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Solutions for Sales Management

Train Your Sales Team with Steve Martin, How to Use Intuition to Become a Heavy Hitter

How to Use Intuition to Become a Heavy Hitter

By Geoffrey James

This training module is based upon a conversation with Steve Martin, the author of *Heavy Hitter Selling: How Succsessful Salespeople Use Language and Intuition to Persuade Customers to Buy* (Wiley, 2006) and *Heavy Hitter Sales Wisdom: Proven Sales Warfare Strategies, Secrets of Persuasion, and Common-Sense Tips for Success* (Wiley, 2006). He was formerly a top sales producer for a billion dollar software firm and served as vice president of sales for several leading-edge Silicon Valley technology companies. As a sales trainer, he has helped thousands of salespeople become what he calls "heavy hitters." Martin can be reached at stevemartin@heavyhitterselling.com.

The Limitation of Sales Process

Over the past 20 years, the main focus of sales theory and training has been the attempt to define an effective sales process that can be both replicated and automated. The overall goal has been a transformation of selling from an unpredictable black box into a "machine" that predictably generates sales. Once achieved, that sales process can presumably be automated, reducing the cost of sales and increasing profitability.

Top managers are highly motivated to attempt to transform selling into a mechanistic process because, if that goal were achieved, they would be better able to predict future revenue and deliver on promises made to the investor community. Sales professionals are also motivated to make sales more mechanistic and therefore predictable, because such a goal, if achieved, would allow them to control the sales process, thus eliminating (or at least reducing) the discomfort of an unknown outcome.

This quest for predictability lies at the core of most sales training and sales automation efforts. Sales training almost always involves the creation of a process or the development of specific skills required to drive a process. Similarly, CRM (originally called "Sales Force Automation" in imitation of "Factory Floor Automation") is almost always concerned with gathering data that will make the sales process more quantifiable and hence more predictable.

Unfortunately, the quest for sales predictability is quixotic, because selling and buying are very human activities that are manifestations of very human emotions. The core of a sales rep's work consists of four essentially unquantifiable activities: building relationships, understanding how others think, predicting future behavior, and persuading customers to think differently.

Intuition and Experience

While focusing on process (and techniques that support that process) is extremely comforting to those who find it hard to tolerate the uncertainty of human relationships, the most effective sales professionals – the "heavy hitters" as it were – take the business world's obsession with sales process and automation with a grain of salt. They know that when it comes to selling, they'll be using their intuition and experience to sense what's happening in the sales relationship and to react accordingly.

All experience is not created equal, because the ability to use experiences effectively varies enormously, depending upon the focus of the sales rep while those experiences are taking place. For example, if the sales rep is focusing on delivering a prepared sales script, the sale will proceed (and end either positively or negatively) without the sales rep ever really noticing why it worked (or didn't). By contrast, a sales rep can more quickly transmute experience into intuition by paying attention to what's actually happening in the moment.

The key to doing this quickly and efficiently is to acquire a set of mental habits that, first, allows you to perceive the undercurrents of thought that actually drive the customer's behavior and, second, helps you react appropriately, while remembering what worked (and what didn't work) to build the relationship.

Layers of Communication

To acquire these habits, you must first understand how the human mind works during a person-to-person communication. This can be visualized as a set of layers:

What's being said (content) is probably the least important element of the communication between Mary and her manager. If all you knew about the conversation was the content, you'd completely miss what was really going on.

The same limitation exists in process-driven and technique-driven sales training, both of which focus almost exclusively on the content and the order in which that content should be communicated. However, in sales situations, as in most human interactions, what's said (content) is often far less important than why it's said (purpose), how it's said (phonetic), how it's heard (word catalog), when it's said (relative to whatever is going on in the hearer's internal dialog), and how it appears to the eye and feels to the gut (physical) when it's said.

