

What Really Makes A Top Sales Producer?

~Brenda Abdilla, President, Management Momentum

The most common question asked by my sales manager clients is, “What should I be looking for in a sales rep or business developer in today’s environment?” Not only do they wonder what they should look for in their hiring endeavors, but they are also at a loss when it comes to knowing which skills to develop in their current team. Sales managers already have their hands full with the combination of a hard-to-read market, the pressure to perform and the stress of constant changes at work, so it’s hard to know where to begin. The sharp sales managers know intuitively the sales characteristics that used to work no longer work. However, old habits die hard, and it’s tempting to look for the rep who seems like they will “hit the ground running,” when in reality, they may end up hiring someone who simply hits the ground instead because they are not a fit for the customer base they serve or have old-school sales habits.

The short and the long answer to the question about what makes a top producer in today’s selling environment has everything to do with the emotional intelligence/skills of the rep and ultimately the team. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined as a set of emotional and social skills that collectively establish how well we:

- Perceive and express ourselves
- Develop and maintain social relationships
- Cope with challenges
- Use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way

Believe it or not, someone’s Emotional Intelligence Quotient (referred to as EQI) is actually a predictor of success in life and work.¹ If you have ever heard

yourself saying, “That guy can really read a room,” or “I don’t know how she does it, but even the toughest customers will buy from her every time,” then you are describing a rep who has a strong emotional intelligence in the areas that matter for their field and market.

The US Air Force (USAF) discovered the power of EI when they decided to tackle the high attrition rates of Air Force Recruiters and ended up saving \$2.7 million in training costs (talk about a tough market—imagine trying to recruit people to join our armed services in a climate of one crisis after another!). The USAF decided to study the differences in EQI among their most and least successful recruiters. They found that the most successful recruiters had a higher-than-average level of *assertiveness*, which is not surprising, as salespeople need to be assertive, right? But they also had higher levels of *flexibility*—meaning the ability to adapt emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in unpredictable circumstances—and *stress tolerance*—which is a belief that one can manage and cope during difficult situations.

Another surprise was that the top producers had higher *happiness* and *self-actualization* scores. Happiness, of course, speaks to a person’s outlook on life, while self-actualization is a person’s willingness to improve themselves in the pursuit of a rich and enjoyable life. By paying attention to the science of emotional intelligence the USAF increased their retention by 92% in the first year alone, and a report to a congressional committee stated that the USAF recruiters are twice as productive as other branches of the armed forces.ⁱⁱ

If you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Experienced managers know how futile it can be to motivate and inspire the rep who simply has a dark view of life, or the one who is always complaining about any and all changes that are presented. The good news is that EI can be improved with a concerted effort, and most of us get more emotionally intelligent with age. It’s important to note that a high EQi is not necessarily the only thing you should look for in a rep. While a higher overall score is definitely a good sign, you have to look a little deeper and



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consider the specific job the rep would be doing and the environment they would be selling into.

One's level of *impulse control* is another important attribute and is a prime example of how important it is to consider the specific job when measuring EQ and attempting to predict sales success instead of just looking for a candidate with a high score. Culturally, we value someone with a high impulse control (the ability to resist or delay the drive to act), and when it comes to road rage and waiting in line at the Post Office, this is a good thing. However, too much impulse control can make a person risk-averse, and many times companies need someone in that sales spot who is willing to act on impulse to make that call or test that new approach.

Sidebar:

“An ROI study conducted by a debt collection agency found that collectors who were hired according to the company’s new emotional intelligence model achieved 163% against target the first year. Even those who were low performers and were trained in EQI brought in 80% against target within 3 months. Source: MHS multi-health systems 2011.

Here are some examples to help you recognize various forms and levels of Emotional Intelligence that may be found within your team, along with some thoughts on how to turn them to your advantage:

- You have a rep who tends to side completely with the customer base. If the customer has even the tiniest of issues with the product, the rep will blow it way out of proportion.
He is overusing his empathy skills and could use some work developing other EI skills like assertiveness, independence and problem solving.
- Your rep comes off as arrogant and overly confident and she ignores feedback from others.



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She is overusing her assertiveness by behaving aggressively and needs to develop empathy skills, social responsibility and emotional self-awareness.

- Your rep fixates on a problem and is very black-and-white with her thinking; even when a solution is readily available to her.

From an EI perspective, this rep has a low flexibility index and would benefit from learning to develop more stress tolerance and improving flexibility and a skill called reality testing—which is the capacity to remain objective.

As you are assessing the development plan for your team and putting together plans to hire, pay attention to how your best producers develop relationships with customers, how they view the world, handle stress and communicate their thoughts and emotions to others. Although it's tempting to focus solely on past experience, know that you will get more bang for your buck if you focus on hiring and developing emotional intelligence skills in your team.

ⁱⁱ Source Multi-Health Systems

ⁱⁱ Source Multi-Health Systems and Gourville, 2000: Handley; 1997



Brenda Abdilla is passionate about momentum. She likes results-oriented action so much she founded her company on the principle of moving people and organizations forward. Brenda is a skilled professional mentor using her experience and advanced tools to help motivated professionals reach their desired outcomes. Those outcomes include promotions, career-changes, higher productivity, better internal relations—most anything that moves a person's career or business forward.



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