

AS SEEN IN
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How to Cultivate SALES STARS



The retail world has changed so vastly over the past few years that talented sales professionals are needed now more than ever.

BY MARK OKUN

As with any career, sales has a set of standards that, when followed, will provide you with success. It requires a commitment to personal growth and applies equally to the characteristics employed in emotional intelligence and adherence to clear processes.

“Fast-talking” and “aggressive” are two worn out characteristics once considered the hallmarks of the sales trade. In a face-to-face selling situation today, neither will help you complete the sale and create a client.

DEFEAT PERCEPTIONS, PAST AND PRESENT

For decades it has been ingrained into the public to be wary of you — yes you, the salesperson. Part of this poor reputation is due to the methods of

some in the profession, as well as the image portrayed by the internet, which has put the spotlight of transparency on us all.

Negative perceptions are not just a thing of the past. As our customer’s journey begins digitally, the ever-present internet resellers have established and solidified their brands around the concept of “quicker and cheaper.” We all know that if an item is not available, no amount of cajoling will get it to arrive any quicker. These are the same brand and image-building tactics every showroom and salesperson must adopt. Today we are playing catch up and the time to start is now or get left behind.

Therefore, it is essential to build your brand around the vision and mission of the company; if you’re a salesperson, build it around yourself. It all starts with a good story.

“People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe.”

— Simon Sinek, author of *Start With Why*

LIFE IS A STORY

Long ago, storytelling was the primary way people communicated everything from history to education. Even in these digital days, storytelling remains one of the most powerful tools for reaching people — and it is the first characteristic of today’s sales professional.

The stories we tell today are about our brand and business, and each one of these stories reinforces why clients want to work with us as lighting professionals and with our showrooms as a resource. The one and the only way to adequately express your story to the world is through a blog. Your website is the critical home base for your blog and any other digital information you wish to share. While the thought of producing a blog can be overwhelming, once started, it will be hard to stop.

The goal is to get clients involved early in the discovery stage while building your showroom and sales team’s reputation as lighting experts. All this must be done without turning clients away by being too salesy.

Good salespeople have a story for every occasion, and they usually follow a pattern. One result of using a story allows clients to say to themselves, “Gee, I want to be like the person in the story.” Or, “I don’t want to be like the person in the story.” The critical ingredient in both scenarios is the ability to communicate empathetically. When using stories, remember that you will hear them hundreds — if not thousands — of times, but your clients may only hear it once.

Compelling storytelling is a crucial component in every presentation process. When it comes to new clients, they *must* hear the story about the company. That company story is produced on the blog, shared through various digital platforms, and is required telling during the face-to-face interaction.

WHAT IS YOUR COMPANY STORY?

When constructing the company story, there are vital points that *must* be included. First of all, you must accept that the majority of new customers are doing the discovery phase of their shopping *before* they enter a store. In the past, the discovery process was done in the store, at which point the sales team would develop trust and rapport with those clients. That opportunity is gone forever. Now, we must build trust and rapport with clients *before* we ever *meet* them. The company story that will help get people to your door will consist of these points:

- ★ Promote expert status by discussing the education the company provides for the staff to stay on the edge of current trends and technology.
- ★ Build interest by including stories of clients who benefited by having a relationship with the showroom and the salesperson.
- ★ Tell them “WHY” you do what you do.
- ★ Define clearly how your store differs from all competitors in the area.

Look for the signs of agreement when telling the story. When noticed, make note and reinforce them — these are the clients’ hot buttons.

PRACTICE DIGITAL DEXTERITY

Time is short, and there is no time to sugarcoat it any longer: Get on social media platforms with the proper materials in high rotation. While print is not dead, its role has changed. The goal of all “mass market” print advertising today is to get customers to visit your website. Leave advertising product or price to the generalists. As a specialty store in an industry that has an itch cycle of 7 years to forever,

“When you show deep empathy toward others, their defensive energy goes down, and positive energy replaces it.”

—Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

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we have to hit hard and differently because different is memorable.

The rapid advancements in technology demand we understand how to share our stories and information digitally. This applies equally to the convenience of ordering products at the touch of a button to the position that our showrooms show up in a Google search.

What does this have to do with sales star characteristics? *Everything!* Once our various stories are built, they must get in front of the eyes of our clients and potential customers. We must be constant and consistent in spreading the word about our showroom brand as well as our own individual brand. This can only be accomplished with bridled self-promotion. Promoting both showroom and sales team is easy, but you will need guts, determination, and self-awareness that is sharp.

Here are a few pointers that can help:

- ★ **Do not be braggadocious.** Share essential ideas and information, and speak of cutting-edge concepts and reasons that ring right with your targeted personas.
- ★ **Create a buzz around your skill set,** be it control expert or design diva. Post on social media how you use your skills. You may be the best of breed at what you do, but if no one knows it, they won't seek you out.
- ★ **Encourage immediate social feedback** from clients on projects, plus record the “results” of your assistance. Do it daily, 3 to 6 times.
- ★ **Engage with the public based on social listening.** This means following the posted conversations within social groups or your targeted client personas focused on lighting-specific topics. In these venues, you freely contribute your subject matter expertise in a way that unearths opportunities and creates relationships that never would have happened otherwise. Similarly, the content you produce and share must appeal to your broad customer base and not be salesy.

EMPATHY: THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC

Empathy is an essential trait for every successful sales team to develop. Selling with this understanding begins with the desire to connect with people and flourishes with the needed practice to increase the skill. To be successful with empathy, you must feel the emotions that customers are experiencing — from the situation they are in now through every point of their buying journey.

Empathy cannot be faked well or for very long, and it only works when there is a genuine personal interest in understanding and helping the clients wherever they are in their personal sales journey, not where you may like them to be. To win using empathy is to be adaptive to the client. It is more than modeling moods and emotions. Empathy goes beyond having the knowledge of what the clients might be feeling; it means feeling what they are feeling based on active listening and your previous experiences.

AND THERE IS MORE!

There are many more characteristics that sales stars have and employ than I can detail in this column.

One of the most important is being organized and applies to notes, customer contact info, order follow up, and client retention. You need to know when to reach out to a client, and what you want them to know or remember about you.

“Passion” and “Self-Motivation” are two key traits that are foundational to search for when hiring new team members and when expanding an existing team. As the rules of commerce change many parts of our go-to-market strategies, both passion and self-motivation will become increasingly important.

Lastly, to remain relevant in the future, both companies and individuals must continuously transform the way we look and operate in our professional lives. Real pros continue — and even actively seek out — their professional development. What is the last sales book you have read? When was the last time your sales team went to an off-site training? Product knowledge is essential, but can your team sell the advantages of your company and the benefits of your select vendors?

Nothing in the sales world is stagnant anymore. As we prepare for business in 2019, keep in mind to maintain your applicable talents plus build new skills.

As always, *happy selling!* ♦

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