

## **The Secret of Top Sales Performers**

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Ask top sales performers the world over what their “secret of success” is. Nine out of ten will tell you “empathy.” According to Linda Richardson author of *Stop Telling Start Selling*, that’s what all the research confirms.

What is this thing called empathy? It means having the ability to identify with another person’s feelings or thinking. It means being able to express those feelings back to them in a way that demonstrates real caring. What else but real caring for another person matters in any relationship?

Empathy diffuses tension, animosity and fear. In sales relationships it says, *I understand. I care. I’m not here solely to “sell” you.* Empathy creates the space for questions? Questions promote dialogue. And dialogue promotes a better understanding of the customer’s real concerns and expectations.

Does it surprise you that success could hinge on such a simple, natural thing? I guess the real question is, is empathy such a simple, natural thing? All I know is that over and over again in sales training, when participants are asked to role-play handling customer concerns many of them leave out any expression of empathy.

Why? Maybe they’re just embarrassed to show feelings in front of their peers. Or maybe empathy isn’t such a simple, natural thing. Maybe that’s why more often than not, instead of empathizing with customers, trainees try to change their minds with fast-talking.

What happens as a result? Communication shuts down. That’s because without empathy no foundation is laid for asking questions. No framework is raised for real dialogue. Without empathy no bridge exists for building a relationship.

You may be thinking that this all sounds well and good when you’re talking about empathizing with a customer who’s unhappy about service or a particular product. But what about a customer who’s main concern is pricing? How can empathy do anything but get you in trouble when it comes to price?

Listen to this Account Manager role-play talking to a potential customer at a major account. The customer is hung up on pricing:

*Customer: Price is the most important criteria to us. If you expect to do business with us you’ll have to meet or beat your competitor’s prices or we’re not interested.*

Watch the sales rep fall right into the trap:

Trainee: *We're the largest company in our market. Our buying power is second to none. I'd be glad to see what I can do. Can you get me a copy of your current contract so I can price it for you?*

Sound familiar? Looks like the sales rep has walked right into a price war. . How can the sales rep get the customer to open up with what's behind this request? How could a little empathy save the day?

In order to find out what a customer is thinking the sales rep must first identify with the customer's position. This lays the groundwork for asking questions. Even though the customer has identified their concern over pricing the issue must be more closely examined. What the sales rep needs to find out is *why* price is so important and how price is weighed and compared against everything else.

By agreeing to discuss price before finding these things out the sales rep has closed off communication and boxed himself into playing the price game prematurely. What causes sales people to react like this? The *natural* thing is to be more concerned about looking good and sounding smart rather than really trying to understand where the customer is coming from. Empathy isn't that easy nor that natural.

How can taking his focus off himself and putting it on the customer turn this conversation around? Let's see what could have happened if the sales rep had used a tincture of empathy.

Customer: *Price is the most important criteria to us. If you expect to do business with us you'll have to meet or beat your competitor's prices or we're not interested.*

Trainee: *Boy, I know what you mean. Price is an important part in choosing a supplier, especially in today's highly competitive market. I've got some high marks to hit for you. But you're a valued potential customer to me. I'd like very much to earn your business so I'll be working hard to meet your expectations.*

(Empathy creates the bridge that is necessary for going deeper).

*There's something I'd like to understand first. Our best customers tell us it's hard to compare pricing before understanding what comes with price, and, what tradeoffs it takes to get the lowest price. Would you mind telling me more about what value you're expecting to get along with your pricing so we can do a more complete comparison?*

In this scenario the sales rep is feeling the customer's position *first* and then is really trying to understand. Empathy lays the foundation for questions. The more and better questions that are asked the more the customer can be understood. By asking more questions customers will guide you on how to sell them. This takes the pressure off you and makes your job easier. Now, you don't have to know it all. You don't have to convince them to change their minds. You don't have to present a one-dimensional solution.

It sounds simple enough but as we know, empathy is the quality that sets top sales performers apart. It's a critical success factor in building successful relationships of any kind. But it isn't simple and it isn't natural. It takes concentrated focus and effort to take the attention off of you and put it on the customer. Practice it and you will experience the secret of top sales performers.

