

Sales Fit

Philip Dennett



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First published in 2008.

Mulga Partners Pty Ltd

39 Wingello Cres, Wyoming, NSW 2250, Australia.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Author: Dennett, Philip, 1960-

Title: Sales fit [electronic resource] / Philip Dennett.

Edition: 1st ed.

ISBN: 9780975843314 (pdf)

Notes: Bibliography.
Includes index.

Subjects: Selling.
Sales management.
Customer relations.

Dewey Number: 658.85

Chapter 1: If it's to be...

If it's to be, it's up to me! That's what the sign said. It was pinned to the wall above Michael's desk. Michael was a very successful insurance salesperson and the sign summed up his philosophy: 'This is a tough business. We're in effect selling death, which is something no-one wants to think about. But I've found that success is not about the clients themselves, or how good a prospect they are; it's all about me and my attitude. I alone have responsibility for my success. If it's to be, it's up to me.'

Michael was talking about the one basic skill that every salesperson needs – Self Direction or intrinsic motivation. Without it, no matter how many training courses you go on, real success will be elusive. Why? Because as a salesperson you are out in the field on your own. Maybe you have completed all your planned calls for the day and you pass a new business that's just opened up. A potential customer. Do you:

1. Ignore it because you are tired and anyway you're on budget for the month?
2. Note the details so you can ring the prospect at a later date?
3. Put it in your sales report for the day so you can check with the sales manager whether she has heard about this company?
4. Pull over and go in and ask to see the manager?

If you answered Yes to (4), then you are self-directed. But, did you answer Yes because you knew it was the right answer. Be honest! Would you do it every time no matter what?

Now, let's get back to Michael. He doesn't have to be told. He doesn't put it off. He doesn't say, 'Hey, I had a good week last week, I'll sit back.' He comes into the office, greets everyone with a cheery smile, grabs a coffee,

commiserates with his mate whose team lost on the weekend, goes into his office and closes the door – then picks up the phone.

The Breakthrough Process

Michael knows if he makes 40 calls a week (where he actually talks to the prospect or customer) he'll get 10 appointments; of those 2 will later cancel, he'll manage to actually make a presentation to 5, and he'll make 2 sales. Every week!

That's why he is the top salesperson in his company. As he says, 'It ain't rocket science.' The process I have just described is Michael's Breakthrough Process. Every company or industry has one. What's yours?

If you're not sure, or want to analyse yours, build a Breakthrough Process worksheet to help. For each customer touchpoint, identify the elements of the underlying process. In Michael's case, the touchpoint was appointment making:

Touchpoint	Process
Appointment Making	Set the scene Remove any potential distractions Setup the call list (prepared the day before) Start calling from top of list Note result of each call Finish when 10 appointments have been made Reward yourself with a 'treat'

Note Michael's first steps are setting the scene and removing distractions: 'I've found it's so easy to find excuses not to make the calls. I don't look at my emails or return phone calls until after I've finished. I make sure everyone knows not to disturb me by putting a sign saying 'Sales success in progress!' on my door.' An equally important part of the process is the 'treat' at the end: 'If I give myself a small treat, like a coffee from my favourite café, or buying a new tie at the end of the week if I've made more sales than I expected, I find it makes it easy to do the hard graft every day. The tie works especially well because people in the office notice and comment on it.'

For your own organization try brainstorming a list of touchpoints with customers. They could be related to sales planning, sales execution, customer service, despatch, communications, marketing,...

Behaviour or Outcome?

Using behaviour-based performance measurements (such as the Breakthrough Process) in today's organizations is increasingly common as selling becomes more team-oriented (Piercy et al, 1996). Many companies in a B2B environment have field representatives as well as internal call centre people and even field support staff. As a sales manager in this situation, I have found that focusing on behaviours results in budgets being met and exceeded (outcomes).

Anderson and Oliver (1987) propose 5 key areas of focus to improve behaviours:

Capabilities

Product/Industry knowledge and competence

Attitudes

Commitment to the organization

Motivation

Intrinsic motivation (self-direction)

Selling strategies

Planning, management and selling skills

Performance

Achievement of objectives and meeting customer needs

As a sales manager, ask yourself how can you add-value to, and reward improvements in each area? As a sales person – identify the areas where you know you need help and go out and seek it.

Remember, if it's to be, it's up to me!

