

Key Behaviours of Best Sales Representatives

Summary

This paper presents major assumptions, basis and conclusions from study aimed at indication of key behaviours distinguishing the best and the worst sales representatives. The study was in the form of partly structured interviews provided among sales representatives employed in Abbot (medical company), Wolters Kluwer Poland (publishing company) and IMOOQEE (advisory company). The analysis of the interviews allow the author to name preliminary conclusions. All the conclusion require further confirmation in subsequent studies, particularly concerning four types of behaviour that distinguish the two groups, namely:

- having a hobby and maintaining it,
- planning a day, week, month, setting targets,
- consistency in action and observing the working schedule,
- searching for challenges.

They indicate the direction of search for differences between sales representatives, which, in effect, not only should help the employers select and match the sales department staff, but also it will indicate the education, training and development process directions and shall be used in building more efficient and effective motivation systems for sales personnel.

Introduction

This paper presents the conclusions from studies aimed at indication of key behaviours that distinguish the best sales representatives. The term of key behaviours meaning human relations used by psychologists¹, but also by social learning followers^{2,3} refers to conduct distinguishing two groups of people varying in terms of more complex issues, such as attitude

¹ Markman H.J. , Stanley S.M., Blumberg S.L. – Fighting for Your Marriage, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 2001
p.18

² Bandura A. - Social Learning through Imitation. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1962.

³ Bandura, A. - Social Learning & Personality Development: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975.

towards a problem, method of task performance or response to a phenomenon. However, in as much the key behaviours related to the groups negatively assessed are relatively well described and examined, in so far the methodology of discovering them in the context of distinguishing the best ones at an area from the rest of the group is not that easy.⁴ This is due to the fact that it is relatively easy to search for the cause of a sickness in the sick, while it is extremely difficult to signalise the reasons for being healthy in the healthy individuals. The study was carried out from January, 2008 until December, 2009 in selected teams of three enterprises operating in Poland (Abbot - medical company, Wolters Kluwer Poland - publishing company and IMOOQEE - advisory company) and it is the first edition of the study.

1. The study assumptions

In the case examined a few key issues occurred that required making certain assumptions and setting out a thesis. The assumed thesis was that there are such key behaviours that significantly distinguish good representatives from the bad ones. The study assumptions, however, included the term of a good sales representative and the method of discovering key behaviours. A good sales representative is a person who has been indicated by his/her boss and his/her sales results grew throughout the period preceding the study. At the same time the managers were asked to follow a variable, sometimes imponderable, to accompany the above data, namely, to ask in each case a question whether it is a sales representative with “selling potential”. It was perfectly understandable that this is a criterion difficult to be explained and its perception really is subjective, nevertheless, it required selection or very detailed description of an unknown profile of a good representative and thus, either imposing the type of people to be examined or rely on the expertise of the manager cooperating with the people. Such manager, although frequently could not explain the foundations for his decision, nevertheless, he had been managing the team for years, gained marked successes measured by the amount of revenues and had been coordinating the recruitment and HR selection processes. However, the managers indicated here that they based their decisions on the fact that a good representative is understood as efficient and effective in terms of sales performance, but also other targets set before him. Outstanding above his own group and perceived by the boss as a person with higher potential than others.

⁴ Patterson K, Grenny J, Maxfield D, McMillan R, Switzler A - Sztuka Wywierania Wpływu. Jak Wprowadzić Dowolną Zmianę, wyd. Wolters Kluwer 2009r p.63

In the first case, taking such assumptions would imply an attempt and practically “condemn” to verification of each variable specified a particular study. This, in turn, would lead to a conclusion that assumptions for assumption verification would be necessary. Such structure would not only be difficult to defend, but also could significantly deform the results. In the selected attitude, except the rigid result growth variable, the manager’s opinion is the key item. Bad representatives, according to the assumption, were those who not only generated drop of sales for the passing year, but, like in the previous cases, were indicated by the manager as people presenting no good expectations as sales department employees of a given organisation. Thus, a group of almost eighty sales representatives of three enterprises were selected, each of such enterprise employed more than one hundred sales people.

2. Methods of the study

The study was carried out in the form of interview, partly (half) structured. The survey prepared for the study purposes included thirteen open questions, aimed at the identification of the attitudes and behaviours and brief profile including questions about professional experience, age and education. Although some authors⁵, recommend observation for identification of key behaviours, however, the principle of declaration resulting from the interviews and providing answers set by the interviewer, was assumed here. Adopting this examination method was conditioned by the fact that another study stage is planned, in a way verifying the results obtained and based on observation. However, the application in this case of partly structured interview with open questions also has the source in the references of this topic. The interviews were of individual type, deepened,⁶ personal⁷. It is justified by the fact that the authors wanted to obtain possibly deep results, allowing for relatively accurate examination of the phenomenon and enable to isolate key behaviours. The focused interview was rejected, because it was important that the respondents do not influence their statements. Within the group examined the authors concentrated most of all on the interviews with the best representatives and they were carried out first. Based on them, the attention was drawn to the behaviours and attitudes of sales people indicated as the worst ones of their teams. The examination was of qualitative nature after which the conclusions were to be verified. However, the key behaviours of the best sales representatives can be indicated now, already.

