

Recognising Your Sales “Edge”

By Suzi Skinner
 M. Appl.Sci (Coaching Psychology)
 Executive Coach

Have you ever wondered how the top sales people in your company keep on achieving their extraordinary results?

Have you wondered what their secret is, in being able to address their customers’ needs every time?

And even when you have the opportunity to watch them in action, have you wondered what that *certain something* is, that gives them the sales edge?

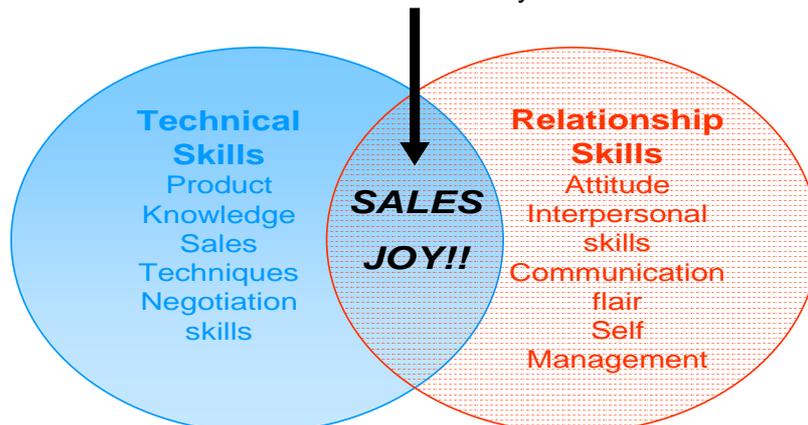
Sales training is alive and well in organisations. And rightly so. There are fundamental skills that can be learnt, that are critical to the success of any sale. As an overview for understanding Sales training, Sales abilities are often partitioned into the technical aspects of selling (eg. product knowledge) and the relationship aspect of the sale (ie. building trust and rapport). Some high level features include (and are in no way limited to):

- communication expertise
- building meaningful relationships with your customers,
- being honestly enthusiastic (& believing in) your product or service
- creating the need for your customer
- providing them with a tailored solution.

Techniques such as open questions, “add on” sales, customer success stories (to build credibility), negotiation, promotions and closing skills are all very real and important components of a successful sale. Indeed it has been claimed that there are over 200 identified competencies, in over 30 categories, that are involved in the selling process (Zues & Skiffington, 2000). Needless to say it is a highly skilled profession!

To understand the core aspects of selling, the Technical and Relationship partition sits well. Often where the truly exemplary sales occur is when these two areas converge as outlined below:

Brilliant sales people have mastered the art of both areas.
 Is that the entire story?



In today's marketplace we are all well aware of the competition and high standards of service that our customers demand. Our customers have more to choose from and are more aware of their options than ever before. Having your technical skills down pat will get you part of the way there, however really leveraging your relationship skills is what will make the difference in that customer coming back to you again and again.

As a sales professional reading this article, I know there is nothing in this concept that this new to you. I assume that you are already doing these things well.

The real question I want to ask is ***what separates your good selling days from your great ones?*** Have you ever reflected upon the great sales that you have achieved and identified what it was about that sales experience that led to your success?

We have all had the encounter of the experienced sales person who left us feeling a little cold or "unloved". Who didn't meet our needs and allowed us to walk away feeling something was amiss or at worst, feeling unhappy about the sales contact.

Luckily for us all, this doesn't happen often. Yet it does happen. And to varying degrees, I believe we can all lay claim to not offering our customers the best experience, 100% of the time. We are human after all!

As mentioned earlier, it doesn't take much to recall the last time a salesperson was not "with us". This type of experience highlights a crucial foundation for successful selling that underpins all of the skills listed earlier. Technical and Relationship selling skills are fundamental to great sales however there is a crucial human element that these techniques do not address.

The Sales Edge

We know from personal experience that our most fulfilling sales experiences occur when the sales person is right there with us - *actively engaged* in understanding and addressing our needs. They were not answering the phone or chatting with their colleague but consciously interested in us and our requirements. They were *present* – *mentally present*.

This capacity to be mentally present is one that each and every one of us possesses. It is also a capacity that we each use to different degrees.

Your attention and your ability to be present & focused in any sales moment is what sets your results apart.

Being able to see things as they really are – the customer, the product and the opportunities before you – will determine the level of your wins. Indeed, research into the Sales area highlights that more than 50% of successful selling is due to the application of these mental or thinking skills (Zeus & Skiffington, 2000).

So what do we really mean when we talk about being mentally present?

The analogies to everyday life are simple. Consider when you have been involved in an activity where you perform easily and where your focus is only on the task at hand. (This could be in any endeavour – sports, arts, work or even family

interactions). You are not spending half of your time worrying about the future or analysing your recent performance, you are just engaged in the moment. By being mentally present in your activity your skills come to you naturally and you do well. Sound familiar? Sportsmen often refer to this as being “in the zone”.

