesperson performance is for managers to ensure that their salespeople are provided with experiences and training that develop appropriate closing techniques as well as flexibility in handling different types of customers across different selling situations. While the remaining sales presentation skills were not found to be directly related with job performance these findings do not imply that sales training in these areas is wasted and so can be decreased or even omitted. On the contrary, salesperson skills at using active listening, handling objections, and negotiating can instead be quite important in building relational factors (e.g. role performance, synergistic solutions) as well as the customer's perceptions of trust and credibility in that salesperson. Therefore, the lack of significant associations between training quality and these important sales presentation skills indicates that training in these areas should be improved and that sales managers should search for additional means to improve their salespeople's skills in these important areas.

Because selling experience is very strongly associated with all of the presentation skills managers perceive to be important, including skill at adaptive selling and closing, sales managers may wish to emphasize retaining skilled
Salespeople as one of the most powerful means to improve sales performance. Besides creating a high-quality and supportive work environment, sales managers could also attempt to retain salespeople by offering them the type of pay plan, benefits, etc. that may serve to enhance their perceptions of the organization and the position itself. In order to more quickly build up relevant sales experience, especially among their newer salespeople, sales managers may wish to augment the number and range of sales experiences their salespeople encounter. For example, sales managers could extensively review each sales call or interaction with that salesperson in order to help him/her identify and understand the factors that may have led to a particular outcome. This may accelerate the salesperson’s ability to draw the proper lessons from their selling experiences and so boost developing the mental schemas that otherwise would take much longer to build up. In addition, and to the extent possible, sales managers could also assign salespeople to a wide variety of selling situations so to similarly expand the salesperson’s bank of experiences upon which he or she can draw when unfamiliar selling situations are confronted.

**Limitations and future research**

While these results are highly instructive, the limitations of this study must also be considered. A potential limitation of this research is the possibility that the results are not generalizable due to the particular sample used. The sample consisted of industrial salespeople only, but it is feasible that the relations among these variables are quite different for salespeople in other environments such as consumer sales, selling services, etc. Accordingly, additional research with samples drawn from differing sales environments, especially

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Construct correlations, reliabilities, average variance extracted, means, and standard deviations construct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active listening</td>
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<td>Handling objections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
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<td>Prospecting</td>
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<td>Performance</td>
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**Notes:** Reliabilities are shown in italics on the diagonal; * Correlation is significant at 0.05 level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II</th>
<th>Hypothesized model completely standardized path estimates</th>
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<tr>
<td>Path</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience ⇒ active listening skill</td>
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research that rigorously compares different groups of salespeople, is needed. In addition, it may be interesting to further examine the roles of additional selling skills (e.g. competitor and product knowledge) or other salesperson characteristics (e.g. personality traits, physical attractiveness, educational level) within the selling skills framework. Future researchers may also wish to consider the role of different product types and market conditions upon the relations between selling skill and performance.

Lastly the form and nature of the relations between salesperson characteristics and sales skills deserves additional consideration. In this research the relations between the variables assumed to be linear, but it is possible that the relationship between salesperson characteristics and skills are linear only up to a certain point, after which the relationship may level off. For example, early in a salesperson’s career there may be a strong association between experience and prospecting skill, but after a few years the salesperson may maximize his/her prospecting skill and so the strength of the relationship may weaken. Or perhaps the relationship is curvilinear, in that past a particular point the relationship between experience and skill actually decreases. In addition, potential interaction effects (e.g. that listening and/or questioning skill may moderate the relationship between adaptive selling and performance) need to be considered and tested. Clearly, the role, nature, and structure of selling skills, including their relations with outcomes other than performance, remain a potentially highly rewarding area for considerable additional research.

References


Appendix. Questionnaire items

Training
- I have received enough training to do my job well.
- The training I have received is useful.
- The training I have received has helped me be successful.

Active listening
- My level of skill in using active listening with customers.

Adaptive selling
- When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach.
- I like to experiment with different sales approaches.
- I am very flexible in the selling approach I use.
- I can easily use a wide variety of selling approaches.
- I try to understand how one customer differs from another.

Handling objections
- My overall ability to effectively answer objections.
- My ability to address customer resistance regarding the product.
- My ability to address customer resistance regarding their need for the product.

Closing
- My overall ability to effectively close sales.
- My ability to ask for and obtain the sale.
- My ability to make multiple closing attempts.