⁵ Reid E.R. - Teaching new words through the sight and context methods, Cove, 1978

⁶ Hague P. – Market Research. A Guide to Planning, Methodology and Evaluation, Kogan Page, 2002 p. 56

⁷ Hague P. Hague N. Morgan C.A. – Market Research in Practice , Kogan Page 2004 p.121

Although we cannot reliably and clearly indicate the points of differences between them and the weaker ones yet, the hypotheses which behaviours are the key ones among the best people can be presented.

3. Characteristics, skills, attitudes

As a result of the interview analyses, the authors managed to set three main groups of attitudes, characteristics and skills, within the frames of which the key behaviours were intended to be fixed. Although the separateness of the groups not always can be explicitly indicated, nevertheless an authoritative assumption was made that they differ from one another to such an extent that their common parts were insignificant and could be omitted in the further analysis. Obviously, it was not assumed that different behaviours would be isolated from each group. On the contrary, it was expected that the behaviours originating from each of them could be the same as in case of other group analysis results. This would lead to the confirmation of a thesis that there are key behaviours distinguishing the best from the worst sales representatives.

The first group isolated was called „ambition”, which can also be called target orientation or commitment into reaching such target. Such characteristics, skills and attitudes were described here as strong demand for achievements, tendency to win, competence, persistence, discipline, consistency in action, analytic abilities, etc. So the „ambition” group includes such characteristics, skills, attitudes and behaviours that concern the achievement of the targets assumed.

The second group was described as „enthusiasm” including commitment in work, widely understood optimism, internal motivation, mental strength, happiness with the tasks performed, etc. So the group „enthusiasm” is the internal commitment in the actions performed.

The third group is related to empathy and so it was called. It includes openness to others’ needs, understanding, patience, keeping promises, responsibility, listening to clients, inducing trust, easiness at adapting to a situation or conversation partner. Thus, the “empathy” group is the openness and reading other people’s needs.

Distinguishing and considerations aimed at differentiating attitudes⁸ from abilities⁹, characteristics¹⁰ and skills¹¹ was not the aim of the study. The definitions taken from Collins

⁸ <http://www.collinslanguage.com/results.aspx?context=3&reversed=False&action=define&homonym=0&text=attitude> 2010-02-15

⁹ <http://www.collinslanguage.com/results.aspx?context=3&reversed=False&action=define&homonym=-1&text=ability> 2010-02-15

¹⁰ <http://www.collinslanguage.com/results.aspx?context=3&reversed=False&action=define&homonym=0&text=feature> 2010-02-15

¹¹ <http://www.collinslanguage.com/results.aspx?context=3&reversed=False&action=define&homonym=0&text=skill> 2010-02-15

on-line dictionary were considered by the authors. Setting the hierarchy of the groups was not the aim of the study, either. What was significant, however, was to group them in terms of the assumptions made on the group contents and search for key behaviours basing on such foundation.

Table 1. Groups of characteristics, attitudes and skills

Ambition	Enthusiasm	Empathy
endeavour after a target, achievement orientation, tendency to win, persistence at task performance, discipline and self-discipline, consistency in action, analytic abilities	commitment in work, optimism, internal motivation and mental strength to handle difficulties, happiness with the tasks performed, relatively high self-assessment	openness to others' needs, understanding in relationships with people, patience, keeping promises and responsibility, listening to people and remembering, inducing trust, adaptation to a situation and conversation partner, timeliness, communicativeness.

Reference: the author's own paper.

