

Could you be the greatest?

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What's the difference between a good salesperson and a great one? Anna Britnor Guest puts together the recipe for exceptional performance

In selling, where results are as concrete as cash, the difference between an OK performer and a really exceptional one is more marked than in perhaps any other field. To be the best is always the salesperson's instinctive goal, which fact can make competitors of one's closest colleagues.

So what does it take to be the person who comes out on top in such a high pressure environment? We piece together the key ingredients that go together to make up the ultimate seller...

Never give up

Peter Lowe, success speaker, has studied the strategies of the world's top achievers and observes "I have found they all have one characteristic in common. They have all learned to harness the power of relentless perseverance. They didn't succeed because they were destined to; they succeeded because they were determined to".

Or as George Bernard Shaw once put it "People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstance. The people who get on in this world are those who get up and look for the circumstances they want and if they can't find them, make them".

The 'if at first you don't succeed, try try again' attitude is ingrained into many of us from an early age but it's not always easy to abide by. Even if we do know what we're aiming for and maintain the energy to keep going, how do we 'know that we know what we don't know' in order to avoid banging our head against the proverbial brick wall without the tools, knowledge, skills or insight to get over, under or round it.

Mind games

According to Rainer Martens, author of the 'Coaches Guide to Sport Psychology' (Human Kinetics Publishers,) 1976 Olympic gold medallist Larry Bassham asserted that "athletics is 90% mental". Most sportspeople and their coaches would agree. Martens identifies that "What they mean when they credit psychological preparation with great importance is that once athletes have developed their physical skills to a high level, and when they are competing with others at that level, the winner is more likely to be the person who is best prepared psychologically".

Watching Goran Ivanisevic win the 2001 Wimbledon men's finals it was clear that the outcome of the match had nothing to do with his technical ability - though without it he couldn't have reached the final - it was down to his own mental attitude and sheer determination.

All in the mix

Such tenacity, self-motivation and desire to win are often cited as desirable qualities in salespeople.

If we observe sales executives who possess good technical selling skills but lack these attributes, we tend to see individuals who achieve sporadic success but find it hard to maintain consistent performance and need constant external encouragement and pressure to motivate them.

Equally, ultra-keen salespeople who lack core skills remain buoyant and upbeat but skirt along the bottom of the sales figures and keep their job only by virtue of their optimistic disposition and conviction that next month will be better.



Successful salespeople, therefore, both know their stuff and possess unquavering commitment to achieving the goal.

Goals and feedback

Personal development specialists highlight the importance of goal setting in achieving fulfilment. They also stress that these goals must be personal and not externally specified. Achievement-oriented salespeople may - though they will never admit this to anyone responsible for setting targets - establish much tougher goals for themselves than the company ever will! And those are the only ones they are really interested in.

Today's salespeople, however, cannot forget that they are part of a team. The current climate is less accommodating of the 'maverick' salesperson who disappears for days on end, turns up heroically waving the biggest order of the quarter and disappears again leaving a trail of chaos and paperwork for others to sort out!

Those who succeed these days recognise that doing it with help is preferable to going it alone.

That help can take the form of feedback, an important adjunct of goal-setting. In a 1983 study by A Bandura and D Cervone into 'the motivational effects of goal systems' some 80 cyclists were assigned to one of four different coaching situations and their performance improvements measured accordingly. They found that the control group who received no performance coaching at all improved by 21%, those who received either goal setting or feedback support improved by 25% whilst those who both set goals and received regular feedback increased their performance by 59%.

Similarly, successful salespeople tend to seek feedback, both formally and informally, from all around them: manager, peers, colleagues, subordinates and, above all, customers. They identify role models and mentors and consciously learn through observing others.

How to spot top performers?

A 1997 study 'World Class Sales Excellence Benchmark Report' by the HR Chally Group asked 1,100 corporate customers to identify the most important skills for salespeople. The most frequently cited, in order, were:

1. Personally manages customer satisfaction
2. Understands customer's business
3. Acts as a customer advocate
4. Is knowledgeable of application within business as well as products / services
5. Is locally, or at least, easily accessible
6. Solves problems
7. Is innovative in responding to customer needs

The study also found that salespeople who receive at least one day per week one-on-one with their manager were more than 20 times more productive than those who do not.

Cardiff Business School's research into sales performance, also undertaken in 1997, suggest a number of behaviours which reinforce the above.

They found that the highest performing sales operations were those whose salespeople:

- focused on profitable sales and high market share
- maintained superior sales skills from product knowledge to communication skills
- were highly adaptable in their approach both to customers and colleagues



- were strong in 'non-selling' activities, particularly teamwork with colleagues and planning their work including calls, sales strategies, account coverage and daily activities
- were key in supplying after-sales service

They particularly stress that the oft-quoted belief that good salespeople are poor administrators is far from the truth. Salespeople have to be effective organisers in order to manage their time, co-ordinate with others and deliver against customer expectations.

The Institute of Sales & Marketing Management highlights some additional qualities displayed by 'superachievers': they can tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, they create their own 'success' environments, regardless of what is going on around them, they take a 'marathon' approach to life and, most importantly, manage their emotions.

If it was easy we'd all be consistently successful high performers. However, for those with sufficient determination and vision the path to excellence is straight ahead.

So, how do I get to be Number One?

First, to be a top performer you have to really want to excel!

Then, break down the core elements you need to succeed and implement a development plan by:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitude

Ensure you work for a company which:

1. encourages and supports you in achieving your goals
2. is a good 'cultural' fit for you

Really work to understand and communicate effectively with your customers

Maintain high ethical standards and integrity

Be adaptable but remain true to your own personality and style

And, finally, never stop learning!