



Book The Career Salesperson

Recharge Your Drive and Ambition, No Matter What Your Age

Stephan Schiffman
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Recommendation

Some business professionals say selling is a young person's game, but not Stephan Schiffman. He offers excellent advice to older salespeople who want to retain their competitive edge. Over three decades, Schiffman personally trained hundreds of thousands of salespeople, so he brings great expertise to the subject. Some readers may find his periodic reminders to buy his books and sign up for his training courses a smidge pushy. However, his guidance is useful and *BooksInShort* recommends this book to longtime sales professionals who want to re-energize their approach to serving their employers and marketing themselves.

Take-Aways

- The modern business world can be very challenging for older salespeople.
- They often clash with younger managers and customers.
- Many salespeople become more lethargic and less competitive as they age.
- However, longtime salespeople can stay sharp by prospecting for new accounts.
- Avoid the inclination to "live off your book," or rely on repeat business.
- If you've lost your sales spark, return to the essentials of selling.
- Sales gimmicks may have worked past decades, but now they are largely ineffective.
- Losing a sales job is an opportunity to find a position with a promising new employer.
- Approach a prospective employer as you would a prospective customer in a sales pitch.
- Once you move past your midlife-crisis years, the odds are you'll feel better about life.

Summary

The Assets and Anxieties of Older Salespeople

If you are an older salesperson, your world is changing. Younger people are moving into executive sales jobs. You may report to someone half your age. Your customers are getting younger, too. You may have little in common with them. Dealing with such changes is frequently difficult, and you may feel outmoded. But each workday, you somehow must put these feelings aside. After all, you work in the high-stress field of sales. You cannot afford to let hurt feelings affect your productivity.

"Getting older by itself does not make you a bad or worse salesperson."

You must produce results to get paid. Each day that you go out, you have to hit your territory hard and close deals. This often gets tougher as you get older. But you can take steps to ease the challenge. And if you have entered middle age, you can look forward to newfound joy in life. Research shows that people tend to be happy when they are young, progressively lose that contentment as they age, then regain it later in life. This third phase begins for women in their 40s and for men in their 50s. What accounts for the U-shaped curve of contentedness? Some researchers speculate that people "learn to adapt their strengths and weaknesses, and in midlife quell their infeasible aspirations."

"Sales isn't something you can do in a halfhearted way. Either you're a salesperson or an order taker."

Ageing brings contentment, but it may also lead to lethargy. Some individuals become less competitive and tire more easily. Being a “road warrior” may no longer be as much fun as it once was. This is natural. But you cannot lose your drive – after all, you are in sales. Your manager doesn’t care if you need to rest more than you did when you were a younger salesperson. Bosses want great performance, period – and that means continuing to close sales. All the past years of surpassing your sales quotas mean nothing now. More than any other field, sales boils down to one question: What have you sold lately? This is the brutally tough-minded ethos of sales, and embracing this ethos is a career decision.

How Salespeople Adapt to a Younger World

Older salespeople often work awkwardly with younger bosses and customers. Of course, tension between different generations is nothing new. But as an older employee, you must learn to get along with younger professionals because, after all, this is quickly becoming their world. With your valuable experience, you should be in the ideal position to win over younger managers and clients. You just have to make the effort.

“Selling has undergone a tremendous metamorphosis over the last three or four decades.”

Resist the temptation to pretend you are magically younger, that you are the salesperson you used to be. That never works, and it could be embarrassing for you. Be yourself, not some phony version of yourself.

If you are an older salesperson who intimidates younger managers, proactively ease the tension. Do your best to make age a nonissue. Instead, focus on sales. Meeting or surpassing your quota is the best way to get your new young sales manager to appreciate you and, perhaps, befriend you as well. Whatever you do, avoid patronizing your young boss. Understand that he or she may feel as uncomfortable as you do in your working relationship. Go out of your way to help your manager get over that awkward feeling.

“Sales has always been a stress-filled job. But it’s becoming more so in a 21st-century economic climate where there’s constant pressure to increase profits and do more with less.”

Prejudging young sales managers is perilous. In the absence of contrary evidence, assume that they can overcome their inexperience and perform their jobs. Share your know-how and wisdom with a young sales manager to help him or her perform more effectively. Younger customers may judge you because of your age. Demonstrate to them that you have as much product and industry knowledge as any salesperson, regardless of age.

“Kindly sales VPs won’t look aside when poor old Bill, who has been with the company for 20 or 30 years, isn’t producing the way he used to.”

Winning over younger customers involves focusing on the future. They will pay little heed to stories about how their predecessors did things years ago, so don’t dwell on the past. Minimize socializing, stick to business and project a professional image. Though casual dress is common in modern office settings, maintain your own personal style and decorum. Always dress well.

Adopting New Habits

As people age, many get stuck in their ways, often with negative results. Slipping into bad work habits and letting them take over can be too easy for an older sales professional. If this has happened to you, return to the selling basics. Write a new sales plan. Improve your product knowledge. Then, get busy with your prospecting and presentations.

“There is a certain amount of prejudice against older people.”

Strive to share your valuable expertise. Think of helpful ideas for customers and prospects. Develop one great idea for each of them. You have been in the business for decades, so put your knowledge to work for them. That’s the best way to win them over.

Re-energize yourself by ensuring that you come across in a highly professional manner. Are you overweight and unable to wear your best business suits? If so, change your diet and increase your exercise. Seek to improve yourself continually. As you lose weight and become healthier, you will begin to feel more confident. You will look good and dress better, and your colleagues, customers and prospects will likely take notice.

“It can be emotionally and mentally debilitating to find yourself at age 40 or older reporting to a kid who couldn’t hold your socks in the field.”