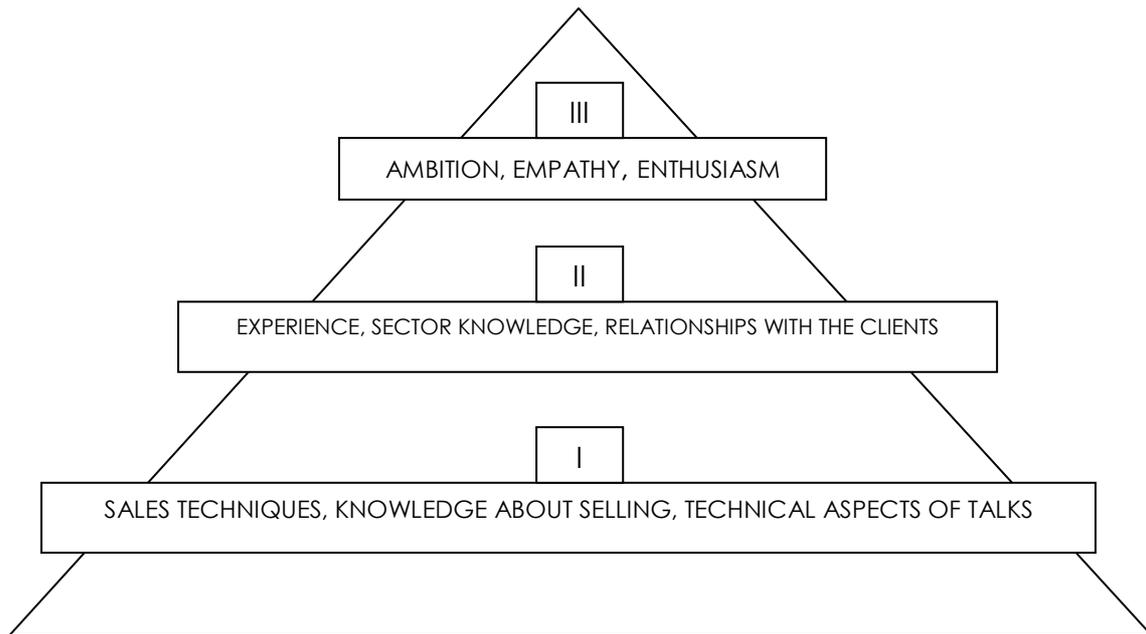
This section appeared to be immensely interesting, not only in terms of impact on the further part of the study, but also from the cognitive point of view. Thus, out of all the respondents, practically everyone mentioned the characteristics and attitudes as the elements affecting the status of the best ones. However, only a little more than every second person mentioned education, industrial knowledge, knowledge of the market or skills related to handling meetings and negotiations. However, what particularly affected the direction of search for key behaviours is the fact that none of the best sales representatives examined mentioned sales techniques and abilities to influence people as the parameter significantly affecting distinguishing the best ones from the worst. Two conclusions can be drawn from the above, namely:

1. This is not the knowledge, ability or skill necessary to be the best sales person.
2. This is an unconscious ability and unconscious skill, unconsciously used by the sales representatives.

In both cases, however, the presumption that conscious practicing sales techniques or ability to influence others are key behaviours, should be rejected. This would discredit the existing concepts on creating methods of best sales people, particularly those contained in numerous handbooks in this scope¹². To confirm the presumption, it was tested whether a new person in the sector, however, after extensive training in sales techniques and relationship building skills, is able to qualify in the group of the best representatives within a relatively short period of time (up to 6 months). Both in the interviews and after analysis of information on the career history of the best representatives, the authors did not manage to confirm this and on such foundation we may subject the authenticity of the above test question to further analyses. The question concerns the issue that neither the knowledge nor a key behaviour consisting in attending training on sales techniques and influencing others make the representative may be included in the circle of the best ones in the future. This is relatively good news for the present sales people who cannot be easily substituted by other persons, particularly, because in the study the knowledge of and about the clients and relationships with them that have been built were indicated as an immensely significant factor in gaining success in direct sales. Basing on this, other partly supplementing, partly separate sets of characteristics were proposed, capable of leading to indicate the directions of search for key behaviours. It was settled that in addition to the three groups (ambition, empathy, enthusiasm), there may also be knowledge, experience, relationships with the clients, sales techniques, knowledge about selling. Basing on the conclusions from the study already presented, the authors also decided to arrange a hierarchy of directions within separated groups of searching for key behaviours where three levels were differentiated. Ambition, empathy and enthusiasm are characteristics searched for most of all (the third, highest level), sector knowledge, experience in the sector, experience in the sector on a similar position and relationships with the clients already established on the second level, sales techniques and those of influencing others, technical aspects of talks with the clients on, third (on the first, lowest level) are presented in fig. 1.

¹² Brian Tracy, Geoff King, Richard Bandler, John la Valle, Joe Vitale and many others

Fig. 1. Hierarchy of key behaviour areas of the best sales representatives.



Reference: the author's own paper.

Thus, it allows for further assumptions that the key behaviours should first of all meet the criteria enabling the search for their effects or motives and foundations on the first level and further, as supplementing ones on the second and third level.

Therefore, the key behaviours should meet three critical conditions in this case:

1. They should be characteristic for the group of the best sales representatives.
2. They should not appear in the group of the worst sales representatives.
3. They should refer, most of all, to the third level of the key behaviour hierarchy of the best sales representatives.

