

ARE YOU A GREAT SALESPERSON?

Score your sales savvy with 10 essential questions

By Phillip M. Perry

Editor's note:

Studies reveal that people with certain characteristics tend to generate more sales than others. Answer Phil Perry's 10 essential questions below to determine your future sales potential and take note of the bonus tips throughout the article.

Nothing happens until a sale is made — so sayeth Thomas Watson Sr. of IBM. But how, exactly, is a sale made? And how do top salespeople go about making lots of them?

The article below outlines 10 characteristics of people who make cash registers ring loud and long. Each is presented in the form of a question that challenges you to assess your own personal strengths.

Score yourself on a scale of one to ten for each entry, then total your results at the end of the article to determine your future sales success.

1 DO YOU CONSULT RATHER THAN SELL?

No one likes to be “sold.” But everyone wants help solving problems. Enter the salesperson as advisor.

“Rather than making a quick buck off a one-time sale of a product or service, top salespeople take a consultative approach,” said Dave Gulas, CEO of EZDC 3PL. “They make an effort to understand the client’s business, then guide them toward solutions to critical problems.”

The goal, said Gulas, is not to make a high-margin transaction or a one-time sale but to cultivate a longer — and more profitable — long-term relationship.

Bonus tip: Ask prospects “What is your most critical business challenge?” Then make a point of finding and communicating a way to meet it.

2 ARE YOU AN ACTIVE LISTENER?

What is the customer saying? And do you send signals of empathic interest?

“Active listening is the most important thing we can do in the sales process,” said Ron Alford of Southwestern Consulting. “It means giving the speaker your full attention, avoiding distractions, and being present in the conversation. It means not being so consumed with the next part of your presentation that you aren’t focused on the person in front of you.”

The best salespeople pose questions skillfully and listen to the answers carefully, added Alford. Open-ended questions are great tools for encouraging prospects to volunteer information about their current business problems — problems that your products and services can solve.

Bonus tip: Sometimes the more we talk the less effective we are.

3 ARE YOU ASSERTIVE RATHER THAN AGGRESSIVE?

A successful salesperson conveys the quality of their product or service in a self-assured way, but they don’t irritate the prospect with an overbearing attitude.

“I view being assertive as confidently presenting optimal service to deliver peak results,” said William McCreight of BluShark Digital. “And I see it as a byproduct of expertise and experience.”

To increase confidence, the salesperson should consider what problems their product or service solves, what resources are required for the best chance of a positive outcome, and positive feedback from previous customers.

At the same time, the experienced salesperson avoids being a pest by not contacting a prospect too often, exerting undue pressure to reach a buy decision, or redirecting the customer in an unwanted direction.

Bonus tip: Make it clear to the customer that when the product or service is right, both parties are winners.

4

ARE YOU AN EFFECTIVE STORYTELLER?

Prospects tend to engage with a good story. “Storytelling is the most effective way of communicating both your offer to the prospect and the value of your brand,” said Emma Orr of U.K.-based Winning Business. “Stories create emotional connections, and that is essential because people buy on emotion, not logic.”

Effective stories describe the emotions of characters who overcome challenges and deal with situations that are relatable to prospects.

Bonus tip: The most effective stories illustrate how previous customers benefited from your products or services.

5

ARE YOU KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT YOUR PRODUCT?

Know the features but communicate the benefits. How does a particular product or service characteristic help your potential customer solve a problem?

“Inexperienced sellers talk about features,” said Donald Kelly, founder of The Sales Evangelist. “Experienced ones keep asking questions to obtain a better understanding of the challenges prospects are facing and how their offerings can help meet those challenges.”

It’s true that every salesperson needs to know what a product or service does, added Kelly. Read and absorb the information about the product or service and be armed with knowledge to answer specific customer questions. But each of those answers should also remind the prospect of how a specific product or service characteristic helps enhance profits.

Bonus tip: Translate each quality of your product or service into a benefit for your prospect.