Negotiating
- My level of skill in negotiating with customers.

Prospecting
- My ability to identify prospects that have a need for my firm’s products.
- My ability to identify prospects who have the authority to buy my firm’s products.
- My overall ability to prospect for potential customers.

Job performance
My performance in:
- exceeding the sales targets and objectives that are assigned to me;
- generating a high dollar amount of sales in my territory;
- quickly generating sales of new company products;
- producing high market share for my company in my territory;
- selling products with higher profit margins; and
- identifying and selling to large volume accounts in my territory.

Executive summary and implications for managers and executives
This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article.
in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

If Arthur Miller’s insecure and deluded Willy Loman had had the benefit of modern selling techniques, effective training and enlightened management, he might have had more success as a traveling salesman and survived to spend a happy and comfortable retirement with his family.

Of course, Death of a Salesman would not have become such a classic of modern literature if Loman’s employer, instead of taking the best years of his life before replacing his salary with a commission-only arrangement, had found a way to incorporate his experience into a training program for newer staff.

Attitudes towards selling have also changed since the 1940s and, whereas then some viewed Loman’s job as lacking in principle, he might now have been viewed with respect as a skilled professional, providing a valuable service to people and organizations who could benefit from what he had to sell.

These days salespeople are often some of the most highly trained members of an organization, even though firms vary in the quality and quantity of sales-related training they provide. Companies recognize that “closing” – the ability to properly and persuasively ask for the sale – is one of the primary strengths of personal selling when compared with other methods a firm may use to influence customers.

Sales managers spend considerable time and effort to try to improve sales presentation skills because they anticipate that increased skill will lead to increased performance.

Salespeople need a whole range of skills, both interpersonal and specific to the product or service. The difference that makes a salesperson a high or a low performer is due to a large degree on their relative experience in selling, but that’s by no means the whole story. Although that range of desirable sales presentation skills is wide, sales managers have grouped them into six specific attributes: listening, adaptive selling, handling objections, closing, negotiating, and prospecting.

In examining the relationship between sales presentation skills that are considered important, and salesperson job performance, Mark C. Johlke gathered information from industrial business-to-business salespeople, finding that sales experience underlies all the sales presentation skills, while training is associated with both adaptive selling and prospecting.

He says:

Many factors affect sales performance, both controllable (e.g. skill level, territory quality), and uncontrollable (e.g. environmental and customer factors, luck). However, the overall conclusion to be drawn is that one means to directly impact salesperson performance is for managers to ensure that their salespeople are provided with experiences and training that develop appropriate closing techniques as well as flexibility in handling different types of customers across different selling situations.

While the remaining sales presentation skills were not found to be directly related with job performance, that is not the same as saying they should be decreased or omitted from training. On the contrary, salesperson skills at using active listening, handling objections, and negotiating can be quite important in building relational factors (e.g. role performance, synergistic solutions) as well as the customer’s perceptions of trust and credibility in that salesperson.

Therefore, the lack of significant associations between training quality and these important sales presentation skills indicates that training in these areas should be improved and that sales managers should search for additional means to improve their salespeople’s skills in these important areas.

Because selling experience is very strongly associated with all of the presentation skills managers perceive to be important, including skill at adaptive selling and closing, sales managers may wish to emphasize retaining skilled salespeople as one of the most powerful means to improve sales performance.

Besides creating a high-quality and supportive work environment, sales managers should also attempt to retain salespeople by offering them the type of pay plan, benefits etc. that may serve to enhance their perceptions of the organization and the position itself.

In order to more quickly build up relevant sales experience, especially among their newer salespeople, sales managers may wish to augment the number and range of sales experiences their salespeople encounter. For example, sales managers could extensively review each sales call or interaction with that salesperson in order to help him/her identify and understand the factors that may have led to a particular outcome.

This may accelerate the salesperson’s ability to draw the proper lessons from their selling experiences and so boost developing the mental schemas that otherwise would take much longer to build up. In addition, and to the extent possible, sales managers could also assign salespeople to a wide variety of selling situations so to similarly expand the salesperson’s bank of experiences upon which he or she can draw when unfamiliar selling situations are confronted.

But what a boring book Arthur Miller would have written if Willy Loman had been in a high-quality and supportive work environment especially if it had a remuneration package designed to retain salespeople’s valuable experience within the organization.

(A précis of the article “Sales presentation skills and salesperson job performance”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)
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