

# *Rapid* Skill-Builder® Sales Effectiveness

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In an increasingly competitive world, an effective salesperson (no matter what they may be trying to sell) needs a wide variety of skills and competencies in order to be successful. Research has indicated that the following skills are required in all four phases of the sales cycle.

1. **Prospecting.** Positive temperament, organisational skills, active listening skills, drive and persistence.
2. **Negotiating the sale.** Active listening skills, communication skills, relationship nurturing ability and exceeding customer expectations.
3. **Closing.** Organisational skills, communication skills, drive and persistence.
4. **Providing follow-up service.** Positive temperament, active listening skills, relationship nurturing ability and exceeding customer expectations.

This Skill Builder explores these important competencies and is designed to help to raise your awareness of how you can build your skills in these areas.

## ▼ Reflect

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Your internal desire to actively communicate with other people, and to find value and enjoyment in the whole process of relationship-building and selling, is a key factor in the sales success equation.

For some people this will be an almost irrelevant issue to debate. For such individuals, their motivation to talk to people regularly and even to engage directly in the selling process is naturally high. Talking to strangers in supermarket queues, at bus/train stops or even in elevators is characteristic of such people. However, even if you enjoy talking to people, it is a proven fact that most of us are not highly confident or highly motivated salespeople. In actual fact, statistics reveal that:

**“Only one in ten people is comfortable striking up a relationship with a complete stranger.”**

Unfortunately, this means that misgivings, fears and doubts potentially hinder the vast majority of people.

Although there are lots of very successful salespeople who don't particularly enjoy talking to complete strangers, one common feature of effective salespeople is that they are good at relating to people when it's needed. In other words, despite any initial nervousness that might exist, they are at relative ease in one-to-one situations or in groups, they can readily empathise with people and they can build strong relationships over time.

This ability and confidence usually springs from a strong sense of self-worth and an awareness about themselves and others that they constantly draw upon in order to get the best out of people.

Most effective salespeople will not necessarily have any formal “model” for how they understand their own style and the style of other people. However, they are likely to appreciate that people are different in very particular ways and adjust their approach “intelligently” to match the needs of the person they are relating to, therefore increasing the possibility of success.



# ▼ Organise

Even if you have a very positive, people-focused and relationship-centred temperament, it won't count for much unless you also have effective organisational skills. In other words, despite the fact that a prospect may be impressed with you as a person, they nonetheless expect that you can also successfully follow through on what has been discussed.

In order to demonstrate organisational skills, you need to carefully consider the following:

## 1 Organisational efficiency and effectiveness

A simple model that describes how most commercial enterprises work is that they:

1. Create demand for their product or service (usually through their sales and marketing people).
2. Fulfil demand by delivering products or services (usually through operational service and delivery type people).
3. Collect money from customers – hopefully satisfied ones (usually the responsibility of accountants and other financial people).

As a salesperson, your main job is very much in the first of these three activities. However, there is little point in being successful at this if the demand created is not satisfied or if the money collected by the enterprise is not efficiently collected (and with the minimum of dispute). You need to feel confident that the entire team is capable of delivering the service that is promised and you should ideally check this well before talking to your customers.

In fact, the most successful enterprises invest a lot of effort in making sure that internal communications are working well between all groups in the organisation to optimise their performance. This significantly helps to reduce the frustration that can arise from customers complaining about over-promising, under-delivering, quality defects, billing problems, etc.

## 2 Personal organisation

Despite the fact that poor organisational efficiency will soon see customers complaining or taking their business elsewhere, this is largely a structural issue that every enterprise has to work hard on. However, perhaps an even more common reason for customer problems (even in an efficient organisation) is an individual salesperson who is poorly organised at a personal level.





Personal organisation skills can involve a whole range of abilities from the most simple and basic to highly complex competencies that take some time to develop. This represents something of a continuum.

- **Basic Organisational Skills**

If you do not have these skills, you are unlikely to get very far. Despite this, many salespeople fail to pay sufficient attention to these factors and turn up to appointments late, in a poorly presented way and without everything they need to explain their products or services to a prospect. To overcome these problems, you need to take a little care and do some basic preparation before every sales contact call.

