



Mind the gap

PETER BRENT and BETH ROGERS present new research suggesting that salespeople rate themselves somewhat higher than their customers do

You have to be confident to be a salesperson, but there can be an unhealthy gap between how good salespeople and their managers think they are, and how good the buying professionals they meet think they are.

This article, based on research from Mathieson Brent, explores the uncomfortable territory of this persistent sales skills gap.

Have you ever wondered why, with the same product portfolio, the same training and similar territories, some salespeople always seem to do better than others? What is it about the more successful that gives them that edge? It is not always possible when hiring sales staff to predict exactly who would have that ability to perform ahead of the pack. It is not always the person with superb interpersonal skills, or the one who is most diligent in territory planning and recording visits. And while there has been plenty of research undertaken into successful strategic account management behaviours, very little research has previously been undertaken on field sales, despite the proportionally larger budgets for most business-to-business sales operations.

There are also different views or perspectives on sales performance. Are we looking to achieve and reward solid annual growth or do we seek and reward spectacular sales growth in one region, which will carry the whole? What do our customers want to see? How are we performing against our competitors? Similarly, how are the companies themselves judged by customers and is a superbly performing sales team holding up the standing of a mediocre company, or vice versa?

We decided to investigate the perceived best sales behaviours as experienced by sales professionals, their managers and by their customers. Initially we conducted qualitative interviews with a total of 18 sales professionals from four suppliers across a range of seniorities. We asked questions about how they view themselves and their selling behaviours and subsequently repeated these questions with their managers and customers. This research enabled us to construct five key areas of 'behaviour' or 'attributes':

- **Immediate behaviours** – appearance, attentiveness, punctuality
- **Demonstrating sales skills** – communication skills,

listening skills and relationship building ability

- **Demonstrating personal qualities** – integrity and reliability
- **Demonstrating knowledge** – product knowledge and own firm's capabilities, knowledge of industry and markets, knowledge of customer's business
- **Demonstrating application** – entrepreneurial, able to understand and interpret customer needs and construct creative solutions.

We heard from both the supplier and customer interviews stories of superb salesmanship — and some examples of dreadful performance. We also learnt that success from the customer perspective was based on the ability of the salesperson to apply knowledge, skills and personal attributes to solve customers' problems.

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THE VIEW FROM THE SUPPLIER

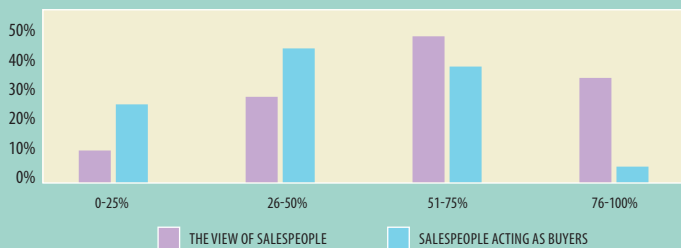
Before the second stage of the research on the view from the customer side, we wanted to establish what behaviours would lead to success according to salespeople and sales managers. An online survey tool was set up and a relevant database was used to approach potential respondents.

On analysis, we found no real differences across the size of the supplier company, length of sales cycle or seniority in sales roles. When salespeople are operating in their selling role, there is general agreement that 'demonstrating knowledge' and 'demonstrating application' are their two most important skills. The remaining three constructs of 'immediate behaviours', 'sales skills' and 'personal qualities' are also important, but more or less taken for granted.

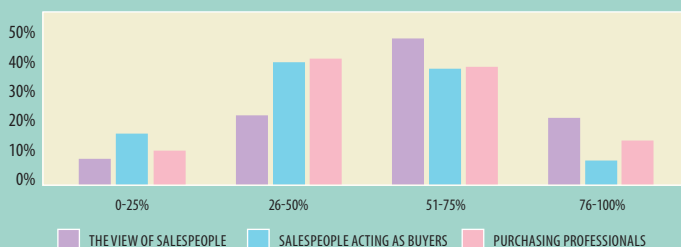
In a question on the proportion of salespeople who met the description of 'successful salesperson', there was an interesting difference among respondents. All the supplier-side respondents were sales professionals and when in a pure selling role reported that most salespeople in their organisation were either good or very good. But among salespeople and sales managers who also had some buying responsibilities for their organisation, most thought that only one-third met the criteria of a successful salesperson.

