

Current perspectives in sales

Why salespeople thrive in one sales environment and fail in another

"A good salesperson can sell anything to anyone." True or false?

The statement infers a salesperson who has mastered the skill of selling, possess the ability to convince any person to buy any product or service.

This is a myth.

The statement may have had credence decades ago when the business world was simpler, but today's selling/buying environment is more complex, clients are better informed and have considerably more choice.

Let us digress for a moment and look at the sport of cricket. The game has been played at an international level for over 130 years. In that time, one player, Don Bradman, was the stand-out batsman. His batting average was 99.94. To appreciate the magnitude of this achievement only three cricketers have scored an average of over 60 and none over 61. This is despite the professionalization of the sport, and the dramatic improvement in technology that allows players to hit harder and longer than in Don's time. Bradman was undoubtedly an exceptional performer.¹

Like other bat and ball games, cricket requires bowlers. Bradman did bowl and took 36 wickets at first class level. His bowling average was 37.97. Not bad for a part time or change bowler – but not good enough to be selected to play at state level – let alone a national team.

Don Bradman was an outstanding cricketer, as a batsman. Whilst there have been outstanding all-rounders - players who have exceptional skills in both batting and bowling, but these cricketers are rare. The point is, even the best at a given sport are only good at one facet of that sport.

The Don Bradman analogy is also true for extraordinarily successful salespeople. Salespeople with a specific set of skills selling a product/service within a sales environment best suited to them can be outstanding performers. However, when placed in a different sales environment selling a different product/service, their performance can drop to below average. Being in the wrong sales environment can also create psychological problems and impact on self-worth, motivation and in extreme cases a sales career. So why will a salesperson change their sales environment?

¹ Reference Bradman's stats

There are two main reasons:

1. Unaware there are different sales environments and the risk associated with change
2. Advice given by others who are equally uninformed.

Sales environments - an introduction

Any product or service can be matched to one of four distinct sales environments. Salespeople who consistently produce a high level of sales outcomes have the skills and attributes aligned to their matching sales environment. For a sales manager to be most effective their skills set needs to correspond in the same way.

The days when a salesperson had all the product knowledge are long gone. Search engine technology and social media provide the client with instant information about a product/service and its corresponding competitor products/services. Changes have impacted on how marketing, leadership, governance, and other business functions operate. However, few changes have happened in business-to-business sales roles.

Sales trainers and course designers have introduced a multitude of sales programs including but not limited to strategic selling; relationship selling; consultative selling; conceptual selling; visionary selling and smarter selling. Whilst most of these concepts may add to the growing body of knowledge, many contain similar theories and or use content comparable to that developed in the 1960 and 70's. For example, '*close early and close often.*' To rely solely on sales technique in more sophisticated and complex sales settings will result in failure.

A sales environment is influenced by core elements including:

The customer/client's need and knowledge

A customer/client's knowledge and experience with a product/service can range from none to extensive. A product/service value can be critical to a business's success or at the other extreme it could be a commodity. Depending on these variables a salesperson needs to be aware of their individual customer/client's past and present exposure to their and or competitor product/service.

Product complexity and need for product/service support

Depending on the product/service the sales process can be straightforward involving one sales call to the decision maker. No or minimal post sales service may be required. In other industries sales calls will involve multiple contacts within the organisation over an extended period before confirmation is possible. Strategic account management often follows.

The product or service life cycle

The product/service life cycle can be new to the market and therefore somewhat unknown. Alternatively, it may have been around for many years, well known by customer/clients and become a commodity and near the end of its life cycle? The optimum selling strategy is determined by the product/service fit in relation to its life cycle.

The competitive environment

A salesperson's products/services are compared by analysing external and or internal competitors. External competitors are the salesperson's most common and the internal competitor occurs when the client uses their own resources. In the latter the customer/client becomes a competitor. The number of people involved in the decision process can add complexity and increase the selling/buying cycle. External competitor behaviour can be aggressive to low key.