- **Intermediate Organisational Skills**

Although basic skills are a bare minimum to get you through the door of a sales prospect, there are a number of intermediate organisational skills that can start to impress the customer. These can be applied by taking a little more time and effort to think about what you are trying to achieve. Having a sound (if simple) system for filing and classifying your prospect and customer list, for building new contacts in regular and systematic ways and for quickly gathering useful data when it is requested by your contacts will make a significant difference. The more these types of skills are demonstrated, the more that a stronger relationship with the contact starts to be established.

- **Advanced Organisational Skills**

Well-organised salespeople at this level usually have a strong system-led approach to their effort. They will often use sophisticated contact management systems or other computer software to help them to get the best results and to get the most optimal solution to each circumstance. In addition, they will often be able to anticipate future issues or problems and therefore think intelligently for and on behalf of their customers, largely by being completely in tune with a customer's business and taking action to help them even before they realise they need any help.

In the final analysis, many effective and well-organised salespeople view their sales job as if they were running their own business. Like independent business owners, they take responsibility for themselves and their whole organisation in managing both their time and their territory. Managing time and territory is often a question of how to organise or how to allocate effort or resources. This is often a difficult process, especially when you are trying to “juggle” a lot of customers. However, when this is done well, it often spells the difference between excellent and average performance in the eyes of your customers and prospects. It is an extremely important competency to master.



## ▼ Communicate

Some salespeople are so sure that they know all about the product or service and are so keen to make a sale that they fail to listen to the customer. Nobody has a better idea of what they want than the customer. Listening allows you to get a clearer idea of what they want, be forewarned of potential objections they are likely to raise, and gives you the opportunity to value-add to the sale.

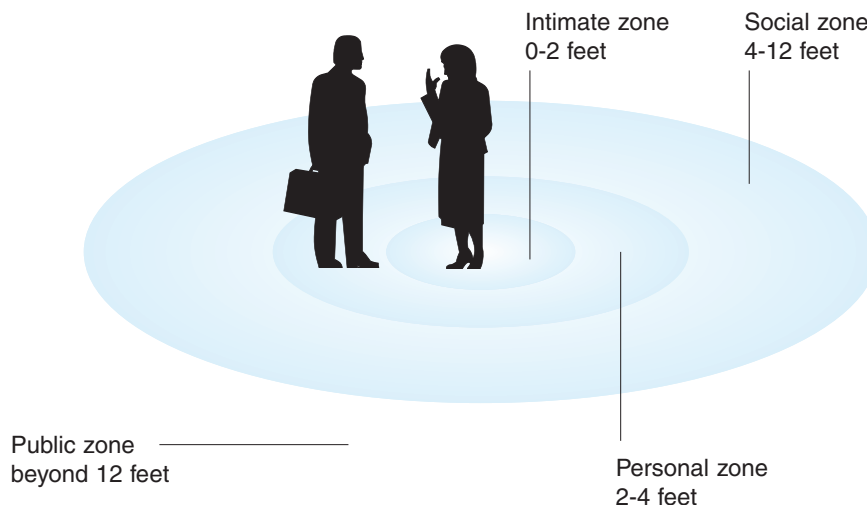
Active listening involves:

- Watching the contact's eyes and other body language signals
- Not letting your feelings show openly
- Checking your understanding of what the sales contact is saying by asking questions and paraphrasing
- Using notes
- Not interrupting
- Picking up on needs that are implied in what a sales contact is saying
- Not queuing up your next question.

Effective listening is not just about making sure that you can hear the other person's words properly. It is about being attentive to the entire communication message. As a result, listening is perhaps more about watching or looking at the speaker and taking in the entire message, than it is about using your ears alone.

