

A SUCCESSFUL SALESMAN FEATURES: FROM NEEDED TALENTS TO A GENERIC MODEL OF COMPETENCE

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It is very important to know the needed features of a successful salesman in order to recruit and select the most suitable persons for such a job. If the native talents are imperative in a view of getting high performance, then qualification, experience and knowledge also have an important role. They are an intensifier of individual talents in order to develop them and convert them in competence. In this paper we intend to refer to the employment of a salesman that belongs to the commercial domain. The present paper tries to identify the needed features of a salesman for accomplishing high performance.

Keywords: talent, competence, high performance, salesman

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1. Salesman: the multiple facets of an employment

According to an old saying, „every one earns his existence selling something”. If we take into consideration the fact that most of us are employed, earning a salary and at a certain time we were in the position of being a salesman of our own abilities, the above approach doesn't seem to exaggerate.

In order to be able to delineate the area of the present issue, we started from the definitions and the descriptions of this occupation, which shows us which are the attributions and the responsibilities that are required, and then we focused to the necessary talents and competences for being able to practice successfully in such position.

A concise definition of a salesman is given in Wikipedia Encyclopedia, according which a salesperson is a person employed to sale different products or services.¹²⁶

According to Robert N. McMurry, the salesman term covers a wide range of functions, where there are more differences than similarities. Thus, a salesman can belong to one of these categories:

- *Supplier*, having as a main responsibility the delivery of products.
- *Receptor*, with the responsibility of taking over the orders for products.
- *Missionary*, when the salesman visits the clients to consolidate the company reputation that he represents.
- *Engineer*, a position that emphasizes the salesman's technical knowledge.
- *Demand creator*, position that requires presentation in a creative way of tangible and intangible products, in order to market them.¹²⁷

This list encompasses positions from the sales department, requiring often different creativity degrees, starting from lower levels to higher ones. The first ones require the employees to offer services to the clients and to take over their new orders, while the latter ones pretend that the potential clients should be searched and influenced to buy.

According to the employment standard of a salesman, developed by COSA (Council of Occupational Standards and Certification), his responsibilities are the market prospectation to be able to identify the main sales opportunities, the negotiation of the sale conditions with potential buyers, creating the sale conditions and the exposition of sale object, monitoring the clients and their satisfaction, and also ensuring service and merchandising activities.¹²⁸

In order to accomplish successfully the activity, the salesman must have some competences such as interactive communication, team-working, daily individual activities planning, promoting firm image, professional development, selling specific products, merchandising, negotiation and others.

Although there is a wide opinion, according to which everyone can be a salesman anywhere, the practice reveals that it is totally unrealistic.

Not every person is able to sell because the constant success in salesman career requires some born talents.

2. Sales myths

¹²⁶ <http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agent-de-vanzari>

¹²⁷ McMurry, R., The Mystique of Super – Salesmanship, Harvard Business Review, după Kotler, Ph., Managementul marketingului, Editura Teora, București, p. 873.

¹²⁸ <http://cnfpa.ro>

There are some prejudgments about the sales efficiency. They are wrong beliefs regarding the determinants of the success, like the following myths.

The educational and the experience myth promote the idea that graduated courses and experience years influence miraculously the performance in the sales field. Even if their important role can't be denied, the Gallup's researches have emphasized that not the postgraduate degrees and longevity on the job make the difference between an excellent salesman and a medium one, but talents developed in a proper job.

The „good salesman can sell everything” myth leads us to the aggressive sales. The sale doesn't consist only in the drawing on customers and determining them to buy something they are not interested in. It is a process that a salesman develops for the client or with the client in order to discover their needs and desires.¹²⁹ This myth may also have another interpretation. We can see that if a salesman was efficient in a company selling some products, he will have the same success in another company, selling other products. In reality, there are considerable differences regarding style and the necessary abilities for a real estate salesman and a pharmaceuticals products salesman.

The money myth asserts the idea that the salesmen's main motivation is to get important earnings. But the researches show that different salesmen have different motivations. Some of them are often animated by their desire of being important or their competition spirit; others have a feeling of accomplishment when they succeed to save a company in difficult financial situation.

People need certain skills in order to be successful in a profession. In the sales field, these refer to the ability of solving clients' problems, of establishing lucrative social relationships, of having influence on others, the ability of planning the job in order to keep engagements to the clients.

3. The required talents of salesmen

The dictionary of psychology defines the talent as being a special ability in a field, like engineering, science, art and so on. Relying on some natural maximal dispositions of the organism, the talent is an aptitude, a natural or gained superiority of doing something. The talent emerges early, develops mostly up to 20 and often has longevity.¹³⁰

To define the talent in the sales field is ineffable because this talent doesn't exist as such. More precisely, there isn't just one talent in this field. The native talents of the great salesmen may be totally different from person to person.

In a developed research relying on thousands interviews of sales department representatives, the Gallup organization's goal was to identify the features and the talents of the greatest salesmen of different companies in order to help them to hire only the individuals who could become "stars".