The results show that either the sales teams of the respondents are uniquely of high quality or that acting the role of buyer produces a sharper critique of those salespeople they meet... ➤

WHAT PROPORTION OF SALESPEOPLE IN YOUR ORGANISATION FITS YOUR PROFILE OF 'A SUCCESSFUL SALESPERSON'?



WHAT PROPORTION OF SALESPEOPLE YOU MEET FITS YOUR 'SUCCESSFUL' PROFILE



◀ THE VIEW FROM THE CUSTOMER

With the help of the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS) we asked purchasing professionals their views on the salespeople they meet. We asked purchasers to rate their experience with Class A suppliers (the vital few), Class B (the medium or normal priority suppliers) and Class C, (those which provided generic products and services). The results from the Class A and B suppliers were almost identical and have been combined. Class C suppliers were usually dealt with on the phone or Internet and no responses in this category were solicited.

Purchasing professionals rated 'demonstrating knowledge' and 'demonstrating application' as jointly most significant. Over 50% of their points allocation went to these two areas, with the remaining being spread fairly evenly across 'immediate behaviours', 'sales skills' and 'personal attributes'. This is not to say that the latter three areas were not important at all, but what purchasers really wanted from salespeople was product, industry and company knowledge. Second, buyers wanted salespeople to be able to apply that knowledge to their situation, to arrive at acceptable solutions.

The buyers' view of salespeople is harsher than that of salespeople themselves. However, when salespeople are acting as buyers, their view of the salespeople that they meet is closely aligned with that of buyers — perhaps they are even more stringent in their demands.

What's happening here? It would appear that the role of purchaser is determining how the salespeople are seen, and that the closest viewpoint to that of a customer

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is gained by those sales professionals who also act in a buyer role. From our findings, sales managers should be aware that there is something about the nature of buying which means that buyers may have a more critical view of the sales team than they do. This could be the buyer's perception of their responsibility to manage risk, and their expectation that the supplier and their sales representative should help them to do that.

THE WORST SALESPEOPLE

Our research shows that, from the buyers' perspective, the worst salespeople perform poorly on 'demonstrating application'. In other words, they cannot present a cogent and reasonable case for the buyer to purchase the product or service. In short, salespeople underestimate the importance of 'knowledge' and 'application' to buyers and overestimate their performance in these areas, relative to buyers' perceptions.

Few buyers are saying that most of the salespeople they see are poor, but there is an impression that salespeople in general are not constructing suitable arguments to help buyers purchase from their firms.

Buyers are under pressure to find solutions to their problems, so if a supplier sends out a relatively new salesperson, there is a likelihood that they will not be successful until all-round knowledge is acquired. Even when salespeople do have great knowledge, they have to be skilled in listening carefully to the buyer's requirements and presenting acceptable solutions.

WHAT ELSE DO BUYERS WANT?

Further questions to buyers indicated that salespeople contribute about 10% of the total value that buyers expect from a supplier. A combination of consistently high product quality and delivery add more than 40% combined to the buyers' perception of a supplier. Buyers seem to be rather underwhelmed by the 'brand values' or marketing persona of a supplier but rate technical support and overall ease of doing business. Again surprisingly, the focus of senior management of a supplier on a buyer's business may be interesting, but rates slightly lower in buyers' eyes than having the attentions of good salespeople.

SALESPEOPLE WITHIN THE COMPANY AS A WHOLE

We asked buyers about their attitudes towards salespeople who are either 'good' but working for an inferior company or 'poor' and working for a good company. In the case of a good salesperson with a poor supplier, it is unlikely for both Class A and B suppliers that a good individual performance can hold together a good relationship with a customer if the supplier's performance is poor. In the reverse case, buyers are likely to continue a relationship with a good supplier if the salesperson is considered poor and will simply try to work around that individual. Even so, as many as 30% of buyers felt that they would be unlikely to stay with a good supplier with a poorly performing salesperson.

The message is clear. Good salespeople should quit working for companies with poor products/services, while poor salespeople should be retrained or weeded out of companies with good products and operations.

MEASUREMENT AND REWARD

Salespeople are most likely to be measured and rewarded on the sales volume they create, and also on profitability and sales growth. They are less likely to be measured on customer satisfaction and, surprisingly, customer retention. Given the harsh economic climate, and the costs of gaining new customers, it is surprising that customer retention is not measured more widely and that keeping customers is rewarded so little.