A key in sales communications is the issue of personal space or distance between speaker and listener. You should ideally observe the interpersonal distance used by the speaker, taking note of cultural differences. Researchers have found that interpersonal distances seem to expand and shrink depending on the circumstances. If the sales contact is very close your relationship may be more intimate. If the sales contact is intruding on your personal body space, he or she may be demanding your attention. If you and the sales contact are far apart you may be in a public setting or the speaker may be uneasy or aloof.

### Distance Zone for Interactions



In general, you should begin customer interactions at the far end of the social zone and not move closer until an initial rapport has been established. If the buyer indicates that a friendlier relationship has developed, you should move closer.

Your communication style is heavily influenced by how you prefer to engage with other people and to receive information in general.

**Some people are internally focused (introverted)** and prefer to work through problems before speaking about them. They're happy to work on their own and often avoid group activities. When they're in a meeting they will tend to hang back unless they feel they have something really important to say. They prefer to work out what they're going to say in advance. This can create some difficulties in face-to-face communication because if the conversation moves away from the "script", introverted people may not be comfortable with the flow, or could miss their opportunity to input.

**More outgoing (extroverted) people are focused externally.** When they have a problem or issue that they're trying to deal with, they will usually very quickly share it with others. They are at home in meetings and can sometimes be seen to be talking too much by more introverted people. They tend to work things out by talking them through as the ideas occur to them. This can create some problems in face-to-face communication because they can often appear to be "shooting first and asking questions later".

Your values and beliefs can also very powerfully shape your communication style because they underpin the way you think about things – even the way you see things in the first place. Values and beliefs are shaped by things like the upbringing you have had, religion, socio-economic factors, your education, political viewpoints and so forth. When you're talking with someone, you need to think about whether your values and beliefs are putting a "spin" on the conversation that is a barrier to good communication. In addition, you might consider how your values and beliefs "mesh" with the other person's. If there are big clashes there is a high potential for your sales communication efforts to suffer as a result.



## ▼ Nurture

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To build long-term partnerships with customers you need the three Cs of successful partnership selling – **Credibility, Commitment and Communication.**

### Credibility

Credibility means that people accept that you are believable and reliable.

This depends on two main factors:

- Your behaviour and personality
- Your selling techniques.

A sales person can do many things to enhance credibility:

- **Value time**

When you make a sales call, clearly express how long you think the sales call will take and then stop when the time is up. If you learn how to judge the time needed for a call, pace your presentation accordingly and finish in the time stated up front, you will gain credibility. If you tell the prospect you need five minutes and are still going after half an hour, you will not have any credibility.

- **Back up your claims**

Another way to establish credibility is to offer concrete evidence to back up verbal statements that you make. If you state, “It is estimated that over sixty per cent of the households in the country will own DVD recorders by 2010”, be prepared to offer proof of this assertion (e.g., hand the prospect a letter or article from a credible source).

- **Balanced presentations**

Many salespeople have found that the most effective way to establish credibility is to make a balanced presentation showing all sides of the situation – that is, to be totally honest. Thus, a salesperson might mention some things about the product that make it less than perfect or may speak positively about some exclusive feature of a competitor’s product. Will this totally defeat the seller’s chances of a sale? No. When used carefully, it may increase the chances of building long-term commitment and rapport.

### Commitment

Selling can be hard work and there are times when everything seems to go wrong. These are the times that most test your commitment to what you have chosen to do. You need strong commitment to the product or service you are selling and to the company you represent. Most importantly, you also need commitment to the customer. Customers are entitled to expect that you are committed to providing them with what they really need or want and that you will not use unfair or underhand tactics in doing so.

### Communication

You must communicate successfully with the customer to make sales. This means understanding both your own and the customer’s “influencing style” and adjusting your approach accordingly. Maintaining open communication with your company and passing on information that can be part of the marketing intelligence effort is also important.



A large part of the process of nurturing your sales contacts is doing so in unusual ways. This is not because conventional methods of contact and follow-up don't work, but because they are common place or popular and everybody is doing it. As a result, a contact may expect a follow-up call, letter, "thank you for your time" note, etc. (but don't stop doing this if it works for you or for your sales contacts).

