

IS SELLING AN ART OR A SCIENCE?

(A New Response to an Old Question)

Is selling an art or a science? When this question is posed to sales trainers their responses are usually identical. Most sales trainers state that selling is both an art and a science. Some trainers will even attempt to guess what percentage of selling is an art and what percentage is a science. This question is usually treated as theoretical, having little impact upon how a sales person actually sells. Yet, nothing could be farther from the truth. Accurately answering this vital question has the power to transform a sales person's effectiveness.

To correctly answer the question of whether selling is an art or a science, one must first understand that the foundation of selling is influence. The activities that a sales person engages in (such as pre-call planning, discovering prospect needs, presenting product or service and closing the sale) are done for the purpose of more capably influencing prospects. Influence is essential to selling because information alone will rarely persuade a person to act. What moves people is not merely information, but how that information is presented. This is supported by hundreds of scientific studies that have conclusively proven that a person's perception and interpretation of a persuasive message is shaped by how that message is conveyed.

The necessity of relational influence within the context of selling is the very reason why sales people are needed. If information alone could compel a prospect to make a positive buying decision then sales people would be unnecessary. Though, this is clearly not the case as research studies have shown that a persuasive appeal is enhanced when it is done through interpersonal relationships.^{1 2 3 4} In addition, surveys which have examined the buying behaviors of over 100,000 prospects have revealed that often a decision to purchase is based not on the features, quality or even price of a product or service, but upon the sales person.⁵ As Harvard Business School Professors Ben Shapiro and John J. Sviokla write, "Despite the tremendous contributions of information and communications technology, selling is still largely a function of interpersonal relations, which are guided by the artful ability to recognize motivations, needs, and perceptions."⁶ The reality is that for a professional sales person, the ability to influence prospects is not a luxury, it is the survival skill.

Why Selling Is Now A Science

In the past, selling was considered both an art and a science because, though some basic knowledge about how people were influenced was known, much of what produces influence was a mystery. Discerning how to influence another person was viewed as an art form because the process of influence had never been systematically analyzed so it could be predicted and repeated. However, this is no longer true.

In the last few decades there have been thousands of scientific studies focused on obtaining an exact understanding of what enables and creates influence. The conclusions of this mountain of research revolutionized what scientists know about how influence occurs. There is now a consensus within the scientific community regarding the behaviors and mindsets that support and enhance influence. This has transformed the process of influencing another from an art to a proven science. As behavioral scientists Douglas Kenrick, Noah Goldstein and Sanford Braver affirm:

For well over 50 years, researchers have been applying a rigorous scientific approach to the question of which messages most successfully lead people to concede, comply, or change. Scientists have long employed a set of systematic procedures for discovering and replicating findings, including persuasion findings. As a consequence, the study of persuasion no longer exists only as an ethereal art. It is now a science that can reproduce its results. What is more, whoever engages in the scientific process can reproduce its results. Brilliant, inspired individuals are no longer necessary to divine the truth about persuasions, for a compelling new reason: The power of discovery doesn't reside, Socrates-style, inside the minds of a few persuasive geniuses anymore but inside the scientific process.⁷

While there are many scientific disciplines that have meaningfully contributed to the study of how humans are influenced, one of the most prominent is social psychology. Social psychology is actually defined as the scientific study of how people are influenced by one another.⁸ Also, another branch of science that has revealed substantial insights about the process of influence is communication theory.⁹ Researchers in communication theory have vigorously studied how verbal and nonverbal communication can heighten and also deter the persuasiveness of an appeal.¹⁰ As one scientist wrote, "The study of compliance gaining message behavior has held the attention of communication scholars as much as, if not more than, any other single topic in the discipline."¹¹ Likewise, significant research in the field of neuroscience has also advanced the understanding of how the brain achieves cognition, makes decisions and retains information. These findings have yielded relevant information regarding how influence is created through human thought, emotion, and behavior.^{12 13}

Science has identified the principles that generate influence. These principles are measurable and repeatable and when leveraged they have the persuasive power to boost one's capacity to influence another. This is the reason that social psychologists confirm that, "everyone's ability to persuade others can be improved by learning persuasion strategies that have been scientifically proven to be successful. Even people who consider themselves persuasion lightweights – people who feel they couldn't convince a child to play with toys – can learn to become persuasion heavyweights by understanding the psychology of persuasion and by using the specific persuasion strategies that have been scientifically proven to be effective."¹⁴

This scientific research also has a profound effect upon selling because it clearly demonstrates how a sales person's influence can be enhanced. Furthermore, though selling used to be an art that seemed to rely on nothing more than a shoeshine and a smile, now because of the proven science of influence, it has evolved. Today selling can be based upon proven science. In fact, selling is only viewed as an

art by those who are unaware of the science of influence. Oddly enough, most sales people, managers and even trainers remain largely uninformed about the potency and potential of this science. In spite of the fact that science will improve a sales person's ability to sell, it has been ignored, left dormant in academic journals. However, selling is a mission critical endeavor that is far too important to be based upon wishful thinking or trial and error. Why should a sales person's selling behaviors be based upon anything other than proven science?

The Hoffeld Group specializes in assisting sales people and organizations in integrating proven science with their selling efforts. When this occurs, the results are always astounding. Sales production increases, market share grows and sometimes careers and businesses are even reborn. In short, when sales people align their behaviors with science their interactions are enriched and so is their effectiveness.

The reality is that sales cannot fail; it is the lifeblood of an organization. Lack of sales destroys careers, kills businesses and thwarts dreams. As researchers Brad Sagarin and Kevin Mitnick assert, "In the marketplace, practitioners live or die by their skill at harnessing the principles of influence. The skilled prosper. The unskilled go out of business."¹⁵ Consequently, allowing sales to be an art is dangerous because in today's hyper-competitive marketplace neglecting science is no longer an option.

About the Author

David Hoffeld is CEO of the Hoffeld Group, a research based sales training, coaching and consulting firm that is the leader in the integration of proven science and sales. The Hoffeld Group takes the repeatable and predictable principles, which science has proven to create and enable influence, out of the laboratory and academic journals and apply them to selling. For a deeper look at the Hoffeld Group's groundbreaking research and innovative sales strategies visit HoffeldGroup.com.

Notes

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