The Gallup researchers found out that these talents may be grouped in zones, that we called *themes*. A theme is a grouping of features and talents that together become an individual's strength establishing a certain approach of his work.

After a fine analysis of the data base, thirty-four themes have been selected and widely described in a Benson Smith and Tony Rutigliano's book.¹³¹

These *talent zones* are presented using examples of specific features and behaviors as following:

Activator. He is anxious to action; doesn't need all information at once; believe that action is the best way to learn; always brings new ideas; has no patience with long meetings.

Adaptability. Although has plans, he shows availability for solving present problems; a very flexible person, which can be efficient when he is called on different actions at once.

Analytical. He considers himself as an objective and impartial person; has many information for making decisions; deeply researches until he find the determinant cause of a problem. A logical and compelling person.

Competition. He is naturally aware of others' competences; makes comparisons between him and others; likes the competitions where he can get the first place.

Communication. He likes to explain, describe, to be a host, to speak in public, to write; is able to animate with images and metaphors the simplest idea; wants the information sent by him to be retained.

Leadership. He likes to take control and impose his point of view; isn't afraid of confrontations, but, on the contrary, considers it as the first step of solving a problem; feels that he must present the facts and the truth no matter how disagreeable are; makes the others to take risks as soon as a goal was established, he will be restless until everyone around him will be mobilized.

Discipline. Because he likes everything around to be organized and planned, he establishes naturally rules and a structure for the surrounding environment. He focuses on scheduled activities and deadlines. He doesn't like surprises and is impatient with mistakes.

129 <http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Management/6234/Mituri-despre-vanzari>

130 Șchiopu, U., *Dicționar de psihologie*, Editura Babel, București, 1997, p. 682.

131 Smith, B., Rutigliano, T, quoted paper.

Empathy. He can feel the others' emotions like his own feelings. He doesn't necessary agree with the others' opinions, but he understands them. When other people cannot express themselves, he easily finds the right words and tone.

Organizing. When he faces a complex situation that involves a lot of factors, he likes to analyze again and again, aligning and realigning until he is sure they are the most efficiently hierarchical distributed. He is able to assume the responsibility of some big projects and to simplify them.

Accomplisher. The individual feels that everyday, until the end of the day, must accomplish something tangible in a view of feeling well. In his soul is burning a flame that makes him to aim always more. It is the energy source for working all day without feeling tired.

Responsibility. This individual needs to recognize "the psychological paternity" for any action where is involved and, no matter important or not important, he feels obliged to accomplish the task. He has a strong consciousness and is guide by unimpeachable ethical values.

All the thirty-four themes of the above research were found at the interviewed salesmen, but none of them had the same talents. Most people have some themes, not many, which are more intense than others'. These are the definitive themes or the ruling talent zones. But, consequently everyone has themes with medium intensity and hardly observable themes.

For salesmen, being aware of the definitive themes means the ability of finding the best approach of their jobs. This kind of knowledge can help them to improve a sales style, where they can use constantly their natural talents.

4. A generic model of competence for the sales personnel

Even if the presence of a talent to an individual may predict his success in a certain field, he will not reach a high efficiency until he will be competent. Being competent is more than having a natural talent, but undeveloped. In order to become competent in a field, besides talent, education and experience are required.

The competence represents knowledge, personal abilities and features required in a view of accomplishing an activity, and the applying way of these attributes.¹³² Abilities and knowledge are just potential competences until they are proved by carrying in to effect through behavior. They will be put to account depending on the individual's motivations, values and self-image.

To be competent in an occupation requires: to apply technical knowledge; to analyze and to make decisions; to use creativity; to work as a team member; to efficiently communicate; to adapt to the environment, where the job takes place; to cope unforeseen situations.¹³³

Distinctive competences of the salesmen, who achieve high performances, vary with order-sending cycle's length and complexity (interactions number and the time between first client contact and sale accomplishment), product features and consumer type.¹³⁴ The features of sales positions with short, medium and long order-sending cycle are presented in table 2.

Table no. 1 The features of sales positions varying with order-sending cycle's length¹³⁵

Short	Medium	Long
Retail	Some retails, more industrial sales	Complex and industrial sales
One buyer	Usually one buyer or a small group.	Many buying influences
Personal impact	Low or medium impact on business	Strong impact on client business
Short interactions, usually, once	Short interactions, but recurrent	Complex and long relations; deep involvement in client decisions
A great many clients	Many clients	A few clients
Small sales income per sale	Medium sales income per sale	Great sales income per sale
Frequent denials	The denial number varies	Rare denials
Varied products, easy assembly	Other sellers offer similar products	Technical complex products, which can be customized; assisted assembly.

132 Adkin, E, Jones, G., Leighton, P., Resurse umane – ghid propus de The Economist Books, Editura Nemira, București, 1999, p. 53.