The way to nurture your contacts differently is often to focus on people's special or non-mainstream needs, challenges or potential problem areas. The following example illustrates this.

You may meet a sales contact who ran a commercial enterprise selling second-hand musical instruments. They share a range of comments about the pleasures and frustrations of being in a small business (cash flow, getting paid on time by customers, seasonality of trade, slow stock-turns, etc.).

In listening to them, your challenge is to separate what are general points of conversational small talk from specific points that are causing them frustration or are issues yet to be solved.

For instance, the second-hand instrument seller may want to offer new services like tuition, and may mention this in passing. This provides the opportunity to think about those people you might know with musical interest and talent. Think about how you can facilitate a connection between them. You may help your customer fulfil a long-term or otherwise important goal by doing so. This will, in turn, strengthen your relationship with your customer. An effective salesperson nurtures the relationship successfully by carefully assessing any conversation and taking prompt action that makes a difference.

In addition to assessing or exploring sales contacts for their non-mainstream needs, another way of finding a successful "niche" for yourself is to suggest ideas that are a little different or unusual. These will help you to stand out and be remembered. Once again, the ideas that you could use are limitless. However, your goal is to make suggestions or think about possibilities that the contact or other people may not have considered. This will depend on the type of sales contacts and what preferences they may have. Some people will be extremely open to novel or very "lateral" ways of looking at possible courses of action, while others may be more conservative. In either case, your suggestions should always be well considered and memorable – and, more importantly, meet their need in a suitable way.



# ▼ Tailor

The capacity to exceed customer expectations is the degree to which you put the customer's needs first.

**Salespeople who think only of making sales are sales-oriented rather than customer-oriented.**

Buyers will perceive you as customer-oriented when you stress benefits and solutions to problems, rather than product features. Stating pros and cons can also be perceived as being customer-oriented, because understanding the cons also indicates that you understand the buyer's needs. Discovering these needs always starts with listening. You can then tailor your proposal, sales pitch and even product to meet their needs.

Listening always has to have a purpose. Here are just four of the compelling reasons to listen to your customers:

## 1 To understand the customer's moments of truth and map what the cycle of that experience looks like from the customer's standpoint.

"Moments of truth" are those critical customer contact times or moments when front line people, including salespeople at the beginning of a relationship, interact with customers, thereby leaving an impression. There are literally thousands of these in most organisations every month. You can determine the critical contact points and measure how well your organisation is managing the sales cycle towards a positive outcome.

## 2 To keep tabs on the markets – the aggregate of all your customer's changing wants, needs and expectations.

"Understanding the customer's learning curve" is one expression for this kind of listening which is one of the critical foundations of the market research business. In an era of constant change, customer expectations and needs are as fluid as anything else and a good salesperson aims to keep as up-to-date as possible.

## 3 To hear the unexpected or new ideas customers and those who work with them can bring to the table.

An effective salesperson will always be on the lookout for customers' particular needs so as to be able to tailor or customise the overall offering and make it as attractive as possible.

## 4 To involve the customer in the business in a valuable way.

Breaking down any "them and us" barriers is a sound motivation for almost any situation but is absolutely essential in selling, as the goal is to create a win-win outcome.



There is no one best way to listen to customers – and definitely no such thing as paying too much attention to customers' ideas and opinions. The cardinal sin is to believe that there is nothing more to learn.

Developing multiple ways of continuously finding out about your customers and tracking their learning curves gives the whole organisation ample opportunities to tap into customers' ideas and experiences. The last drop of potential can then be squeezed out of every encounter you have with a customer who has something to say.

Acting on what you learn is the ultimate key to your success. The information you receive won't do you any good unless you use it.

It is always wise to remember that customers are the ultimate recipients of the goods or services provided by your organisation and/or team. If customers were consistent in their expectations and could describe their needs openly, your task would be extremely simple. Customer needs would be known and the service delivered accordingly. Unfortunately, customer needs not only keep changing but are often kept well hidden from the salesperson or organisation trying to satisfy them. For any organisation trying to meet and exceed their customers' expectations, the only place to start is to set up several "listening posts".

