

1.3: What Does It Take to Be in Sales?

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the characteristics required to be successful in a career in sales.
- Understand what you can expect from a career in sales.

When Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple, delivered the commencement address at Stanford University in 2005, he told the story of how he and Steve Wozniak started the now \$32 billion company in a garage in 1976. Jobs said, “I was lucky—I found out what I wanted to do early in life.” He left the Stanford graduates with some personal words of wisdom to think about as they prepared themselves for their careers: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it.” Steve Jobs, “You’ve Got to Find What You Love,” commencement address at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, June 12, 2005, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/20...love-jobs-says> (accessed May 20, 2024).

To be successful in sales, and in life, you must love what you do. If you aren’t passionate about your profession, you will never be the best. You will always fall short because the people who love it will naturally excel. It seems simple enough: do what you love. But what if you love many things or don’t know if you’ve found your niche? Don’t worry—there are questions you can ask yourself to help you determine whether a career in sales will excite you and make you want to leap out of bed every morning.

Are You Born to Sell?

How do you know if sales is your passion, the career of your dreams? The first step is taking this course. You’ll have an opportunity to learn about sales and actually put your knowledge to work in real-life situations by role-playing with your classmates. After reading this chapter, you will better understand the profession of selling and what it has to offer. This chapter includes insights about which personal characteristics and talents are best suited to sales, which industries you might work in, and how you can be successful in the profession.

Just like being a teacher requires traits such as a love of learning, an ability to communicate, and the talent to make concepts come alive for people, selling calls for certain personal characteristics as well. Some people think that successful salespeople are those who have the “gift of gab,” but that’s not really what makes salespeople effective. Although communication and relationship building are valuable skills, just being able to talk to people is not enough to be successful in sales. Consider the following points that make a salesperson successful and see if these are a good match to you and your skills.

Character and the Ability to Build Trust

It never goes without saying that character—the combination of your beliefs, tendencies, and actions that you take—is the single defining trait for a salesperson (or any business person, for that matter). Dave Kahle, “The Four Characteristics of Successful Salespeople,” *Industrial Distribution* 97, no. 4 (April 2008): 54. Your character defines how you will conduct yourself, and it is the yardstick by which customers measure you. After all, your customers are spending their money based on what you say you will deliver; they have to trust you. If you ever break the trust for any reason, you will likely lose not only the sale, but you will most likely lose your reputation, and, ultimately, your livelihood. According to a survey by Forrester Research, trust is imperative in the buying and selling process. “Trust in a company drives revenue-generating behaviors such as the likelihood to purchase again, preference for a company over competitors, trial of unrelated products, and propensity to share personal data.” “Trust In 2023 Is Essential For Business Growth” <https://www.forrester.com/blogs/trus...siness-growth/> (accessed May 20, 2024).

Listening Skills

Contrary to popular belief, speaking is not the most important aspect of selling—listening is, because “salespeople are communicators, not manipulators.” Monroe Porter, “Six Common Characteristics of Successful Salespeople,” *Pro* 20, no. 6 (May 2008): 33. It’s interesting to note that many of the salespeople who are constantly talking are actually not successful. It is those salespeople who have a genuine interest in listening who learn precisely what the customers’ needs, priorities, and opportunities are. Listening skills are the fundamental basis for forming a connection. “Listening builds relationships,” according to Marjorie Brody, author of *Help! Was That a Career-Limiting Move?* She suggests a “silent solution” to many problems in the form of listening. Pamela J. Holland and Marjorie Brody, *Help! Was That a Career-Limiting Move?* (Jenkintown, PA: Career Skills Press,

2005). The challenge for many people is that listening with undivided attention is hard to do. According to Barry J. Elms, CEO of Strategic Negotiations International, psychologists say that we listen using only 25 percent of our brain. Steve Atlas, “Listening for Buying Signals: Missing Your Prospects’ Buying Signals,” *Selling Power* 20, no. 2, <http://www.sellingpower.com/content/article.php?a=5350> (accessed May 23, 2024). That means that the other 75 percent is thinking about a response or thinking about something else. Salespeople who take notes, refer to written material, and are intently aware of their nonverbal cues can be extremely successful because they see and hear things that people who are talking just can’t absorb. Steve Atlas, “Listening for Buying Signals: Missing Your Prospects’ Buying Signals,” *Selling Power* 20, no. 2, <http://www.sellingpower.com/content/article.php?a=5350> (accessed May 21, 2024).

