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FOUR TRAITS OF SALES SUCCESS

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The backfield players of the Cleveland Browns football team are shown at a practice workout. Left to right; Bob Brown, right halfback; Otto Graham, quarterback; Mario Motley, fullback and Edgar Jones, left halfback.

In professional and collegiate football, there is always talk about how fast a player can run 40 yards. Why? In the book *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation*, author Michael MacCambridge writes about the origin of the 40-yard dash. "Intent on building a fast team, [Paul Brown in the mid-1940s] began timing players in the 40-yard dash, rather than the 100, reasoning that the 40 was a more meaningful measure of true football speed, about the distance a player would cover on a punt." This test of skill initially was for only specific positions on the team, but it soon became an essential measurement for nearly every player. In addition to speed, a top athlete will also have other characteristics such as athletic ability, strength, and technique to name a few. These are specific traits that determine if an individual is going to be good or even great. Perhaps these skills come naturally, or maybe, through years of hard work and study they have been learned and practiced.

"How does this apply to sales?" you may wonder. Well, just like a coach may look for specific skills in an athlete, you can determine a salesperson's chances of success or failure by identifying four particular traits. These four areas have a significant impact on the level of success that an individual will achieve, or if they can succeed at all. Understanding these four points can be a key to determining who should be on your sales team, or if an individual should pursue

a career in sales at all. Indeed, like sports, sales is about performance, and these four traits are beneficial for managers and team members to understand.

Is one of the traits a person's good looks? No. Some people believe that attractiveness is essential to being a successful salesperson. However, some of the most exceptional salespeople I have ever known were average looking at best and may have been considered downright unattractive. What about people who have great personalities? Well, that is nice, but again I have been around some great salespeople, and they weren't all that nice, and their personalities would be considered quite mediocre. I have seen many attractive people, with charming personalities, fail repeatedly. Being good-looking with a great personality is no guarantee in sales.

Here is a brief overview of the four traits that a salesperson needs to succeed:

1. Sales Acumen – This attribute contributes to being a successful salesperson, yet it cannot be taught. It is a talent that a person either naturally possesses or they don't. If they do not have sales acumen, they should pursue another career. What is acumen? It is the ability for a person to think on their feet, to have the wherewithal to make sound judgments and quick decisions. In sales, it is the ability to make a series of persuasive arguments in a logical fashion. Unfortunately, I have met salespeople who

lack this talent, and I usually feel sorry for them, because I know they are in the wrong profession. I am sure you have had a similar experience, you encounter an attractive, friendly salesperson attempting to sell you something, yet they cannot make a logical presentation if their life depended on it.

Natural abilities are just that. You either have it, or you don't. I will use myself as an example. I am a horrible artist. I cannot even draw a decent stick figure! Should I enroll in art school and pursue a career in this field? No! As for natural talent in art, I have none. Zip, zero, zilch.

Sales acumen is very rarely if ever, discussed. However, it is paramount to being successful. Again, if a person does not have the natural ability to think on their feet, they should make other career plans.

2. Continual Learner – So, now let's say an individual has sales acumen, what is the next trait? It is the need to be a continual learner. I put the word continual in there for a reason. Being a learner is not enough. A person must have a continued desire for knowledge in their field. I mean not only the specific business of their employ, such as medical supplies, real estate, insurance, technology, securities, etc., and the product or service they sell, but also the objective to increase their knowledge in the science and art of sales. The constant learner is always looking for the next book or article on sales strategies, or they are listening to

audiobooks where masters of sales discuss great ideas. I remember when I started in sales, I always had a book in my hand or I listened to hours of sales training gurus on cassette tapes (yes, it was that long ago). I would read the same book, and I would listen to the same audio recordings ten times over. But this was not a temporary period of learning. Today, I continue to read everything I can get my hands on that has to do with sales – always looking for the next good idea. The reason I will never stop? In the book by David Clark, *The Tao of Charlie Munger*, (a collection of quotes from Warren Buffet’s business partner) Munger relates the importance of one, simple habit: reading. He says, “In my whole life, I have known no wise people who didn’t read all the time – none, zero.”

3. Industry Expert – Remaining a continual learner leads to the next point – being an expert, or authority, in your field or in the nuances of the specific product or service you are selling. Once a salesperson reaches this stage, they have an elevated status of authority, and this causes their prospective customers to take notice. Becoming an expert is only achieved if an individual is also a continual learner. Top producers continuously increase their expertise in their specific field. It is an ongoing process. Again, I have seen individuals miss the mark in this area. A salesperson gains an elementary understanding of the industry and product or service and settles in a particular comfort zone. This deficiency stifles their ability

to reach their potential and could disrupt their career. Do you read industry journals and find out what the latest trends are in your industry? Do you seek out articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg News*, *Businessweek*, or *Harvard Business Review* looking for matters that affect your business? Do you research well-informed articles on the Internet that discuss relevant statistics and industry trends? That research is what is required to be an expert. The more you know, the more competent you are and the more of an authority you become. This knowledge increases your value in the eyes of your prospects and customers.

4. Sales Process Specialist – We have established that a successful salesperson has acumen, is a constant learner and has become an expert in his field. The last point is whether the salesperson possesses a thorough knowledge of Sales Process. What is Sales Process? I refer to it as the science of sales – the application of sales psychology – what is behind the purchasing decision. Sales Process gives you the ability to develop a presentation that addresses the underlying concerns that buyers have when purchasing any product or service. Sales Process includes “reasoning arguments” that increase the buyer’s confidence in the salesperson and the company and reduce buyer’s concerns about risks assumed in buying. When a salesperson learns Sales Process, they are far more likely to be successful than ones that haven’t put forth the effort to gain this understanding.

Again, and this is unfortunate, I have seen an increasing gap in this area. It is surprising to me that a high number of salespeople have never received basic Sales Process training. Amazingly, some intuitively discern certain aspects of Sales Process, but those that do not subsequently fail. Knowing Sales Process and the psychology of sales is a must. A salesperson cannot successfully do their job without it. I have been in sales for over thirty years (think cassette tape), and yet I review my Sales Process every day. I am always looking for new ideas that relate to Sales Process that can improve my results.

Sales Acumen, Continual Learner, Industry Expert and Sales Process Specialist – If an individual has these strengths, they already are or can readily become a master salesperson, and this is most certainly the goal. I am not referring to merely just getting by, or achieving a passable level of mediocrity, but being the best! Although acumen is a natural ability that someone is born with, it takes a measure of resolve to master the other three skills. It is a matter of hard work, practice, and diligent study to reach the top. If you spend time with big producers, the ones at the top, you will find that these attributes are present. So, just like the athlete that runs a four to five-second 40-yard dash – is that the beginning? Or does that make them a great football player? No, they must have the desire to be the best which requires continual learning and diligent practice.

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	MASTER	INTERMEDIATE	BEGINNER	INADEQUATE	FAILURE
1. ACUMEN	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
2. LEARNER	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
3. EXPERT	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
4. SALES PROCESS	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO