

Do Your Salespeople Have The Right “DNA”?

What does it take to be successful in printing sales? I ask that question frequently in the seminars I teach, and I’ve noted that the answer tends to differ according to the position and perspective of the respondent. Salespeople talk about persistence and product knowledge. Sales Managers talk about hunters vs. farmers. Owners who have sales background and sales responsibilities talk about time management and organization. Owners and managers with no sales experience or sales responsibilities talk about people skills and outgoing personalities.

Toward the end of last year, I started thinking that all of this could be quantified. In the early spring of this year, I launched The Printing Sales DNA Project.

Methodology

The methodology was pretty straightforward. I created a list of “success factors,” basically consolidating all of the things I’ve heard over the years into a common terminology. The list included 8 personality traits, and 12 working skills and attitudes. I then created a survey website, where we would collect demographic data, and ask each respondent to rate each of the “success factors” in terms of its importance to the overall Printing Sales DNA, using a scale of 1-20.

That’s not a “standard” scale, of course, as most similarly structured surveys use either a 5 point or 10 point scale. I wanted as much range as possible for differentiation purposes. I knew that it would be easy for respondents to say “these are all important!” The goal of the study was to identify which ones are *most* important, even by small increments.

I wanted to be able to segment the importance data by type of printing company, and also by the specific job responsibilities of the respondents. Here are the choices we provided:

My company can best be described as:

- quick/small commercial printer
- large commercial printer
- reprographic printer
- large format/specialty graphic printer
- print distributor

My responsibilities can best be described as:

- full-time sales/employee
- full-time sales/owner or manager
- part-time sales with other responsibilities/employee
- part-time sales with other responsibilities/owner or manager
- owner with no sales responsibilities
- manager with no sales responsibilities
- employee with no sales responsibilities

We also collected data on age range and sales experience, both years in printing sales and total years in sales (including printing).

Success Factors

Here is the list of “success factors” each respondent was asked to rate:

Personality Traits

- **Energy:** The willingness to work hard, getting as much done as possible every day.
- **Creativity:** The ability to work smart, coming up with solutions to problems, obstacles and objections.
- **Ego Drive:** The inner need to get people to say “Yes.” People with high ego drive get great satisfaction from convincing others to agree with them; in this case, to agree to talk/meet with them and ultimately buy from them.
- **Dollar Drive:** People with high dollar drive are motivated by money. They work hard and smart to maximize their earnings opportunity.

- **Courage:** The willingness to ask provocative questions and to challenge objections. (NOTE: *Creativity* is the ability to come up with a response to an objection. *Courage* is the willingness to execute that response; essentially to tell people why they should agree with you rather than disagree.
- **Resilience:** The ability to handle and bounce back from rejection.
- **Empathy:** The ability to accurately and objectively perceive another person's feelings.
- **Sociability:** An outgoing/extroverted personality; being a "people person."

Working Skills and Attitudes

- **Technical Product Knowledge:** General knowledge of printing processes and specific knowledge of the company's products and capabilities
- **Applications Product Knowledge:** An understanding of how the printing is used in the customer's business and the ability to consult/advise on ways to make the printing work better.
- **Hunter Skills:** An organized approach to prospecting for new business.
- **Hunter Attitude:** A commitment to prospecting for new business. This can include both prospecting for new customers and prospecting for more business/new opportunities with current customers.
- **Questioning Skills:** The ability to lead a sales conversation with questions, both to uncover opportunity and to keep the customer engaged.
- **Listening Skills:** The ability to hear and understand what the other person is saying. (NOTE: The other person can be a customer, a co-worker, or a manager.)
- **Presentation Skills:** The ability to describe the printing company's capabilities and value proposition.
- **Convincing Skills:** The ability to handle obstacles and objections and close the sale.
- **Negotiation Skills:** The ability to negotiate effectively, resulting in a win-win scenario, not simply a price concession.
- **Improvement Attitude:** Eagerness to learn and willingness to be trained and/or managed, because better skills and management should produce better results.
- **Team Skills and Attitude:** The willingness and ability to work well within the team which includes both the sales side and the production side of the business.
- **TMOP Skills:** Time Management, Organization and Prioritization.

Results

The results of the study were surprising in some ways, predictable in others. The most surprising element was that there was far less difference in perspective based on job responsibilities than I expected.

That can partially be explained by the fact that nearly 70% of the 535 respondents categorized themselves as full-time salespeople, and of that group, just over 70% were owners and/or managers in the full-time sales role. In the Sales Management seminars I teach, a much higher percentage of attendees are owners who do not have full-time sales responsibilities — and who also do not have a great deal of sales experience!

Still, the responses were very consistent. Every demographic group rated *Listening Skills* as the most important of all of the success factors. Owners and managers rated it higher than sales employees, but not by a significant margin. Every demographic group rated *Ego Drive* as the least important success factor. Sales employees rated it higher than owners and managers, but again, not by a significant margin. In all, sales employees rated 13 factors higher than owners and managers. The largest differences were *Product Knowledge* (both *Technical Product Knowledge* and *Applications Product Knowledge*), *Presentations Skills*, *Courage* and *Team Skills & Attitudes*. Of the 7 that owners and managers ranked higher than sales employees, the largest differences were *Convincing Skills* and *Negotiation Skills*.