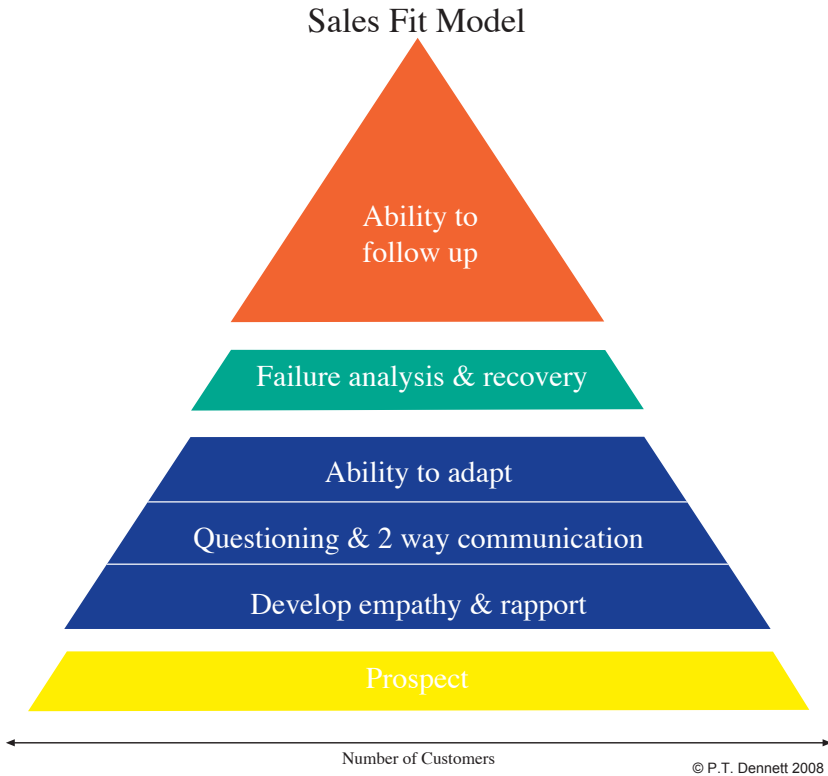
5 steps to sales fitness

After many years in sales and marketing, both as a salesperson and a manager, I have seen many fads come and go. I've worked with frameworks such as AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) or AIDAS (adding Satisfaction). I've developed training programs based on relationship selling techniques, but at the end of the day, I've found the key is for a salesperson to be a self-directed learner. My job as a manager is to provide a framework for individualized support. To provide the help when and where it was needed, rather than just have a training program at each sales conference.

The framework I use, I call the 5 Steps to Sales Fitness. It focuses on skill development in 5 key areas:

- empathy and rapport
- questioning and 2 way communication
- ability to adapt
- failure analysis and recovery strategies
- follow up ability

The following chapters discuss each in turn.



Chapter 2: Empathy & Rapport

‘Clients seldom take kindly to being told that, despite what they say they want, what they really need is something rather different.’ (Leigh, 2007)

This divergence between a client’s needs and wants is often at the core of difficulties in a sales situation. Just because you have the knowledge, don’t presume the client will accept it as the solution to all his problems: ‘Knowing a client’s first name when they telephone, or what they ordered last time, or the date of their wedding anniversary, proves of limited benefit if you also come across as distant, unempathic, not a warm human being or unable to respond appropriately to a customer’s unexpressed need.’ (Leigh, 2007)

Unexpressed needs? How can you find out what they are? One way is by the effective use of questioning, which is important, but before you get that far why not walk a mile...

Walk a mile in the customer’s shoes

As sales manager in a publishing company I would ask my salespeople to spend time in a customer’s bookshop:

- Help them stock the shelves (you’ll get a better feel for your competitors’ products and an overall idea of product mix in the store)
- Spend some time behind the counter (what are customers asking for?)
- Offer to help with window displays (what attracts people’s attention?)
- Have a coffee in the staffroom (what interests the salespeople?)

Obviously, it is not possible to do all of these things with every customer, but by opening your eyes to the possibilities you will have better empathy with all your customers. Start by making a list of opportunities (like the one above) for you to ‘walk a mile’. Then look for ways during each sales call that you can experience what the customer experiences.

But don’t just limit this to the sales situation. How empathic are you with people close to you? Are you conscious of people’s unexpressed needs? How in tune are you with those around you? Empathy is not just a skill relevant to the sales situation – it’s a way of thinking and acting.

Is it worth it?

Sparrow (2007) echoes my own experience. She interviewed Malcolm Murray, sales director with an information services company, he said ‘Putting the emphasis on empathy as a sales tool increased the confidence of the sales team. It improved the process of questioning and improved business presentations. We got rid of bad selling, which is telling clients what they need without looking at their needs, and we increased the size of the business from four to 160 people.’

These comments are typical of many sales managers I have talked to. However, a word of warning, ‘a focus on behavior only could lead to a superficial customer orientation where salespeople visibly engage in customer-oriented behaviors but are not committed to these behaviors internally.’ (Stock & Hoyer, 2005) You can only establish close customer relationships if the whole organization is committed to it.

Listening and empathy

Researchers argue that empathy is an integral part of effective listening (Comer & Drollinger, 1999). They maintain that ‘...for communication to be effective, genuine concern is requisite.’ That’s why in the Sales Fit Model,

I have placed Empathy first. If you develop this skill you will find ‘active listening’ much easier.

Listening is generally thought to be a multidimensional process which, if you understand the dimensions, you will be able to master. Use the following table as a starting point for analyzing your listening skills.