The Ability to Ask the Right Questions

It was Einstein who said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first fifty-five minutes to formulate the right question because as soon as I had identified the right question, I knew I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.” Kim Michael, “The Most Powerful Tool in the Sales Arsenal—Part 1,” *American Salesman* 54, no. 6 (June 2009): 3. This demonstrates the power of asking the *right* questions. Those questions can only be asked when you listen and have the ability to connect.

The Willingness to Learn

Salespeople must not only have product knowledge and understand the buying and selling process; they must also learn skills that will make them more effective and efficient as salespeople. Financial skills, negotiating skills, and even speed-reading courses were mentioned as additional training needs in sales. It is important to note that besides constantly learning new skills, salespeople have to be students of the business. Skills and abilities are developed and fine-tuned over time, and experience plays a role in the learning process. Therefore, it makes sense that salespeople are not “made” simply because they have the title just like a Doctor is not a doctor without 7 years of schooling or a teacher without 4 years of studying or a mechanic without their trades training. While some people may be more “natural” at sale, being successful in sales requires persistence, time, and hard work. If you are thinking about pursuing a career in sales, keep in mind that like other professions it takes time, training, and experience to be successful.

The Drive to Succeed

You can’t be successful if you don’t set goals. Great salespeople set goals for themselves, achieve them, and celebrate those achievements. They visualize what they want, then put together a plan to get it. The drive to succeed is important not only in sales, but also in life. Consider Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps. He set out to do something that no one else had ever done: win eight Olympic gold medals. It’s instructive to look at his drive to succeed and what he did to prepare for and achieve his goals.

Resilience and a Positive Attitude

It’s important to remember that you will hear “no” more frequently than you hear “Yes, I’ll take it.” That challenge, however, is offset by the thrill of victory when the sale is made and a relationship with the customer based on trust is built. You can only succeed when you go the extra mile, by investigating one more lead, going back for the second sales call even when the first hasn’t been successful, and trial closing even if you are not sure you can really get the sale. Dave Kahle, “The Four Characteristics of Successful Salespeople,” *Industrial Distribution* 97, no. 4 (April 2008): 54. It’s the eternal optimism that pushes you, even when others might think there is no reason to pursue the sale. If you think you can make it happen, you should definitely be in sales.

The Willingness to Take Risks

Has anyone ever told you, “You won’t know until you try”? That statement is especially true in sales. You can set yourself apart by taking smart business risks. Think about how you consider taking risks in everyday life and how they pay off. For example, let’s say you are from a small town and you chose to go to a college in a big city because you wanted to experience something new. That was a risk; it took you outside your comfort zone. But if you hadn’t taken the risk, you would have never known what life in a big city was like. Great salespeople go beyond the norm to explore and test the waters. For example, making phone calls to senior executives that you have never met, networking with people you don’t know, or making a presentation to a room full of customers all involve some level of risk. But getting out of your comfort zone and taking risks is how great opportunities are found.

The Ability to Ask for an Order

It may sound intuitive that successful salespeople shouldn't be afraid to ask for a customer's order, but you would be surprised at how often it happens. Most customers *want* you to ask for their order. "Would you like fries with your hamburger?" "What can I get you for dessert?" and "Would you like to pay with credit or cash?" are all examples of salespeople asking for the order.

A large percentage of the time these salespeople are successful and meet their customers' needs at the same time. You reduce your chances of being successful if you don't ask for the order. In other words, if *you* don't ask for the order, someone else *will*.

Independence and Discipline

Most sales positions require independence, self-motivation, and discipline. Although these traits may seem contradictory, they are actually complementary. Independence is especially important if you are calling on customers in person. It usually requires travel, either locally by car or by plane, which means that you have to be able to manage your time without being told what to do. In fact, it means that you set your schedule and do what you need to do to meet your sales goals but having this kind of independence requires discipline and self-discipline is considered essential for successful sales. *"Self-discipline is the difference between success and failure...and in sales, it is what separates the great from the mediocre"* according to Anthony Iannarino, a multi-book writer on the success of sales <https://www.inc.com/theodore-kinni/w...cing-this.html> (accessed May 20, 2024).

Flexibility

Along with the need for independence comes the importance of flexibility. Just as you are able to set your own schedule, you have to be flexible based on your customers' needs. Most sales positions are not nine-to-five jobs. That means you might be working nights or weekends, or you might be traveling out of town during the week or even long periods of time, especially if you are selling internationally. You have to be available when your customers want to buy. Before you cringe at the prospect of grueling hours and long flights, remember that this kind of schedule may also work to your advantage. You may have some weekdays off, which allow you to enjoy family, sports, or other outings that you might not otherwise have an opportunity to enjoy.