6

Do you under promise and overdeliver?

Soft-pedal expectations. Then knock the delivery out of the park.

It can be smart to “under promise” by making proactive statements about your offering’s potential downsides. “Being transparent with customers will help them take steps to mitigate otherwise unanticipated problems,” said Gulas. “They will appreciate your honesty, and that builds trust.”

Set the stage for “overdelivering” by holding back information about some valuable but nonessential characteristic of your product or service. Then, surprise the customer by revealing the feature later.

For example: faster than expected delivery. A surprise bonus item that helps the customer in unexpected ways. Or how about an unprompted suggestion for a more economical solution? That will astonish and please the customer.

Bonus tip: Restating customer concerns in your own words can prompt prospects to reveal additional needs that you can satisfy with surprise add-on services.

7

ARE YOU SELF-CONFIDENT AND OPTIMISTIC?

Customers respond favorably to self-confident salespeople. And salespeople build self-confidence by concentrating on their past successes.

“Being self-confident is a skill we all have to work on — it usually does not come naturally,” said Alford. “Salespeople who have it tend to define their own possibilities and avoid slipping into defeatist or victim mode.”

For an instructive exercise, record your voice while performing a sales pitch when unsure about your message. Then repeat the recording when you are feeling confident. You will find your tone much more convincing in the latter case.

Bonus tip: Daily affirmations and self-talk are key tools for programming your brain to think positively and accept all challenges with confidence.

8

ARE YOU HONEST AND TRUSTWORTHY?

Relationship management is everything when transforming connections into commercial opportunities. Belief in the veracity of what a person says is essential for a productive relationship. So is trust that the person will follow through on promised actions.

“It is essential to be both honest and trustworthy,” said Orr. “It is upon this basis that great long term business relationships are formed. A prospect likes to know that whom they are dealing with will communicate the real benefits and limitations of a product or service.”

You can probably remember a time when a businessperson promised to do something and never followed through. How did this make you feel about the individual’s professionalism?

Bonus tip: Be alert to small promises you make in passing and mark your calendar to follow up with appropriate actions.

9 ARE YOU RESILIENT AND PERSISTENT?

Rome wasn't built in a day. "No" is just a stepping stone to "yes." Pick yourself up and start all over again.

Whatever mantra you find most attractive, the message is the same: Resilience and persistence are effective qualities when dealing with customer rejection. Top salespeople have both qualities in spades.

"We all experience highs and lows," said McCreight. "But I am a firm believer in the law of averages and that all things find equilibrium over time. Being resilient in the low periods is what allows you to bounce back and take advantage of the high periods. And being persistence makes things happen."

Persistence can be cultivated by engaging in due diligence about potential clients and using the gathered information to help develop solutions. If you truly believe your product will help create value, you should not feel bad about engaging in multiple steps to follow up.

Bonus tip: Develop greater resilience and persistence by concentrating on past proposals that resulted in sales to reluctant prospects.

10 ARE YOU TECHNOLOGICALLY SAVVY?

Technology drives productivity in companies. Great salespeople improve their effectiveness by leveraging advances in the digital world.

"Salespeople must achieve an understanding of the technology that's available," said Kelly. "They don't have to be a whiz at programming, but they do need to understand how to get the information they need to make their life easier and help their buyers solve problems."

Sales professionals should learn how to use a Customer Relationship Management program. These programs can store critical information for fast retrieval. What was discussed at the last meeting? Who are the key players at the prospect's company? What is the next step in the relationship? It's all in the database.

Bonus tip: Stay abreast of new technology by asking fellow sales professionals which programs they find most useful.

There you have it. After rating yourself from 1 to 10 for each question, how close is your score to 100? Analyze the results to design a self-improvement program that transforms you into a super salesperson.

Take small steps. Be persistent. Be patient. And remember that becoming a great salesperson is more a journey than a destination, so enjoy the scenery along the way. ■

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