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How ‘cracking the code’ of a secret belief system is boosting sales

Author credit: Ben Laker, Mark Ridley

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“Much thought and attention is given to the techniques of the successful salesperson. But what about the belief systems?” ask Ben Laker and Mark Ridley, partners at Transform Performance International.

What are the attitudes and views that underpin consistently high achievement in sales, and how can anyone in sales use this knowledge to help their business grow?

Described by internationally acclaimed author Daniel Pink as “an essential read”, the recent Transform Performance International research study (www.salespersons-secret-code.com) found that all salespeople have five life and career “destination beliefs” – feeling personally fulfilled, maintaining control over their work, remaining resilient, influencing others and communicating effectively – that drive them towards achieving success.

However, while all salespeople hold the same beliefs, the research has shown that the top 5pc interpret these beliefs in a particular way as they travel in their life and career journey towards their destination.

The various interpretations of destination beliefs are called journey motivators and the differences they cause in thinking and behaviour are evident in the success of top performers. Business development professionals at leading global companies such as Deloitte, Vodafone and JP Morgan have revealed how the way they interpret and live out the journey motivators have benefited their organisations hugely.

Let’s just be clear what we mean by “sales”. In this context, we mean anyone who is tasked with helping to develop business by improving the adoption and expansion of the product or service their company offers. This might be selling to consumers or selling to other businesses.

All companies have growth plans and anyone involved in sales embarks on a journey to hit those targets, often year in, year out. If they remain ignorant about what is motivating them and the impact this can have on their behaviour, they are not only blindly getting in the driving seat of their career; they are stepping on the accelerator before they know where they are heading.

For decades, many companies have operated on the basic assumption that by upskilling their sellers whatever their job title – account manager, sales executive or global vice-president – increased sales numbers would follow as surely as night follows day.

But when you think about it, any initiative that improves capabilities and improves education is likely to have some impact. Doing something is clearly better than doing nothing. In today’s world, this approach is no longer enough.

Arguably upskilling in the financial services industry has been the root cause of too many scandals, from pensions to PPI misselling. This has resulted in regulation on an unprecedented scale and it is still expanding.

Customers are infinitely more sophisticated than they were 30 years ago. They know when they are being sold to and they have often already gathered product insight from a webpage before they even meet a sales agent.

Whether consciously or not, today's customers want more than a talking brochure. They want to feel a connection; they want their part in the buying process acknowledged. They are looking for signals from those they engage with that there is a desire for the customer's greater good and an absence of pure self-interest.

In short, they want to have it acknowledged either tacitly or openly that the sale (whatever its nature) exists to bring benefit to both parties. More than ever, successful selling has to involve a clear understanding between customer and seller about why the seller does what they do, and how it is important to them. It is no longer a matter of just opening the brochure – if it ever really was.

The research that revealed The Salesperson's Secret Code made it clear that those who want to sell more and sell better can no longer simply work longer hours or take more training courses.

They must understand what it is that motivates them to succeed and how this is manifest in their behaviours. Then they can compare their operating style with the best of the best and make the adjustments in a mindset that will cause a shift in how they view their own role and cause changes in the way customers regard them.

And if you think this does not matter, consider this statistic: about 25pc of sales opportunities die because customers fail to make decisions to purchase. They may need the goods or service, but they are unconvinced by the seller.

The global world product, according to the World Bank, is around \$80 trillion. But if 25pc of opportunities go begging, there must be at least \$20 trillion of business deals languishing.

Analysts at Forrester believe that this gap is caused in large part by buyers being disappointed by self-interested, non-collaborative and incurious sellers. The top 5pc, as revealed in The Salesperson's Secret Code, are the ones who do not leave opportunity on the table.

Take fulfilment, the first destination belief in The Salesperson's Secret Code, for example. The research showed that all salespeople share a desire for personal fulfilment that drives them towards success.

Two journey motivators were unearthed – a fear of failure and a desire to be the best they could possibly be. In all cases, lower-performing people were driven to a greater degree by fear of failing than they were by the prospect of success.

But the real nugget of gold was understanding where the optimal intensity between these two journey motivators lay. Where was the ideal journey motivator balance?

Too much fear of failure and you are paralysed. Too much need to be fulfilled for the sake of it and you are unfocused, self-indulgent. It was no surprise when the data was analysed that those who believe in simply striving to be a better human being also ended up at the lower end of the performance curve.

But beliefs about fulfilment are one aspect of The Salesperson's Secret Code. Each of the five destination beliefs is interlinked, which means salespeople must understand what they are, the differing journey motivators that drive people towards satisfying them, and the optimal intensity of each journey motivator.

At that point, salespeople will have cracked the code. They will have achieved beliefs and motivations aligned to the top performers. It is now their choice about how they live out those newly balanced beliefs. And that is the most exciting part of the journey ahead.

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