Building Sales Intuition

There are several shortcuts that can help you develop the mental habits of perceiving communication on multiple levels. One is what's commonly known as "body language." Another is Neural Linguistic Programming (NLP), a scientifically studied method of interpreting thought patterns through their manifestation in eye movements. (E.g., a person will look away when telling a lie, or look upwards and slightly to the right when remembering a past event.)

Probably the most valuable mental "tool" is the ability to differentiate between what are sometimes called "thought modalities" or, more colloquially put, "how your brain is wired." Extensive research has shown that most people favor one of the three different modalities:

Visual. The person values and responds to what he or she sees. A visual person will tend to dress flashy, talk quickly, and use plenty of broad hand gestures.

Auditory. The person values and responds to what he or she hears. An auditory person will tend to dress conservatively, talk in an even tone, and use subtle hand gestures, usually synchronized with what's being said.

Kinesthetic. The person values and responds to what he or she feels. A kinesthetic person will tend to dress casually, talk quite slowly, and make many "checking" gestures, like touching their chin while thinking.

Understanding a customer's primary modality helps you to read, and react to, the more subtle levels of communication taking place during the customer call. If you determine that a customer is auditory, you might decide to set up calls with reference accounts rather than show a product demonstration video. Conversely, with a visually oriented customer, you might do the exact opposite, or with a kinesthetic customer, forego both and simply help the customer imagine how great he'll feel when your product has solved his problem.

QUICK TIPS FOR YOUR NEXT SALES MEETING

Four key attributes of successful sales professionals:

1. They are skillful builders of personal relationships. They have the ability to create rapport quickly and their presence has an appeal that makes a customer feel at ease. The customer enjoys their company.

2. They are masters of language. They know what to say and how to say it. They can convey and decipher deep underlying messages that less successful sales professionals miss. While using the same language as everyone else, they have developed an uncanny ability to persuade nonbelievers.

3. They are sales cycle experts. They understand how to facilitate an information exchange with the customer. If they are following a formalized sales process, they use this process as a guideline, enhancing it as necessary, based upon their

personal experience, to manage and control their deals.

4. They have highly developed intuition. They continually catalog their successes and failures. They store patterns of individual and company behavior and link them to the sales process, using those experiences to guide them through interactions with different types of people and sales situations.

Sales Manager's Training Guide

At Your Next Sales Meeting

Below are 12 practical steps to help your team communicate better with individual customers, using the practical application of thought modalities.This meeting should take approximately one hour.

1. Prior to the meeting, ask the team to print out hard copies of the last 10 business emails that they sent. Tell them that they won't be sharing them with others but using them as part of an experiment.

2. Also prior to the meeting, prepare a handout based on the "Quick Tips for Your Next Training Session" segment of this article.

3. Open the meeting with enthusiasm. Explain that the team will be learning a skill that will vastly improve their ability to build rapport with customers and help them move prospects to customers faster than in the past.

4. Based upon the material in this article, summarize the basic concept of modalities and the role that they play in a customer's thought process. Point out that a sales rep can quickly build rapport and more easily guide the sales forward by adapting the sales approach to the customer's primary modality.

5. Distribute the handout and have them read it. Ask them to call out the name of somebody in your company, or a well-known customer personality who is obviously a visual. Ask for another. Repeat the process with auditory and kinesthetic. (You'll notice that it may be harder for them to come up with kinesthetic examples because they tend to blend more into the background than the other two types.)

6. Direct their attention to element #3 in the five-step process. Have them take out the 10 emails that they've brought to the meeting and put a V next to every time they used a visual word, an A next to every time they've used an auditory word, and a K every time they've used a kinesthetic word. Tell them that they are not limited to the words in the list in element #3 but are free to characterize other words according to modality.

7. Have the team member total up the inscribed letters on their hard-copy emails. Point out that the letter that appears the most is probably their primary modality.

