

Profiling Successful Salespeople: Myths, Folklore...and Progress

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Introduction & Background

Current economic conditions have resulted in some notable changes to our workforce. Many companies have found themselves in unfortunate positions, having been forced to lay off hundreds (if not thousands) of workers to cope with a paucity of resources and try to maintain a competitive edge, or even stay afloat. The financial meltdown of 2009 has caused many organizations to fundamentally change their business models. But the fact remains that even in financial crises, companies still manufacture goods or provide services, salespeople still sell them and someone ultimately buys whatever that product or service is. The world may slow down from time to time, but it does not stop. And while no one likes a recession, it is these very periods that truly force most businesses to think critically about their model, strategy and practices.

This is especially true for sales management. Businesses must incur expenses in order to grow, and salespeople are a frequent source of expense for organizations. They also are given a wide degree of latitude and freedom to get their jobs done, provided they meet their business objectives. During bull market conditions, managers are content that the salespeople are selling. But during challenging times, sales leaders often find themselves asking if they have the right control on resources, the appropriate measurement to gauge their sales force performance, and even whether they have the right people on the team. With the world economy now in an uptick, we at Chally have found many sales leaders are coming out of the slump with a newly invigorated sense of sales force management and a commitment to ensuring the right talent is on board and in the right roles going forward.

As of late, a theme among blogs, newsletters and clients seems to be a movement of “getting back to basics.” This seems reasonable at first glance – look for the lowest common denominator across sales organizations and address it. Need to fill the pipeline? Just get out and talk with people. Need a better process, go get a sales lead management tool from the Web. Need a good sales manager? Promote your best salesperson (which seldom works, by the way). However, in good times and bad – the concept of basic solutions for specific problems is destined to be a failed one because of its one-size-fits-all approach. Getting specific is absolutely critical to hiring and developing the right sales talent for the right sales roles. As the old saying goes, the devil is in the details.

New thinking

A recent article, published by the Sales Executive Council (SEC) entitled “The New High Performer,” challenges the concept of basic sales approaches and sales rep “types” – and Chally agrees with them. In this article, the SEC surveyed about 450 sales managers and asked them to rate top performers and core performers across a number of characteristics, in an attempt to identify trends in performance relative to sales types (i.e., specific profiles).

What is appealing about the SEC’s approach and results is that no single sales profile emerged. In fact, the results from the study identified five different types of sales profiles that emerged from the survey analyses. Chally supports this concept directionally as far as it goes, because our database of several hundred thousand sales professionals distinguished 14 “Unique types” of sales roles. Based on over 35 years of studying the sales profession, helping organizations select winning salespeople, and developing better salespeople and managers, Chally has had a longstanding position that “a salesperson is not just a salesperson.” As an example, having an outstanding track record of selling snow tires does not mean the same person will be effective at selling a sophisticated telecommunications system to a Fortune 500 company. Our research and common sense dictate that there are significantly different skill sets involved.

The Problem with “Generic” Profiling

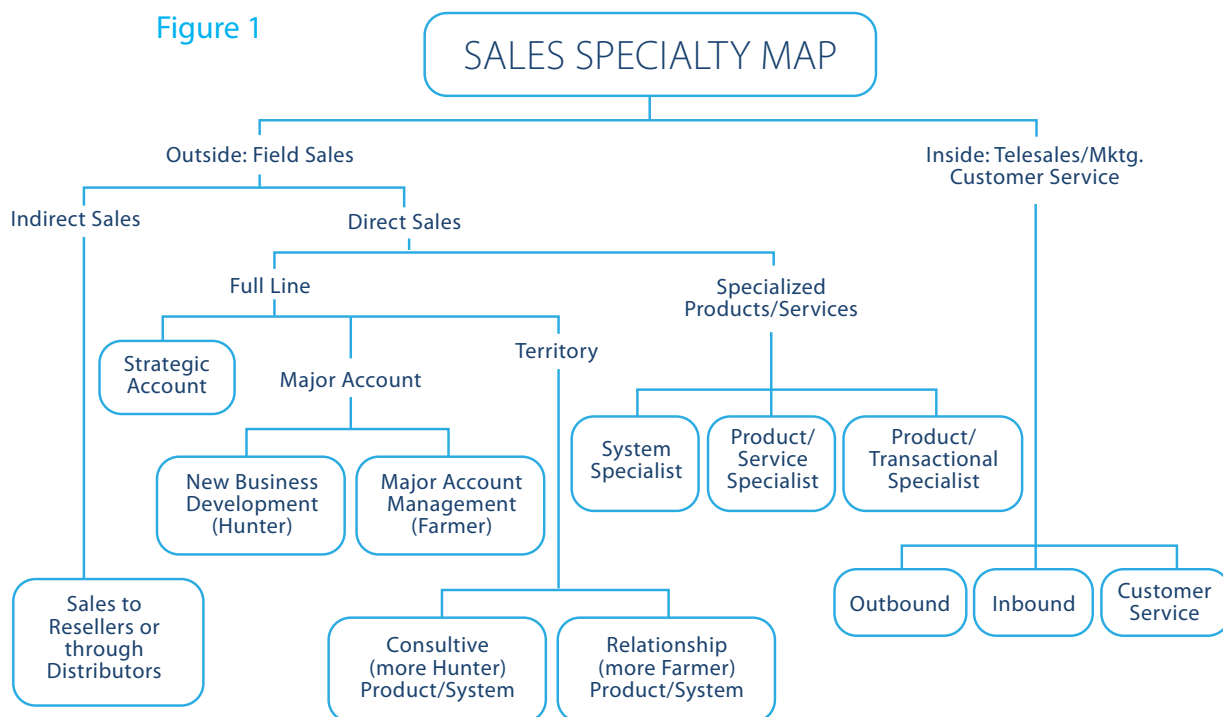
While the SEC’s recent article deserves merit, we also believe that several concepts critical to salesperson performance were neglected in this research. First, they compared the performance of High Performers to Core Performers, and the concept of “Core Performer” did not appear to have been clearly articulated. But based on the presentation of the data, it appears comparison between sales superstars (the New High Performer) and everyone else on the team was the method. Chally research has documented that salesperson performance can be mapped to an almost normal curve, meaning there are fewer exceptional (unfortunately)