Asking buyers about how they are measured and rewarded yielded some interesting and different responses. Buyers are measured on three groups of metrics: first, reductions in purchasing costs and number of suppliers; second, on supplier performance for delivery and quality; and third, on the satisfaction of their company's customers. Overall, buyers are much less likely to be individually rewarded and more likely to receive a bonus or an award as part of the team or as part of a total company award or bonus scheme. Clearly, there is an opportunity for suppliers to help buyers achieve things that matter to their performance.

There is an interesting contrast here between individually rewarded salespeople, who are not generally receiving any award for customer retention, and buyers who generally receive group awards. Salespeople and their managers may like to bear that in mind when facing their buyers. Buyers' distrust of individual rewards to salespeople, particularly if not based on customer satisfaction, probably influences their behaviour.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR SALES MANAGERS?

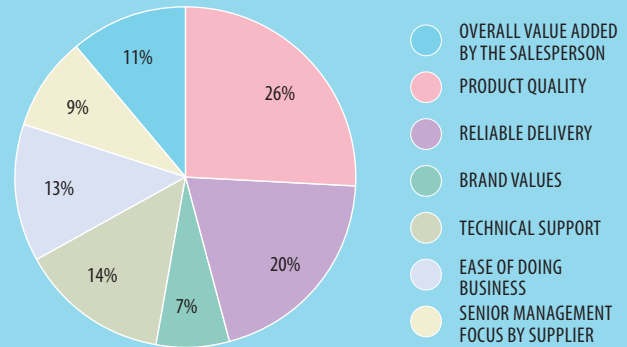
Field salespeople are key employees in achieving sales growth and customer satisfaction. Buyers have indicated in this survey that they regard good all-round knowledge of products, supplier capability and the industry in general as absolutely key to success. Of equal importance is the ability of the salesperson to use all their knowledge and associated skills and attributes to create and communicate solutions to the buyers' problems.

This research should give sales managers food for thought about sales training and development. While training in sales skills and associated communication, listening and other skills is very important, supplying companies must also ensure that the product knowledge of their salespeople is up to date and augmented by a complete understanding of the capabilities of their firm, matched with a good understanding of the customer's industry sector and the issues facing it.

It is difficult to train salespeople to create customised solutions that also look realistic to operational and finance people. Customised implies changes to pricing, service plans or product modification. In times past, with hierarchies of senior salespeople, sales supervisors and area sales managers, there were more experienced sales professionals to work with individual field salespeople to help them develop their skills, especially in proposing good solutions.

Even though business pressures conspire to make group sales meetings less frequent and sales managers have less time to work with reporting staff, the coaching of field sales staff to achieve better solutions is as important as ever. Online coaching might be a helpful way of expanding coaching capacity. Equally, operations and finance have a role to play in mentoring salespeople.

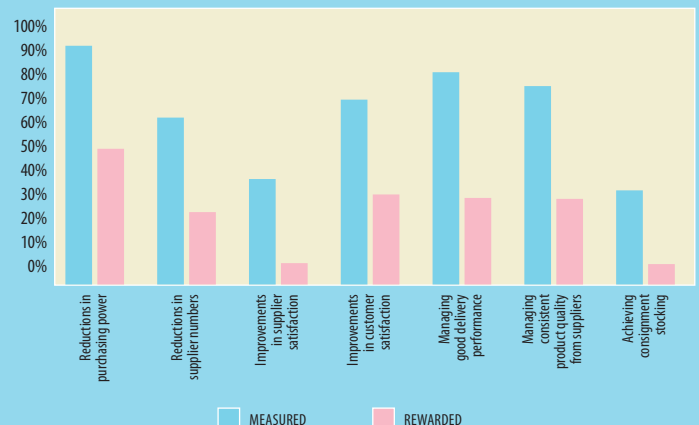
THE VALUE ADDED, AS PERCEIVED BY BUYERS



HOW SALESPEOPLE ARE MEASURED AND REWARDED



HOW PURCHASING PROFESSIONALS ARE MEASURED AND REWARDED



KEY TAKEAWAY

If salespeople think that they are better than buyers do, should anyone be surprised? Salespeople need to be confident, and there is obviously something about the buying role that prompts the buying decision-makers to be critical. Even sales managers, when in a buying role, thought less of the salespeople they met. So the key takeaway from this research is that sales managers should be examining ways to close that gap, by assessing their sales staff and developing knowledgeable and creative sales teams that are appreciated by the buyers.

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