4. Presumable key behaviours

During the analysis consisting in declared, not monitored, description of behaviours in the work of the best sales representatives, in relation to the worst ones, a few behaviours were identified that could be acknowledged key ones as they met three conditions set earlier on:

- having a hobby and maintaining it,
- planning a day, week, month, setting the targets,
- consistency in action and keeping the working schedule,
- searching for challenges.

4.1. Having a hobby and maintaining it

Two directions dominate in this area. The first trend includes hobbies consisting in very active spending of free time, while the second one includes ones that require scarcely any physical exercise or are not a challenge on the mental grounds and seem to be a sign of peace and comfort. Practically no indirect ways were found during the study. The first trend may include parachuting, rock climbing or motor-cycling. Walks, gardening, reading books or recreational cycling were classified within the other trend. Finding no competitive sports in this group was interesting and surprising to the group of researchers. In each case, however, the hobby was maintained, which was characterised by the length of statements, regular participation, specific structuring of the hobby (determined time, regular activities, mode, etc.), the level of commitment in the statement, no hesitation in the answer to the question about a hobby and pastimes. The hobby criterion grasped in such a way met three requirements for key behaviours set earlier on.

4.2. Planning and targets

Planning the day, week, month and setting the targets are further key behaviours distinguishing the group of the best sales representatives. It takes various forms and often is brought to keeping a personal calendar and largely the observance of entries included therein. The written form seems to be quite important here as it appeared much more frequently than non-verbal planning in the group of respondents. Although the group examined, due to its number, does not really allow for statistics or statistical analyses, nevertheless we may find that out of the best sales representatives, most of the respondents (slightly above 50%) had no difficulty with determining the targets of their activities in the nearest future. The important thing, contrary to the worst representatives, only in few cases money was mentioned as the primary target. Money appeared by far most frequently among the worst representatives. This can be interpreted in numerous ways, however, it was assumed that either money is the target for the people or they indicated the target as one they assumed under the principle of peculiar easiness of formulating it. It is fairly obvious and easily defined, does not require personal commitment and conviction at determining it and setting the ways to reach it. Thus the target was more complex, existent, the best sales people were aware of it and tried to accomplish it.

4.3. Consistency

The consistency in action and adherence to the working schedule is another behaviour acknowledged as key one, although in this case it was not as explicit as in the two cases presented above. The sales representatives acknowledged the best ones stated that they tried to act consistently and consistently accomplish the targets they set for themselves. They are not discouraged with failures or no response of the people surrounding them to their actions and keep accomplishing their plans. This is partly connected with the previous section (planning and targets), however, indicates a slightly different type of behaviour, namely, some kind of stubbornness at the plan accomplishment, but also no surrender to momentary changes, fashions and suggestions of people surrounding them on the basic direction or structure of action. It rather includes living and professional issues important for the respondent, the performance of them or “faithfulness” to them occurs for a longer period (more than one year). It also includes the stubbornness at the plan accomplishment and regularity in action. Combined with behaviour related to planning, this may take the form of breaking the plan into sets of actions and their consistent accomplishment. The consistency formulated in such a way was identified in a little more than 20 interviews carried out among the best representatives.

4.4. Search for challenges

The search for challenges is a category where some problems occurred with determining boundaries in the study. The definition of a challenge assumed after PWN¹³ dictionary determines it as a difficult, unusual situation one should cope with. This definition was assumed, which in turn significantly expanded its scope beyond the professional questions related to the work of a sales representative. So it included hobbies and pastimes, living targets, methods of task performance and other questions occurring during the interview. Search for challenges was connected with declarations of willingness to take up new tasks, searching for them and relating internal motivation to the occurrence of new, untypical actions and untypical task performance.

¹³ Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's. English Dictionary, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, wyd. I, 2009

5. Summary

The conclusions from the study presented in this paper are only the introduction to search for key behaviours distinguishing the best sales representatives from the worse ones, according to the assumptions and definitions. The study was in the form of partly structured interviews, the analysis of which enabled setting preliminary conclusions to be further confirmed and concerning the four key behaviours distinguishing the two groups, namely:

- having a hobby and maintaining it,
- planning a day, week, month, setting targets,
- consistency in action and observing the working schedule,
- searching for challenges.

However, they require verification, both on a larger group of respondents and by method different from the one used, i.e. watching sales people's working day as suggested by some authors already mentioned in this paper. Nevertheless, they are an important guideline for directions of search for key behaviours and differences between the best and the worst ones.

The deepened and more authorised conclusions on the results obtained not only shall help select and match the staff for the sales departments, but also will show directions of the education process, training and development and serve to build more efficient and effective motivation systems for sales people.

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