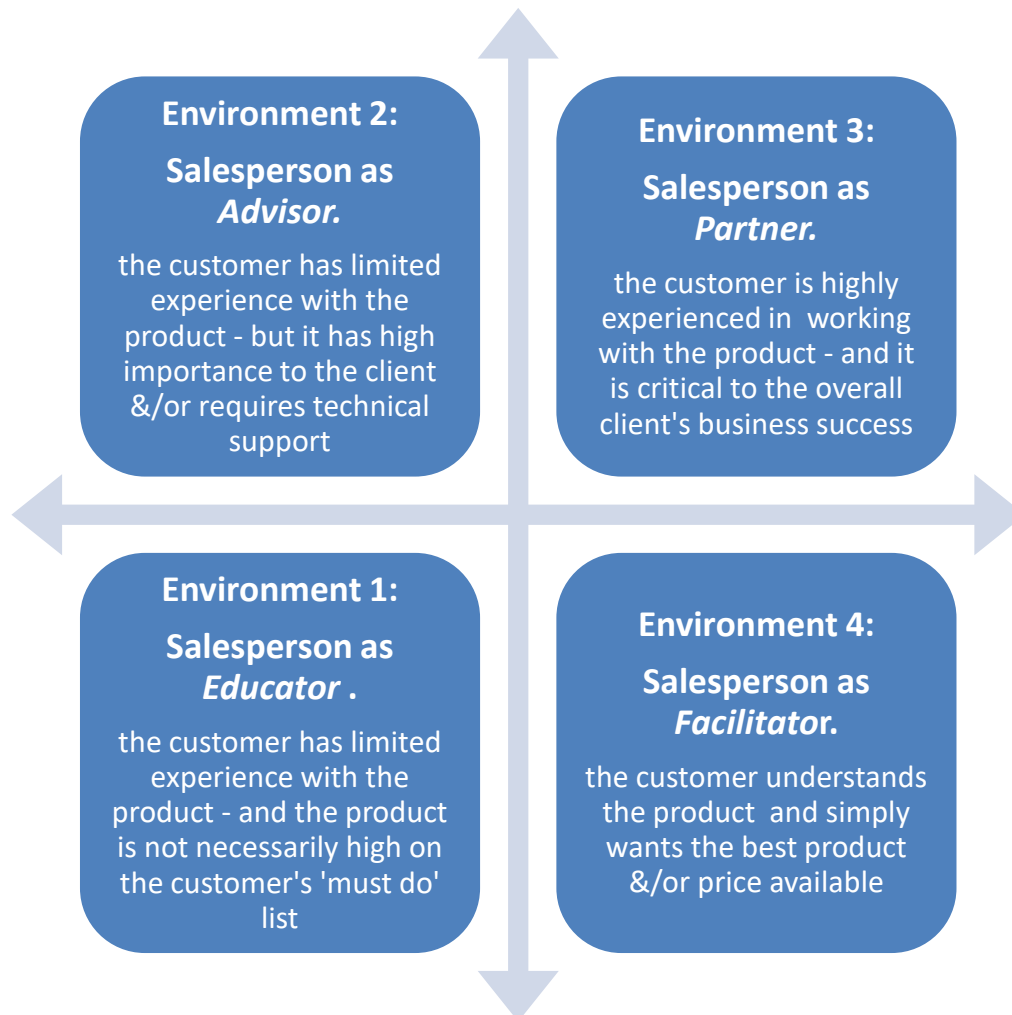
The salesperson's natural sales style

Most salespeople have two sales style patterns with one being dominant. There is no sales style pattern better than another, but a salesperson needs to know their sales style to understand how they sell and their natural communication manner. This may not necessary be compatible with how the customer/client wants to buy so the salesperson needs to shift their style accordingly. Lack of style shifting ability is the core reason why many salespeople fail.

