

Observing salespeople in their natural habitat

WHEN was the last time you sat in a customer appointment and observed one of your salespeople in action without getting involved personally? If this is something you undertake often then hats off to you. For the rest of us mere mortals this can be something of a challenge. However, unless you are clairvoyant it's the only way of reliably improving an individual's performance.

I often ask clients what they think a particular individual's key development areas are, since it's my guess they will have a better idea than me. Once they have told me they are lazy/crap at closing/poor interpersonal skills/not hungry enough (delete as applicable), I then ask them what specific proof they have for this 'thorough' analysis. Whilst this doesn't serve to win me many friends, it does serve to illustrate the point that we often think we know what development our people need but rarely have tangible evidence of skill deficiency.

Obviously you could resort to the many and much loved psychometric tests that will tell you variously that a person is a protagonist/a completer finisher/a red/a wardrobe (delete as applicable). Whilst of course it is claimed that these methods are psychologically sound and thoroughly researched, my real problem with them is what happens after you have been 'diagnosed' by Dr Knowitall's miracle mind reading and human sorting method. My experience of working with clients who have used these tools is that 12 months after their people have been assessed they are behaving in exactly the same way as they were before the assessment – sometimes they are even worse! "The Lyers Smiggs report says I'm a 'red' which means I often behave like a jerk – so that's my excuse for behaving like a jerk"! Thankfully I am yet to meet

two human beings who are the same and so am deeply sceptical of anything that attempts to put people into convenient groups. Frankly you might just as well find out what their star sign is and use this as a method for deciding how to improve their performance!

No – far better is to get out and watch exactly what your salespeople are doing and saying in the field. Sit in some appointments. If possible introduce yourself as a new salesperson out learning at the hands of the master (not senior enough yet to have business cards). Be quiet. Avoid eye contact with the client. Try and sit out of the eye line of your salesperson. Make extensive and specific notes.

If you use this approach the first thing your salesperson will ask when you sit in the car/café after the appointment is "so what did you think?" If it went well they will be expecting the usual pat on the back and general encouragement, if it went poorly they will be expecting you to hear a litany of inadequacies. Rather than telling them what you think straight off, here's my suggestion: irrespective of the outcome of the appointment ask them what they thought of their own performance. What did they think they did well? What could they have done better? What in their mind should happen next? Encourage them to be specific. Muster all of your skills as a salesperson and do what you do with clients – try and get them to say what you want them to say. It is 10 times more likely that I will apply myself to a development area if I identify it versus you telling me what it is.

In summary unless you have an extraordinarily well-developed sixth sense, best you get out in the field and use the other five senses to help your salespeople improve their performance.



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NEXT MONTH

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