133 <http://cnfpa.ro>

134 Spencer, L.M., Spencer, S.M., Competence at Work, John Whiley& Sons Inc., New York, 1993, p. 171.

135 Idem, pg. 112.

Starting from the present models reanalysis and combining the results of a research, that included representatives from over 200 job types, L.M. Spencer and S.M. Spencer have developed a generic model of competence for the sales personnel, widely described alongside other competence types, in “Competence at Work”.¹³⁶ The model presented in table no. 3 includes some competences that tell the high performance salesmen from the mediocre ones.

Table no. 2 Generic model of competence for salesmen¹³⁷

Relative importance	Competence
x x x x x x x x x	Impact and influence
x x x x x	Orientation to accomplishment
x x x x x	Initiative
x x x	Interpersonal skill
x x x	Orientation to the client’s requirements
x x x	Self confidence
x x	Building relationships
x x	Analytical thinking
x x	Conceptual thinking
x x	Information search
x x	Organizational conscience
Basic requirement	Technical expertise

The number of “x” symbols from the table shows the importance of the respective competence.

Impact and influence. Influencing others in a view of buying products needs most of the salesmen time. It is very important when the selling takes place in an intercultural environment. The salesman addresses to the client understanding the most important needs and problems. The “impact and influence” competence is more important in long sales cycles than in the medium and short ones. In the case of industrial buying, the salesman will thoroughly prepare the presentation offering a lot of technical data and emphasizing the product’s advantages.

Orientation to accomplishment. Even less frequently mentioned than “impact and influence”, the orientation to accomplishment may be more important for high performance. The researches emphasize the important role of accomplishment need for sales personnel.

The orientation to accomplishment starts with a great self-management: choosing provocative goals, but achievable, using efficiently the time and “enjoying” the competition.

The orientation to accomplishment, which had the highest frequencies in the medium sales cycles, requires personal efficiency, improving the operations for clients, cost-benefit analysis and, sometimes, assuming calculated risks.

The initiative often takes the shape of tenacity and perseverance to the salesmen: they try again and again, in different ways, working many hours and not giving up in front of denial.

In the long and medium sales cycles, the initiative includes identifying opportunities, immediate action, facing the competition threats and, altogether, doing more than the job requires.

Interpersonal skill is the ability of understanding others’ skills, interests, needs and perspectives and translating non-verbal behavior. Interpersonal understanding is used in order to explain or specify someone behavior, to influence or to better meet the clients’ requirements.

In the long sales cycles, a high performing salesman needs sometime to coordinate the effort of some persons (technical experts, finance person) working in a team. In this case, what distinguishes the high performing salesman is his ability of accommodating the colleagues to the clients, using his sensitivity both for colleagues’ style and the client one.

Orientation to the client serving varies from prompt and courteous attend to the assuming his consulting role in important decisions. The essence of the orientation to the client serving is the allocation of the necessary time for finding out the consumer real needs and their adjustment to the offered products and services, making an extra effort for satisfying consumers’ needs.

A high performing salesman often is the client’s confident consultant. As a consequence he must be very familiar both the product’s characteristics and the client’s business.

Self confidence, expressed by a confident attitude to challenging situations, is the dominant personality feature of the salesmen. It seems that it is the main feature in the models where the technical expertise is less important.

136 Spencer L.M., Spencer S.M. – quoted paper.

137 ibidem.

In the short sales cycles, where there are many denials, the high performing salesman doesn't feel sorry for denials and most often attributes the failure to external causes or doesn't explain it at all. On the contrary, the medium performer usually looks for possible reasons why he lost the sale.

Building relationships is usually considered an important part of the sale activity. This is true for some product types selling, especially the daily-use products. The selling of high technology products and the selling consulting depend less on building relationships and more on technical expertise and post-selling services.

Analytical thinking. In long sales cycles and financial transactions, the analytical thinking may require problems solving, technical processes or improving processes for the consumer. Otherwise, the competence content refers to how to understand and influence the client. Analytical thinking of sales personnel has in general a medium level of complexity.

Conceptual thinking. This competence was most often found as basic to moderate level at salesmen. Nevertheless, some top executives have build theories and strategies very complex in order to influence the client-organization.

Searching information about products, clients, potential consumers, their needs and competition is a constitutive part of every sales model.

Technical expertise. In the retail trade, technical expertise is assimilated by the search for superior knowledge about products. In intermediate sales, the technical knowledge wasn't mentioned as distinct competence of high performers. A certain level of expertise is still required for keeping the job, but the additional knowledge doesn't differentiate a high performing salesman from a mediocre one. In long sales cycles, the technical expertise is an essential requirement.

Conclusions

Regarding the accomplishing of high performances, the salesman needs:

- to identify his own talents, the specific features that could become strengths if they are properly developed;
- proper specialty training;
- experience in that field for consolidating the strengths and developing a selling style where he can use invariably his naturally talents;
- to apply efficiently the acquired knowledge and experience, adapting him to the work environment, using his creativity and the ability of making decisions in order to face unforeseen situations.

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