Reorganize your schedule so that you allow yourself some downtime for nonbusiness activities. Reserve 30 minutes of your workday to rest, read or think. Clean your desk first thing every morning. Start with a clean workspace and you will feel hopeful; start with a messy desk and doubt will ensue. Another way to feel better about yourself is dining out at least once daily. Serving yourself isn’t fun; let someone else serve you.

Avoid a Sense of Entitlement

As an experienced salesperson, you may choose to “live off your book,” or a group of accounts you have handled for years. You have earned the right to do so, and to reduce the constant pressure that goes with sales. You may no longer seek prospects or make presentations, and your sales activity might degrade to order taking. The problem with this strategy is that your book may wither away. Relying only on repeat business stunts the growth of sales professionals in other ways, too. For instance, they can get lazy. Don’t just go through the motions. You are a capable, experienced professional. Be smart about your approach, and constantly look for new business.

“All those years that contributed to midlife crises also gave you the experience to get over some of them.”

Are you divisive? Do you argue to establish your seniority at the office? This is a problem for salespeople who expect younger colleagues to show deference for their age and experience. Is this you? If so, “get over yourself.” You will become a bitter salesperson if you take yourself too seriously.

“Whatever you do, remember you are a person who has demonstrated the skills to build business.”

Reject regret. Resist thoughts of what might have been in your career. When you were a young salesperson, perhaps you imagined that one day you would be the chief executive officer of a big corporation. Now, you may be in your mid-40s or mid-50s, with your dream job nowhere in sight. Does this mean your career is over? Not at all. Set your sights on another career goal that is both worthwhile and achievable.

Smart Sales Pitches and Cold-Call Logic

To some extent, gimmicks drove sales in decades past. One salesman would send a single shoe to a prospect to “get a foot in the door.” Another would send Xerox copies of his face so prospects would recognize him when he arrived at their offices. These cornball techniques are less effective in the modern business world. Whacky marketing tactics generally have been deemed wasteful, so behave professionally, especially with no-nonsense business prospects.

“You’ve been doing this for a long time, and the odds are you’re not suddenly going to fail now.”

A smart sales pitch trumps a cute one. Cute techniques are unnecessary. Rely on your superior product knowledge instead. You have made strong presentations to prospects for years. You don’t need gimmicks at this stage in your career. To make a smart presentation, you need both self-confidence and intuition. Try to think like your prospects think – it’s the best way to sell them. Ask them smart questions to gather the information you will need to win the new account.

“Because of your years of experience in the industry, it’s likely that your customers will rely on you for their expertise. Frankly, don’t you want your prospects to do the same?”

Is anything worse than prospecting? This is the one aspect of selling that all salespeople hate. So, what can you do to make prospecting as painless as possible? First, accept that rejection from prospects is both normal and impersonal, not a reflection on your character. Second, make prospecting as routine as breathing. Don’t think about it; just do it. If this means making 10 cold calls every day, then make them, but do so intelligently. Arm yourself in advance with verbal comebacks to counter objections. Face it, sales requires prospecting. And if you are an older salesperson, prospecting should be a well-developed habit by now.

Your Next Sales Job

In a weak economy, holding onto a job can be tough, especially for older employees, who often are the first to lose theirs. If you are an older salesperson who recently lost a job, take heart. View your situation as an opportunity to venture into a new sales position. Burn no bridges. Maintain good relations with former employers. Verbal abuse and other forms of retaliation for the job loss aren’t productive.

“Prospecting in person puts a higher premium on appearance.”

Getting a new position requires selling yourself – and selling is what you do. To find a new sales position with promise, first make a plan. Weigh your professional strengths and weaknesses, and think about what type of company you want to join. Consider selling only a product or service that excites you.

“There is no excuse to dress down, not even the weather.”

Enlist help in your job search. Tap into the incredible power of networking. Contact friends, former co-workers and industry associates and ask for leads. Develop a strong résumé with a full description of your work experience. Write a compelling cover letter. Before a job interview, learn everything you can about the company and the person who will do the hiring.

To secure appointments, be persistent. Don’t just mail out résumés. Follow up with telephone calls. Try this approach: “Ms. Smith, we have a mutual friend, Bill Jones. He suggested I send you a résumé using him as a reference. I sent it to you about a week ago, and I’m wondering if you had a chance to read it yet.”

Avoid making boastful comments or talking about vague career goals in your job interviews. Don’t brag about your past sales triumphs or say that you want “a position that challenges [you].” This jargon lacks clear meaning. Instead, explain that you want a job that will allow you to apply the skills, wisdom and experience that you have gained over the years. Handle job interviews as if they were sales calls and you were the product.

Mentoring, Managing and Self-Marketing

If you mentor a younger salesperson, you will both gain from the experience. Besides the obvious benefits to your less-experienced co-worker, mentoring helps you maintain your sales enthusiasm. If you do well as a mentor, your firm may think you also show promise as a manager and offer you a leadership position. Should you take it? Many salespeople dislike management jobs, which can embroil them in office politics. On the other hand, sales management jobs can lead to even higher executive positions. But don’t take a sales manager position just because your company offers it to you. Only accept a job that truly will make you happy.

Some salespeople enjoy working as a consultant. This can be a wonderful way to make a living. But, it is not for everyone. Start-up costs are involved, and earning good money may take some time. Before you decide to launch your own consulting business, weigh important considerations like medical insurance and other details.

Never sell yourself short. For decades, you have made your living in sales, one of business’s toughest and most demanding fields. By now, you possess terrific sales skills and a wealth of experience. In short, you bring a great deal to the table. Keep that in mind as you plan your next career move.

About the Author

Stephan Schiffman has trained more than 500,000 salespeople for AT&T, Motorola and other companies. He is the author of *Cold Calling Techniques (That Really Work!)* and *Closing Techniques (That Really Work!)* among other books on sales topics.