The salesperson's competence

This is the ability to use a sales process, match with the buying process, and apply the required skills and strategies.

Sales attributes need to be in line with one of four sales environments to maximize effectiveness. These are:



Environment 1

The product/service is new to the market or has been available and not known to the customer/client. The salesperson has a short-term advantage over their competitors and a limited window of opportunity to sell as much volume as possible until a similar product/service is offered by competitors. The profit margin in Environment 1 is high because for a period of time there is no market pressure from competitors to reduce prices. This provides the company with an opportunity to recoup some or all of it's investment in research, development and set up costs.

Industry examples: Apple's first release of the iPad, door to door industrial chemicals and some domestic financial services.

Sales Style

The salesperson working in this environment has an Action/Expressive Sales Style. This doesn't preclude other selling styles from being successful but the tendency is these traits. This salesperson is confident in their ability and has a strong work ethic. When there are sales obstacles or high sales targets to achieve they increase their energy and sales activity to meet the demand. Their behaviour toward sales support people can be confrontational and aggressive particularly when under pressure. Some clients may feel intimidated by their bold and assertive manner.

Selling Skills

The successful salesperson in this sales environment has perfected the following skills:

1. Business Development. Much of their time is spent seeking new business. They enjoy the hunt and uncovering new sales opportunities.
2. Qualifying. They qualify early in the sales process because they don't waste their time with a person who hasn't the authority to purchase.
3. Presentation. Prior to a major sales presentation they plan for potential sales objections and rehearse until they feel confident and competent. Their aim is to project a professional image to increase their chances of a confirmed sale.
4. Sales objections. They know and practise handling every possible sales objection. The less experienced salesperson can appear defensive in front of a customer/client if they haven't been through this rigour.
5. Closing. Their self-worth is high so they expect to win the business. Coming second isn't an option for them.
6. Follow-up. This is mostly done well.

Management and Motivation

They are motivated by recognition and status such as awards and public acknowledgement for their achievements. Their ego drives them to break previous sales records. They can have a positive impact on younger salespeople in the team. The combination of being good at their craft and a healthy ego can make these salespeople difficult to manage. They will respect and work with a sales manager who can demonstrate sales competence in areas they need improvement.

These salespeople enjoy the hunt for new business and tend to get bored in an account management role.

Sales Environment 2

The customer/client has limited knowledge and experience with product/service so they need advice and ongoing support for a period of time to gain full value. Profit margins in Environment 2 can be high even though more competitors compete for the same business.

Industry examples: Software, consulting services and high end medical equipment.

Sales Style

The sales style most often is Analytical/Action. These salespeople are strategic, considerate and methodical in the way they go about solving customer/client needs. Their greatest strengths are persistence, focus and attention to detail. They tend to overload themselves with too many activities and can end up stressed and prone to procrastinate.

Selling Skills

These salespeople tend to be strong in the areas of:

1. Impact. These skills are associated with creating a good first impression.
2. Presentation. This sales environment can have long selling cycles so when a qualified sales opportunity arises getting this part of the sales process right is vital. Time is invested in planning and developing a tailored presentation.
3. Strategic Account Management. Once the sale has been confirmed the salesperson makes sure the agreed objectives will be met. They do this by actively managing the account and seeking other sales opportunities within the client organisation. Salespeople in this sales environment are good at developing and maintaining ongoing client relationships.

Management and Motivation

These salespeople can set unrealistic goals and in doing so push themselves to the point of exhaustion and become negatively stressed. This can have a domino effect on those around them. To positively influence their wellbeing and productivity review their accountabilities and guide them in setting workable sales goals, activities and deadlines.

They are intelligent and highly motivated salespeople who have a lot of stamina; motivated by doing an outstanding job and receiving positive recognition along the way. Often ambitious and career driven these salespeople respond to public recognition which can drive them to higher levels of performance. They welcome opportunities to be coached and or mentored. Generally the selling skills requiring improvement are business development, handling objections and closing.