performers and an abundance of more average players on most sales teams. Hence, simply focusing on selecting or developing one “type” of salesperson (i.e., the coveted superstar) equates to lost effort for recruiters and hiring managers – and ultimately suppresses overall sales success. A good analogy is a sports team – take basketball. Michael Jordan was arguably the best player in the history of the sport, so why didn’t Chicago Bulls Coach Phil Jackson build a team full of Michael Jordans if he was the best? The answer is simple: there were not enough Michael Jordans from which to choose. But one can still build a highperforming team that is focused on winning, if a slight change in method and philosophy is taken.

Neglected by most sales managers, industrial psychologists, human resources managers and researchers is the fact that there is more to a high-performance sales team than selecting the next Michael Jordan – it is also about eliminating the players that cost the company money, are difficult to manage and don’t deliver results. It is largely about not hiring the salespeople who are below average. This is a concept that is frequently ignored in selection and assessment practices, as we routinely hear companies and consultants make the claim that “if you assess your top 15 people, we can create a profile based off them and you can use that to hire (clone) those good performers.” But ask any sales manager where he or she is spending most of their time – (a) on the superstar performers or (b) the hiring mistakes – the majority are dealing with poor performance issues. Thus, while the aspiration in selection and development efforts is about hiring/coaching the hi-potential salesperson, in practice it’s much more about not hiring the problem employees.

Second, hiring the right salesperson is dependent upon far more than just whether the person is a debater, relationship-builder, knows the customer’s business and is willing to push people out of their comfort zones. These descriptive behaviors are certainly useful for development, but this general and broad approach to predicting whether someone will be successful or unsuccessful in a specific sales role has proven to be ineffective. It’s similar to claiming that all salespeople have to talk to customers so all salespeople are extraverted. The fact is that not all extraverts are salespeople, and not all salespeople are extraverts. In fact, many introverted people are very good at selling, just as many extraverted people may spend too much time talking to someone instead of listening – a key ingredient to effective selling. There is a great deal of research in the field of Industrial/Organizational Psychology that suggests broad personality traits like extraversion do not predict well enough when used by themselves. These constructs do a sufficient job of describing someone’s tendencies and are therefore useful for self-awareness and on-boarding new employees, but they do not identify the specific competencies and behaviors that someone will need to be a strong performer in a specific sales role.

The crux of the argument is that someone who scores as a particular sales “type” may be a very good performer, but mostly for a specific type of sales role. Chally has identified 14 different sales-related profiles (See Figure 1, below), and while our research concludes that 65% of people who are failing in one role can be successful in another role, the probability of success depends largely on whether someone is moving from one specific sales role into another for which they naturally demonstrate capability.



In fact, our research has demonstrated that those who have the capability to be a top 20% hunter-type seller demonstrate a diminished (less than 10%) capacity for being in the top 20% of farming sales roles (e.g., account management). This is because there are very specific things that a top hunter does to make him or her successful that would generally be counterproductive in another role. As a result, taking a broad brushstroke approach (e.g., the Challenger, the Extravert, the Dominant person) tells us little about what someone will do to be successful in a specific sales role. Pushing people out of their comfort zones may be useful for a New Business Development Hunter-type salesperson responsible for influencing others, but the same approach for a Relationship-based territory Salesperson, Account Manager, or Inbound Customer Service Representative likely will fall flat.

Conclusion

Conclusion. Historically, applied research has shown substantial differences between skill sets of generalists versus specialists. This is true for physicians, attorneys and sales people alike. Recent research focusing specifically on sales roles suggests differences among salespeople will dictate whether they are successful in one sales role versus another (low vs. high complexity). There are very few hybrid sales roles (e.g., a hunter and farmer together) that are practical or useful, as a salesperson very rarely demonstrates exceptional performance in such different sales disciplines.

Chally believes companies who want to succeed in a competitive market need to begin with the end in mind and gather thorough information about the sales position(s) under consideration. An understanding of exactly what is being sold, to whom it is being sold, sales cycle length, and how many stakeholders need to be involved is just a surface level synopsis of the key decision criteria that need to be addressed to specify exactly the salesperson specialization (and subsequent critical competencies) needed to ensure success in that specific sales role. From there, it is vital to select, onboard, develop, plan and measure those same critical competencies throughout the employee lifecycle to ensure consistency in methods and measurement. This consistency will go to ensuring that companies leverage a system that distinguishes strong from poor performers for a specific role and keep them focused on those things that reliably predict sustainable results.