Here's a listing of the success factors, ranked by order of importance, for all respondents:

1. Listening Skills
2. Creativity
3. Energy
4. Resilience
5. Questioning Skills
6. Improvement Attitude
7. Applications Product Knowledge
8. Team Skills and Attitude
9. Hunter Attitude
10. Courage
11. TMOP Skills

12. Empathy
13. Negotiation Skills
14. Convincing Skills
15. Sociability
16. Presentation Skills
17. Hunter Skills
18. Technical Product Knowledge
19. Dollar Drive
20. Ego Drive

My Rankings

Now we come to the “predictable” part. My own rankings are considerably different than the average of all respondents. And the reason I feel this is predictable is because most printing salespeople are underachievers.

I know that I need to defend that statement. Here’s how I think I can. I routinely ask salespeople to rate themselves on their performance, using a simple scale of 1-10. I hear very few 10’s, a few 9’s, a lot of 7’s and 8’s, and occasionally lower scores.

I also routinely ask owners and managers to rate their salespeople, using the same 1-10 scale. I hear even fewer 10’s and 9’s, a lot of 6’s and 7’s, and a disturbing number of even lower scores. My conclusion is that we really are an industry of sales underachievers. And there has to be a reason for that. I think it’s largely a misunderstanding of the DNA, which leads to mistakes in hiring and shortfalls in training, managing and motivating.

Here’s my own listing of the success factors, ranked by order of importance:

1. Ego Drive
2. Hunter Attitude
3. Listening Skills
4. Dollar Drive
5. Creativity
6. Energy
7. Resilience
8. Questioning Skills
9. Improvement Attitude
10. Courage
11. TMOP Skills
12. Empathy
13. Negotiation Skills
14. Convincing Skills
15. Applications Product Knowledge
16. Team Skills and Attitude
17. Hunter Skills
18. Technical Product Knowledge
19. Sociability
20. Presentation Skills

The average of all respondents puts *Ego Drive* at the bottom of the list. I put it at the top of the list. As noted earlier, *Ego Drive* is defined as the inner need to get people to say “Yes.” People with high ego drive get great satisfaction from convincing others to agree with them. I meet a lot of printing salespeople who tell me that they love being in sales. I ask them what they love about it. The underachievers say things like “I love to meet new people” or “I love being out and about” or “I love to help my customers.” The top achievers say “I love the challenge of overcoming objections and convincing people to buy from me.”

The average of all respondents puts *Hunter Attitude* in the middle of the list. I put it at the top of the list, actually tied for the top position. A *Hunter Attitude* is defined by the commitment to prospect for new business. This can include both prospecting for new customers and prospecting for more business/new opportunities within current customers.

It’s interesting that the most common complaint I hear from owners and managers is that their salespeople aren’t bringing in enough new business. Based on that, I would have expected a higher rating for this factor. Even more interestingly, full-time salespeople rated it higher than owners and managers! But the fact remains, it’s not happening with the frequency that owners and managers are looking for.

Dollar Drive

I also rated *Dollar Drive* considerably higher than the average of all respondents. As I noted in the “Success Factor” descriptions — which were right next to the rating scales at the study website — people with high dollar drive are motivated by money. They work hard and smart to maximize their earnings opportunity. Obviously the data suggests that most printing salespeople are not motivated by money, and my position is that they should be. If they are not, something is wrong with their compensation plans!

I wrote an article for *SGIA Journal* several years ago on the topic of sales compensation, and explained my compensation philosophy — that *money talks*, so it’s important that its voice says what you want it to say. In my experience, *keeping it simple* is the driving force behind most compensation strategy, and not nearly enough thought goes into what behaviors management wants to motivate. For example, a high guarantee and a low incentive component motivates complacency, and commission paid on gross volume as opposed to gross profit motivates discounting. There’s no question in my mind that most sales compensation plans in our industry don’t work very well.

Having said that, another part of the success equation is to hire people who *are* dollar driven. In interviews, I always ask “what will motivate you?” If the answer does not include the opportunity to earn a very good living, I’m inclined to disqualify that candidate. And if it does, I always say “now I need to hear some evidence that’s really true. What will you do with the money?” I have found this strategy to be very effective in quantifying *Dollar Drive*.

Better Hiring/Training/Management

The findings of The Printing Sales DNA Project should enable better hiring. Skills and attitudes can be determined by questioning — and by checking references! Personality traits can be determined by testing. I use the Caliper Profile as my testing tool, and have found it to be very effective in measuring 7 of the 8 “success factor” traits. The only one it can’t measure is *Dollar Drive*, but as noted, that can be addressed in the interview stage.

The findings should also enable better training and management. The process I recommend is to rate each of your salespeople against each of the working skills and attitudes, using a simple 1-10 scale. A low score in any of the skills would suggest that as an area for training. A low score in any of the attitudes would suggest that as an area to be addressed by management supported by motivation. Low scores in the most important factors should be addressed before the less important factors. Bottom line, you now have a picture of the optimum DNA for a specialty graphics printing salesperson, and you should be able to use it to improve your sales team.

The Printing Sales DNA Project Detailed Findings Report is available for purchase at www.davefellman.com.