Passion

If you are not passionate about what you are selling, how do you expect your customers to believe in you and your product? You have to love what you do, believe in it, and feel passionately about it. Passion encompasses all the traits mentioned above; it is how they all come together. Passion is the element that sets you apart from other salespeople and makes your prospects and customers believe in you and your product or service. See why Selena Cuff, head of Heritage Link Brands, thinks passion is what makes a great salesperson. *"I look for passion for the product and I don't think that's something that you can fake. As a salesperson, you are up against a lot of no's, a lot of reasons people can't take the product, and you have to convince them. You can't do that in a slimy way. You can't fulfill that need if it's just about the money or meeting the numbers. Passion is what creates the ability to meet your customers' needs on the scene and get the sale."* (What makes a great salesperson, n.d.).

Creating Value

The role of a salesperson can be summed up in one sentence: "Salespeople are value creators." To further describe what this means, think about a recent visit to the Apple Store. If you go to the store at virtually any hour, it is filled with customers. The salespeople are not just those that are pushing a product, hoping that you buy so that they make their sales quota. They are experts who know everything about the products in the store whether they be MacBooks, iPads, or iPhones. The salespeople engage you in dialogue, listen, and learn about what you are looking for. They ask questions like, "What do you do with the photos you take? Do you like to make videos? Do you want to easily access the Web from your phone?" No techno-talk, no slick sales pitches. They just want to know what is important to you so that they can let you try the product that not only fits your basic computing needs, but also blows you away. Apple and its sales team know that computers are complicated and can baffle even savvy users. To build trust and confidence with their customers, they developed the "Genius Bar" so that Apple users know that they can always talk to an individual and find help with any problem or question they may have. In fact, Apple dedicates a section of their Web site to the Genius Bar and invites customers to make an appointment online to come to a store to talk to one of the "resident Geniuses." Talk about creating value. As a result, Apple is able to charge a premium for its product and generate such demand that in some cases people are line up to buy their latest products.

What Will You Be Doing?

The life of a salesperson is never dull. You could be working with a single customer or with multiple customers. You might work in a corporate office, or you might work from your home. You might talk to customers via phone, live chat, instant message, and text, or you might meet with them in their office in your neighborhood, your region, or anywhere around the world. You might be working on research to identify new customers, preparing a presentation for a new or existing customer, meeting with customers face-to-face, following up to get contracts signed, or communicating inside your organization to be sure all goes well to deliver the product or service to the customer on time and on budget. On any given day you might be working on any number of activities to support an existing customer or to approach, present, or close a new customer.

Key Takeaways

- To be successful in sales and in life, you have to enjoy what you do for a living.
- A good salesperson does more than sell; he builds a relationship and trust with the customer and offers solutions.
- A successful salesperson is a good listener. It's important to listen and understand the challenges that the customer is facing in order to present solutions that will work.
- Asking the right questions is critical to being successful in sales. It is the right questions that provide an opportunity for customers to share their challenges. Successful salespeople are always learning new things from selling techniques to technology in order to bring the best ideas to customers.
- Selling requires independence and discipline. There is no typical day in selling so salespeople have to be able to manage their own time.
- One of the biggest challenges of being in sales is the number of times you hear "no." Successful salespeople are resilient, have a positive attitude, and are willing to take risks.
- Passion is one of the most important characteristics of a successful salesperson. If a salesperson isn't passionate about what he sells, it's unlikely that his customers will be motivated to buy.
- The primary role of a salesperson is to create value for the customer and the company.
- A job in sales can be very rewarding on both a personal and a financial level, and it can lead to just about any career path you choose.

? Exercise 1.3.1

1. Think about someone you trust such as a parent, professor, friend, classmate, or colleague. Describe why you trust him or her. Now, think about that person again. Would she say that she trusts you? How would she describe why she trusts you?
2. Ask a classmate to describe his background and then describe yours for five minutes each. Write a summary of his background based on what he or she said and ask your classmate to do the same. How accurate was each of your summaries? How many details did each include in the summaries? What did you learn about listening skills?
3. Discuss the sentence, "Salespeople are communicators, not manipulators." What does it mean? Why is it important to know the difference in sales?
4. Describe at least three characteristics of a good salesperson. Do you have any or all of these characteristics? What is appealing to you about a profession in selling? What is not appealing to you about a profession in selling?
5. Invite a salesperson to visit your class (in person or virtually) to discuss his career in sales, what he thinks is most rewarding, and what he finds most challenging.

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