8. Ask the team members to mentally review a past sales call that immediately "clicked" and a past sales call that was a real "dud" from the get-go. Ask if, based on their best recollection, there was a match or mismatch between the sales rep's primary modality and the customer's primary modality. Open the floor for discussion and sharing of specific cases. At the completion of this step you should be about 25 minutes into the meeting.

9. Break the team into groups of two. Have each subgroup select who will be person A and who will be person B. Tell them that for the initial role play, person B will be the rep and person A will be the observer.

10. Tell person B to give person A the standard one-minute elevator pitch, but in a way that would appeal to a visual customer. Have B repeat the pitch, but this time in a way that would appeal to an auditory customer. Repeat again for a kinesthetic customer. Have A provide feedback.

11. Repeat the exercise, but with person A as the rep and person B as the observer. After A has presented using all three modalities and B has provided feedback, bring the group back together and ask for comments and discussion.

12. Thank the team for their participation and have them resolve to review, at the next sales meeting, whether and how the use of modalities helped move the sales process forward in real account situations.

QUICK TIPS FOR YOUR NEXT TRAINING SESSION

Use the following 5 steps to quickly assess a customer's primary modality:

1. When meeting the customer, note the clothes and jewelry the customer is wearing. If they are:
• More colorful or dramatic than you'd expect, add a point for visual.
• Relatively neutral and unexceptional, add a point for auditory.
• More sedate and casual than you'd expect, add a point for kinesthetic.

2. If you are meeting in the customer's office, take a quick inventory of the "conversation starters" in the room. If they consist primarily of
• Splashy photographs of scenery, add a point for visual.
• Photographs of family, hobbies, or anything musically themed, add a point for auditory.
• Anything tactile (a baseball, a "fidget" toy, etc.), add a point for kinesthetic.

3. Ask the customer a conversation-starting question,such as, "Before we get started, I'd really like to know…what do you like best about your job?" Then listen to the vocabulary that the customer uses for key words and phrases that suggest their primary modality. Example:
• Visual: Bright, brilliant, clear, demonstrate, focus, frame, glimpse, highlight, illuminate, imagine, light, magnify, perspective, reflect, scan, see, shine, show, viewpoint.
• Auditory: Articulate, assert, audacious, banter, boast, call, crunch, dictated, discuss, edit.
• Kinesthetic: Bask, blink, bounce, breathe, catch, chop, crawl, friction, heart, impact, impress, move, post, push, sense, smell, smile, strike, throw, touch, walk, weigh.

4. When in the customers' presence, notice how they are talking and moving as they answer:
• Talking fast, with broad gestures, lots of eye contact, add a point for visual.
• Talking medium speed, some gestures, some eye contact, add a point for auditory.
• Talking slowly, frequently pausing to think, few gestures, occasional eye contact, add a point for kinesthetic.

5.Based upon all of the above, use your intuition to select the correct modality and then adapt your behavior accordingly, by using language and process that matches the customer's internal "wiring."

Note: Many of the most successful people have balanced modalities (that's one reason they're successful!) and are consequently difficult to read. However, the majority of your customers are likely to exhibit a clear preference for a primary modality.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Does this mean that all sales process is useless?

A: Not at all. However, if you focus too much on process and what's "supposed" to happen next, you'll miss what's really going on in the customer interaction and consequently miss the opportunity to build a store of experiences that can lead toward better intuition.

Q: How can I learn more about modalities and other intuition-building tools?

A: The book Heavy Hitter Selling (Wiley, 2006) contains detailed overviews of the applications of these tools in a selling environment, with examples and exercises. For further study, there are numerous books on body language, Neural Linguistic Programming (NLP), and the psychology of communication.

Q: How long does it take to build the intuition that can make me a heavy hitter?

A: A lifetime. Seriously, it's an ongoing process that began when you first entered sales and is going on every time you speak with a customer. Your challenge is to make sure that you learn as much as possible from your experiences so that your power of intuition not only develops as swiftly as possible, but has the widest range of options to select from.

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