



Are you made of the right stuff?

First published in Infomatics, February 2002.

Many IT sellers start their careers in another area, or as part of the sales team's support staff. So, if you're interested in moving into the area, or want to encourage someone else to, check out Anna Britnor Guest's handy guide...

Money, variety, recognition and a fast-track career path. It's no surprise that many are attracted to IT sales but how do you make sure you hit the ground running?

Firstly, it's important to make sure the move really is right for you. A sales support role may look similar to a sales role but there are some fundamental differences which may influence whether you sink or swim.

Targets are probably the biggest factor. Some are motivated by aiming for a tangible goal. Such people often set themselves tougher personal goals than the company does and highly value either the external recognition or internal satisfaction of achieving target. Others find the constant pressure to be stressful, demotivating and confidence-sapping.

Self-starters essential

Proactivity is also crucial. This requires considerable self-discipline and motivation - the term 'self-starter' really does mean what it says! Being proactive is not the same as being busy - it's far too easy to spend time on enjoyable or undemanding tasks that don't take you nearer to your target!

Although many salespeople consider customer relationships and variety to be key to job satisfaction they alone are not sufficient for achieving long-term sales success. This requires two elusive elements - a real passion for customer service in its broadest sense and a personal desire to achieve.

For any role there are a number of factors which influence ability to perform which might be loosely categorised as attitude, knowledge and skills. We've established something about the attitude of a successful salesperson but developing a serious track-record also requires core skills and knowledge.

Grasping the fundamentals

The world of IT sales is becoming increasingly complex. It's no longer good enough, as some recall in the days of proprietary systems, to rely on product features and customer relationships. To find that elusive competitive edge today, salespeople need to be better informed about business than ever before.

The learning curve for someone just starting out in sales is steep but developing and maintaining knowledge in the following areas will pay dividends:

- Their products and relevant technologies
- Their competitors' products
- Company strengths and weaknesses (customer base, expertise, ethical values, service levels, specialisms etc) and how these compare with competitors
- Technology trends
- Market/industry trends
- Their customers' businesses, industry sectors, issues and trends



These may seem obvious but often salespeople focus almost solely on product leaving them trapped in a feature - function -price sales culture.

The same can also be true if a salesperson fails to develop a clear understanding of the sales and buying processes and the skills necessary to establishing customer relationships. It takes a book not an article to scratch the surface of these but the following offer pointers to establishing the fundamentals.

The process

Sales cycles differ in time and complexity according to the nature of the sale. It's important to have a mental framework to support sales activities and measure progress towards winning an order but flexibility is key to establishing win-win customer relationships.

Some sales processes fall down because they do not effectively overlay the customer's buying process. Only by dovetailing the two can you find a smooth route to making the sale. (see fig 1).

Building relationships

The old adage 'people buy from people' really means 'people buy from people who they trust to do a good job and not let them down'.

Develop trust-based relationship by

- Being an effective listener
 - Focus attention on the customer
 - Avoid distractions
 - Ask clarifying questions and reflecting back to confirm and develop understanding
 - Avoid being judgmental and jumping to conclusions
 - Separate fact from opinion to understand the speaker's viewpoint
 - Don't interrupt!
- Asking appropriate questions throughout the sale to understand requirements, assess progress and gain commitment:
 - open questions develop and expand discussion,
 - 'closed fact' questions (how much, how many, who etc) elicit specific pieces of information,
 - closed questions (will you, do you, have you, can you etc) request a yes/no answer and are generally used to gain commitment for actions and orders!

- Making the match

Having understood the customer's needs, it's important to match your offering to their needs- if a customer doesn't need specific features or services then don't spend valuable time talking about them! Relate everything back to the business benefits they are seeking and don't be afraid to be creative if their style and process allows.

- Understanding cultures and timescales

Many customers cite that their favoured suppliers are those that understand their business and way of working. They work to the customer's timescales even when these are painfully slow or frantically last minute - and wherever they seem to fit in the salesperson's targeting period! They also recognise the customer's business culture and personal style and adapt their approach to fit.



Planning

Mention pipelines and forecasts and most salespeople will groan. Like it or not, they are necessary for businesses to predict revenue but salespeople can make use of them to maintain focus.

It's easy to fall into a fire-fighting mode in sales but this doesn't bring sustainable sales success. It's essential to talk to enough companies and enough contacts within these companies about as many products as are relevant in order to develop a long-term pipeline. This doesn't mean bombarding customers with everything you sell, it means taking time to understand their environment, areas of responsibility and targeting your activities towards the right people at the right time!

Talking to the right people

Influence and authority are all important. Very few high value sales are made on the basis of one individual's sole decision - the final decision maker will generally take advice from a variety of colleagues. Some may have covert or political influence without being obviously involved in the decision, others may have a formal role in recommending technologies or solutions but may not wield political influence or be party to all of the business objectives. Spotting and working with people who have impact in this area is all important to fully understanding requirements and positioning your solution to meet these business needs.

Delivering against commitments

If one piece of advice holds true above all others it is 'do what you say you will do - and if you can't - say so as soon as possible!'

It really is as simple as that! The sooner you share any bad news the more time there is to find alternative options. Last minute surprises only cause additional inconvenience and sour relations.

Working in partnership

Consider your customer a partner - you are both looking to benefit from the relationship. Think win-win and long-term - don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs by being too greedy or pushy!

Developing sales skills is an never-ending process - there's always something new to learn but you start on the right track if you work with a simple process, are committed to building knowledge and close customer relationships and have a real desire to succeed!