A "listening post" is a deliberate organisational mechanism that is set up to capture customer feedback in whatever form that it may be expressed. This demonstrates your organisation's commitment to hearing the truth about the customer service you provide or way in which your product or service offerings could be improved.

Once appropriate customer listening posts have been established, and the organisation has segmented its customers into a number of sensible categories of common interest, the task of assessing what customers value most can truly begin.

In each separate segment, customers are likely to give a wide range of feedback. Your task is to assess this feedback, prioritise it according to what customers appear to value the most and then tailor the service you offer to them accordingly. The more "flexible" your offering appears when in a selling situation, the more successful you are likely to be in keeping existing customers and in winning new ones.



## ▼ Persist

**Effective selling is just a systematic way to positively relate to people in the world around you and build strong relationships based on trust, honesty, competence and credibility.** In this sense, it is a lifelong journey, where you never stop listening and learning, so you can continually improve and grow personally.

It is also clear that effective selling skills are built on a foundation of valuing yourself (high self-esteem or self-worth) and valuing others. This means believing in working with and through people to achieve the best results. Your willingness to freely contribute to the success of your customers – not just through your products and services but by voluntarily connecting them with others and volunteering ideas will also have a significant impact.

Successful selling cannot be viewed as temporary, occasional, periodic or half-hearted, or anything else that is anything other than persistent. Personal drive and persistence is critical if you want to help yourself and others to build positive and successful relationships over the long-term. While this might be easier said than done, unless you commit to persisting in this way, you may well become frustrated and disappointed with your sales efforts very quickly.

A key action here is to maintain your sales contact effort by varying the means and methods that you use to communicate with the people whom you meet. Hence, in addition to phone calls, you can drop people an e-mail, send a letter, note or card, invite them to a meeting or event, or plan to chat informally at a place or a time that will be convenient. This variety will help in your systematic attempts to keep in touch, remain at the front of any customer's mind and stay fresh and new personally.

One of the enemies of sales persistence is becoming distracted by other events, priorities or activities that prevent you from maintaining contact or follow-up. In such circumstances, it is easy to adopt a “**burn and churn**” mentality. This means that you take the view that it doesn't matter if you lose a sales contact. There are plenty more “out there” that you can meet. However, not only does this waste your time but the time of your sales contacts, and may quickly build you the kind of reputation that you don't want.

Best practice salespeople are persistent not in a pushy way or in being relentless in their communication to the point of annoying their customers, but are long-term relationship builders who are able to keep every customer happy and even earn referrals or gain positive word of mouth endorsements to keep building their good reputation.

When you make a sale, follow the process through to ensure your customer receives what was promised **when** it was promised. The Skill Building template on the following page will not only summarise what we have covered but hopefully help you prepare to sell more successfully in the future.



# Sales Effectiveness Skill Building Template

**Persist**  
Follow the process  
Follow up  
Follow through

**HOW**

**Reflect**  
Disposition  
Attitude  
Style

**HOW**

**Organise**  
Self  
Systems  
Sales leads

**HOW**

**Tailor**  
Flex  
Adapt  
Customise



**HOW**

Preparing to Sell Successfully	
1. Is my knowledge of the products and/or services I want to sell as good as it COULD/SHOULD be?	
2. What support material, back-up and other resources do I need when talking to a customer?	
3. Am I personally organised and ready to act as quickly as necessary at the various stages of the sales process?	
4. Have I targeted the customers I want to concentrate on and have they been properly pre-qualified?	
5. How competent and well prepared am I to listen attentively and carefully clarify customer needs by questions?	
6. How well prepared and polished is my sales message and overall orientation towards product/service advantages and benefits (rather than just features)?	
7. In what ways will I actively build relationships with individual prospects and customers?	
8. In what ways can I prepare myself and my organisation to tailor the services offered and to respond as flexibly as possible to customer needs?	

**Nurture**  
The situation  
The relationship  
The opportunity

**HOW**

**Communicate**  
Listen  
Question  
Present



**HOW**