

# Myth of the Salesman

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# Myth of the salesman

You don't have to have the gift of the gab to be a successful salesman for your firm. Peter Belsey dispels some sales myths and stereotypes.

Few occupations are more misunderstood than that of the salesman. Take any accountancy practice; at most there is likely to be only a small proportion of staff with a sales-related job title. Few staff members would recognise selling as part of their role and most would probably shudder at the mere thought.

Yet across your business, there are many individuals who regularly meet clients with the express purpose of acquiring more business on the best possible terms, developing client relationships and building something of value – however small or indirect – for the practice. Like it or not, that is selling.

The sales process has attracted more than its share of pejorative connotations. Yet the ability to sell effectively requires a high degree of professionalism and is the very lifeblood of successful business development. It is time to dispel some of the myths and stereotypes that have grown up around selling.

## **Myth 1: You need a sharp suit and a firm handshake**

First impressions may count, but the truth is, there is no correlation between physical appearance and sales achievement. Indeed, many top sellers totally contradict this stereotype. Instead, what links these top performers is that they are highly skilled, professional and know how to deal with people.

## **Myth 2: You need to have 'the gift of the gab'**

This is somehow seen as key to talking the buyer into doing or thinking something different. In fact, the most successful sales people have far less 'airtime' than the client in a sales conversation. Their true skill lies in getting the other party talking and thinking, by asking lots of questions and listening to the answers, in order to unearth concerns and needs.

## **Myth 3: You need to be an extrovert**

There's no link between personality traits and success at selling. Extroverts may be inherently more comfortable, say, in a cold-call situation. On the other hand, an introvert may be better at listening, and not have the tendency to interrupt and present solutions too early in the buying process. Natural extroverts and introverts can both succeed, provided they understand and are willing to adopt the right behaviours throughout complex negotiations. Much depends on the personality of the buyer.

## **Myth 4: You need to sell differently to women than to men**

There's a commonly held view that buying drivers are gender-related – for example, women are more influenced by emotional factors and men by more hard-nosed elements such as money. Rather than matching female seller to female buyer, for example, the key is to ensure that the buyer feels you have their best interests at heart.

## **Myth 5: Being an expert really helps**

Being an expert can be an impediment – a specialist can easily swamp the often part-time and inexperienced buyer with their expertise, resulting almost inevitably in failure. Skilled experts will work out how best to make their knowledge available to the client by asking questions rather than imparting information. The goal is to establish how capable the client is likely to be in absorbing information and work out how to explain what they have to offer.

## **Myth 6: You face a street of never-ending sales opportunities**

Natural optimism aside, this myth betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the need to target your sales effort effectively. This means identifying those prospects sufficiently attractive to you and those for whom you have a realistic opportunity to put together a relevant value proposition. Don't 'spray and pray' – it's a waste of time and effort to focus on those whom you have little or no chance of converting.

## **Myth 7: Cold calling isn't fun**

OK, so this isn't a myth, it's true. Very few people enjoy cold calling but many more are very good at it. Fortunately, it is unlikely to be critical to the long-term success of the practice. Though it does have a part to play in business development, it is much more effective to focus your efforts on looking to cross-sell within existing clients and seek referrals from those who know and trust you.

**Myth 8: The prospect hasn't called back, so they aren't interested**

Research indicates that around three quarters of professional services buyers say 'no' up to five times before buying; yet 92% of sellers of professional services give up after the first 'no'. Not surprisingly, the remaining 8% of 'dogged' sellers win 73% of sales. So persistence pays. Initial buyer negativity is often because, at the time of the initial contact, they may not have identified a need or may be dealing with more important issues. By staying in touch, you can influence their thinking so that they begin to see the related issue as more important. Equally, by keeping your name in front of them, you are more likely to be 'in the frame' when they come to consider a solution.

**Myth 9: People don't like salesmen**

The view that sales people generally are not 'nice to know' or, even worse, 'con-

artists' is the kind of superficial stereotyping that results from a few extreme examples of the breed. Selling is a highly professional occupation, and the skills needed to succeed are strategic, behavioural rather than intuitive, well-researched and, critically, can be developed. By identifying where the contact is in their thinking, helping them develop that thinking into a defined need and providing the appropriate solution, it is possible to convert any contact with the customer into a sales opportunity.

**Myth 10: Bidding and pitching is the most important sales activity**

Pitching is expensive, time-consuming and a gamble – though at times unavoidable. An equally valuable use of time and resource is to focus on strategic networking, and building stronger relationships with existing clients, prospects and intermediaries. This involves you much earlier in the buying process, with the opportunity to help

determine the precise nature of the client's need and improve the chance of being able to provide a suitable solution.

In today's highly competitive commercial world, the ability to differentiate service is crucially important. Selling can no longer be dismissed as 'not for us', but must be embraced as a vital and legitimate practice development tool. And fortunately, everyone can be trained to do it – and do it better.

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