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Death of the old-style salesman

They used to be focused on closing the deal, but now sales staff do best when they think of ways to help their customers

Carly Chynoweth Published: 27 April 2014



Carl Day, a sales director at Toshiba UK, has had success after telling staff to approach customers with business suggestions (Akira Suemori)

The stereotypical salesman is a fast talker who always has his eye on closing the deal. The best sales people, however, are those who are more interested in helping their customers than in getting the contract signed.

Sharon Ashcroft, HR director at Ford Retail in the UK, came to this conclusion after an analysis of its sales force showed that the characteristics most strongly associated with high performance were good communication and a commitment to customer service. Armed with this information, the company stopped recruiting people based on experience — “It [used to be] a case of ‘Did you

sell cars before? How many have you sold? Great, start on Monday,” she said — and turned to psychometric profiling.

In February, Ashcroft reviewed the first year of the new approach. “We have [compared] people recruited in this way with those recruited in the previous 12 months before on actual sales, on customer viewpoint scores and the profit that they make — and they are more successful in all three elements,” she said.

James Beevers, head of consultancy at Talent Q, which conducted the psychometric assessments for Ford Retail, said: “The biggest predictor of sales success was verbal reasoning — the ability to understand what is being said, process it and then communicate clearly. That was less surprising. What was really interesting was the importance of the customer service rating, which was produced by people being supportive, being consultative and being relaxed. These skills are associated with rapport building and trust.”

The skills demanded of good sales people have changed hugely in recent years, agreed Phil Squire, chief executive of Consalia, a sales-development and training organisation. Partly this is because the internet allows buyers to research potential purchases thoroughly before they speak to a company representative. This in turn means that sales people have less opportunity to influence the starting point of a buying decision and so must rely on “exceptional levels of service” to win the deal, he said.

“In the past the sales person held all the cards because he knew the facts and the buyer had to choose whether to believe him or not,” added Beevers. “But now buyers will go in knowing as much as the sales person . . . they will know if he or she is lying or trying to pull a fast one.”

For those who sell complex “solutions” — which can include a mix of physical products and service contracts — increased buyer knowledge means that they need to bring more than the deal to the table. “Customers like people thinking hard about their business and coming up with ideas,” said Squire. “These have to be proactive, creative ideas that are grounded in research and properly thought through.”

Sales people also need to have done thorough research, he added. “They can’t just walk into a [client’s office] and ask questions about their business; clients expect sales people to have done their homework. They need to go in with knowledge or insight.”

In a sense they have to be more like management consultants — albeit ones who are not charging for their insights — than traditional sales staff. “It is about business acumen — the ability to understand the customer and the customer’s industry, including what is changing in it, and then to link back to their own company to see what resources they have that can help,” said Squire.

They must also be flexible enough in their thinking to deal quickly with unexpected changes. “And they need to be able to work not just with their own product or service but that of the customer and, sometimes, their competitors. People selling complex solutions will find that one day they will be fighting a competitor to win a contract, but at other times they may be working with them as a partner.”

The key difference between the stereotypical sales person and the customer-focused communicator who is more successful today is mentality, said Beevers. “These skills can be acquired and practised,” he said. “But what it really comes down to is mindset — how individuals view themselves, their jobs and the world.

“A salesman who regards himself as here to win, here to beat the competition, here to get the best possible deal out of the customer, is likely to behave differently from one who regards himself as here to help. These mindsets are not necessarily easy to change.

It can be done if the individual is committed to changing, Beevers added, but it is not easy and it is not something that can be forced on someone who is unwilling to make that transition.

Time to leave the comfort zone

Carl Day is a former engineer who changed gear two decades ago when he noticed that sales people drove nicer cars than the technical staff. They were also more likely to conform to the sales stereotype, but even then the best people focused more on the customer than the product.

“At first it was about the clichéd sales guy — the one with the loud voice who doesn’t care what anyone thinks of him and who would pressure and badger people into giving an order,” said Day, now a sales director at Toshiba UK. “But even then I could spot sales people who were a bit different.”

Over the years, buyers have become much better informed and more demanding, forcing sales staff to raise their game. There is less room now for the older approach and more focus on customer service, Day added.

As part of his own development, he has been studying Consalia's own MSc in sales leadership at Middlesex University; some of the company's dealers are also on the programme. Day has already started to put some of the theories into practice, including the suggestion that sales people approach customers with business suggestions. “I introduced [a member of the Toshiba team] to the idea and he went to a longstanding client where we have seen a slide in business over the past 18 months and put in place a couple of [thoughts],” said Day. “It was probably outside his comfort zone [but] it means we have just had our best month with them for two and a half years.”

Most of the time, sales people want to do more of the same but harder. But for Sharon Ashcroft at Ford Retail the time has come to do something different. “We have adopted a culture that each month everyone tries to do two things that they have never done before to see if it makes a difference. We are embracing a culture of change.”