Sales Environment 3

These salespeople work on a regular sales call cycle. They have a great deal of product/industry and customer/client knowledge. The market is very competitive with many similar products/services forcing a downward pressure on prices and profitability. The salesperson takes great pride in their customer service and dependability and can be more loyal to their customer/clients than their employer. Because pricing is so competitive and no or few product/service differentiation the customer/client will purchase from the salesperson with whom they have the greatest rapport. If the salesperson resigns from their employer and joins a competitor it is not unusual for the client to follow the salesperson to their next employer.

Industry examples:Electrical wholesale, nursery and plumbing trade suppliers.

Sales Style

Salespeople with a Harmonious/Analytical Sales Style are attracted to this type of sales environment. They are reliable, considerate, conscientious and get much job satisfaction from being of service to their customer/clients. Their sense of self-worth can be affected when it is tied too heavily to customer satisfaction. A tough customer/client can take advantage of their gentle nature.

Selling Skills

This salesperson's greatest selling strengths are in customer service and getting regular repeat sales. In time they develop a loyal customer/client following and sales are based on a solid long term relationship rather than selling skills. They naturally demonstrate empathy when given a sales objection. Business development is avoided or minimised because they spend most of their time managing existing accounts. Overservicing can be a problem and costly to the employer. Excuses will be used when asked to increase business development activity. They would benefit by developing assertive skills, business development, handling sales objections and closing.

Management and Motivation

These salespeople have a strong work ethic and given a choice would like to be left alone in their sales territories. They can be sensitive and become subserviant when a customer/client behaves aggressively. Developing greater self-worth and self-confidence would benefit them greatly particularly in conflict situations. They have a tendency to be single minded blaming their own company when things go wrong rather than considering it could be the customer/client's fault. Greater assertiveness and a driving need to achieve current sales opportunities is required. Acknowledging and demonstrating appreciation for a job well done will create a positive response from them.

Sales Environment 4

Product/services are at the tail end of their life cycle and or have reached saturation point in the market. Profit margins in most instances are slim so volume is needed to make a profit. Customer/clients are well informed, know what they want and have a tendency to shop around for the best price. The salesperson needs to keep themselves busy or boredom could set in as they wait for a customer/client to enter their premises or for the phone to ring. They need to be able to quickly adjust their energy level and react when they connect with a customer/client.

Industry examples: Retail and on-line businesses.

Sales Style

Sales Environment 4 attracts all types of salespeople with many trying sales for the first time including those who have just left school. Accomplishing sales tasks reliably, working consistently and not being under immense pressure attracts an Harmonious Style Salesperson. They are dependable, have a warm and friendly manner and can develop long term customer relationships. They can be remarkably versatile and adapt to a range of sales situations but avoid being criticised or challenged.

Selling Skills

To attract customers advertising and sales promotions are heavily relied upon so the need to undertake business development is not applicable. However the ability to be able to provide excellent customer service to encourage repeat business is mandatory. Product knowledge is essential in order to establish credibility with the customer though, in many cases the customer knows as much or more than the salesperson. They benefit greatly when sales skills training is tailored to suit this sales environment.

Management and Motivation

Management need to set realistic sales goals. During quiet periods brief sales training sessions can motivate the sales team. This will keep them mentally active and responsive. They like working within a team environment so activities focussed on helping each other can provide positive interaction between salespeople. Public recognition and reinforcement of desired behaviours can be motivating.

I began by highlighting Don Bradman, a standout batsman but considered an average bowler. A salesperson who works in a sales environment best suited to their intrinsic sales skills and personality traits has the potential to become an outstanding sales performer. However, in the wrong sales environment the outcome is often outright failure and a belief that sales is not for them.



Kurt's expertise is in improving the sales effectiveness of his clients' businesses by generating more sales and in a more profitable manner. He has guided companies to increase sales 10-56%. Clients range from small to multinational companies in Australia, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

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