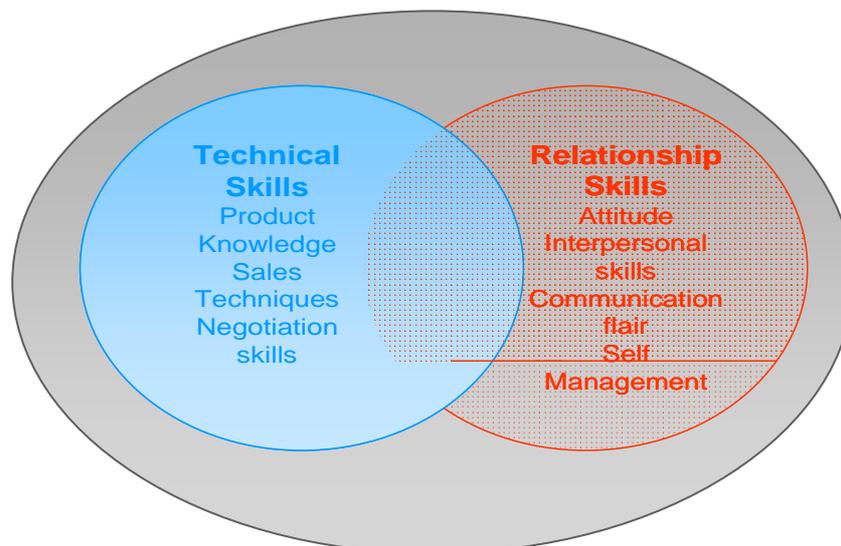
At work, we know adults in particular struggle with directing their attention & focusing consistently (W. T. Gallwey, 2000). There are many, many distractions – both externally within the work environment and internally with our competing thoughts and desires. Often we have days of sporadic focus followed by periods of extended distractions. Consequently we leave work feeling that we have not achieved what we set out to do.

However work does also provides us with many opportunities to focus and become immersed in a task. I know many clients that have conducted sales meetings with clients and had the time literally fly by – not because there was so much to do, but because they were actively engaged and enjoying the meeting at hand. They were present.

This ability to focus and direct attention is the master skill behind all skill development.

“Focus is the quintessential component of superior performance in every activity. No matter what the level of skill or age of the performer” (W.T. Gallwey, 2000 p.43).

As outlined in the diagram below, the ability to focus and pay conscious attention supports and underpins the Sales skills. Without this, distractions can occur, and mistakes can be made and opportunities missed. With it, salespeople are able to bring all of their natural skills and abilities to the selling process and maximise their results.



Attention and Your Communication:

In a sales environment, your communication flair (or lack thereof) is a major indicator of your levels of focus and attention.

- How can you be effective in selling if you are not really paying attention to what you are communicating?
- How can you tune into the needs of your customer if you are more focused on worrying about the future result (closing the sale) or thinking about your upcoming lunch break?

Sales people that are present and focused are able to uniquely tune into the nuances of their customers. They notice any changes in the tone, dialogue speed, body language of their customer and they respond accordingly. By paying real attention to their customer they send the message that they care about them and are willing to listen to them. This almost imperceptible skill is what gives them that sales edge, as trust and rapport with the customer is built with ease.

Paying attention is one way of combating the effects of the relentless speed of our lives and our desire for results. Our “extreme future-mindedness” (M.Seligman, 2002) can often detract from what we are trying to achieve. Paying attention to our task at hand (the sale), allows us to enjoy the present and not have our future oriented thinking detract from our (or our customers) experience. Rather than unconsciously missing things or losing opportunities we are able to create potential and open up opportunities.

Beginning Your Attention Journey:

In order to develop your sales edge it is first important to become aware of what you are doing. These steps below will begin you on your journey.

1. Be aware of what your attention is doing when you are selling. Begin to take a mental note of what you are thinking about:
 - Are you preoccupied with closing the sale? (future orientation)
 - Are you worried about meeting your sales target? (future orientation)
 - Are you wondering what you should have done with your recent customer? (past orientation)
 - OR Are you able to enjoy the moment with your customer?
2. Be clear about your priorities.
 - Have you clearly connected with the personal benefits that you will achieve in doing your sales well?
 - What personal goals does this behaviour achieve? (For example, does this sale reconnect you to your core values of helping others?)
 - Are you passionate enough about the products to sell them from an authentic place? Do you believe?
3. Forgive yourself for past mistakes or wanderings. Let them go. We know that trying to pay attention to your thinking, can actually hinder the process, so this

step is more about allowing your attention to wander but then getting it back on track as soon as you can. And when you are with a customer, it is also good practice to acknowledge that your mind wandered (“I’m sorry I missed that comment – can you please repeat it?”). This honesty actually helps to reinforce the trust that you are building with them. (L.Whitworth, 1998).

4. Relax and give yourself the time and space to enjoy your selling!

Finally, a simple exercise:

Next time you have a great sale, ask yourself the following questions:

- What were you focusing on?
- How were you feeling?
- How did the customer respond?
- Were there other factors that helped in your success?
- What can you do to get into that success mode more often?