Dimension	Definition	Components
Sensing	Recognizing cues	Inflection, tone, body language
Processing	Mentally processing cues	Understanding meaning/emotions Interpreting implications Evaluating key messages Remembering
Responding	Giving feedback	Assuring message received using appropriate tone, inflection and body language

Adapted from Comer & Drollinger (1999)

Activity: Active Listening

Salespeople are always wanting standard answers to standard questions – it makes them feel more comfortable and knowledgeable. The problem with this is that while the question may be standard, the unexpressed need behind it is never standard. A useful way I found to help my salespeople was to put them in situations where they could observe someone else selling while they focused on the process above, then debrief them afterwards. If

you are a sales manager, use the following questions to explore the level of active listening:

- Did the person's inflection, tone or body language say something different to what was being verbalized?
- Were there any questions you could have asked to explore the meaning behind those cues?
- How could you have reassured the customer that you understood them?

If you are a sales person, at the end of each sales call review your listening effectiveness (with the questions above) and make notes on things to work on. Try to focus on one area at a time (e.g. cues) and master that before going on. In a relatively short time you will be surprised at how in-tune with your clients you become.

Or, try the Left Column Conversation method (From Peter Senge's Fifth Discipline, adapted by Gunn, 2003):

- Draw a vertical line down the center of a piece of paper.
- Recall a recent difficult conversation. On the right side of the paper, write down everything that was said – by you and by the other person.
- On the left side, write down all the things you thought but didn't say. Notice how busy your brain was while the other person was talking. Were your thoughts so loud that they interfered with your ability to listen to what was actually being said?
- Finally, review what you wrote in the left-hand column. How much of your mental dialogue reflected assumptions – about what the other person was thinking, about her motives, intentions, expectations? How much evidence did you really have to support your assumptions?

Chapter 3: Questioning and two-way communication

When conducting sales training, my opening question is usually, ‘During a sales call, how much speaking should the customer do and how much should you do?’

A few brave souls say that customers should talk about 30% of the time. The smart ones are looking at me to gauge my response (I try to remain neutral) and then offer 50%. My response is the customer should be talking 80% of the time!

Sounds extreme? Ok, every sales call is not like that, but the principle is that the customer should be talking way more than you. How else can you expose their needs, objections, feelings, motivations and build rapport with them?

Of course, someone always asks – ‘how can you do that?’ Questioning skill!

Example opening 1:

‘Mary, John [the Principal] said you might be interested in the new things we are doing with Book Club, so I’m here to talk to you about Club to Class.’

This was the opening I posed for the sales team at a publishing company who sold books through having book clubs in school. Does the opening encourage dialogue?

Example opening 2:

‘Mary, thanks for taking the time to see me. I know how busy you are and I appreciate the time. John said you are doing some interesting things in

encouraging reluctant readers. I'd like to learn more about what you're doing and then explore how we might be able to support your program. How does that sound?'

What's different? In the second opening we're showing empathy (I know how busy you are...); we're asking about a subject Mary is passionate about (encouraging reluctant readers); we're establishing a basis for dialogue (... explore how we might be able to support your program); and we're asking for agreement (How does that sound?).

While I don't believe in having standard questions, it is useful to make a list of questions or situations and practice developing responses that could fit similar to opening 2 above. However, if you repeat them verbatim every time you are faced with a particular scenario, you risk sounding insincere. Instead become proficient at acknowledging, involving, and getting agreement. A sale is the end result of a whole series of 'yes's'!

The importance of language

Successful selling is all about communication. It's important to be aware of the effect of the words you use. Consider the following examples:

A customer mentions a problem:

Good: 'How did you handle that?'

Superb: 'I'm sorry to hear that happened. How did you overcome the problem?'

The first example implies effort and compromise, whereas in the second, the word 'overcome' implies success, reward etc. Make a list of words you routinely use and see if you can replace them with better ones. By making a question sympathetic and involving you are building up a store of 'little agreements' that will translate into a sale.

The following customer response sums up the most common and strongest objection for the publishing company:

‘You people are always trying to get us to do more Book Club offers, and don’t understand the huge effort it takes us for what is, quite frankly, little reward.’

Typical response: ‘What is it you don’t understand?... Let me go through the benefits to your class/school of [product] again...’

Empathic response: ‘We certainly don’t mean to do that. I’m sorry we have not been clear. What specifically...?’

With the first response the salesperson is keen to help and find out more but comes across as aggressive and also puts blame onto the customer (‘What is it you don’t understand?’) Whereas the second shows empathy and implies a willingness to hear what the customer has to say.

Acknowledge and learn

In their hurry to answer an objection many salespeople fail to acknowledge that the customer’s concern is valid and also make presumptions without confirmation. This is the danger with training where an objection is matched with a standard response. The result is often Pavlovian – the salesperson hears a keyword and ‘salivates.’

Customer: ‘Why should we participate in Book Club twice a term?’

Answer: ‘Because you get bonus rewards.’

Acknowledge: ‘Twice a term can seem a lot. May I ask what your concern is about participating more often?’

The first answer is the standard response and presumes that all customers are motivated by the rewards. By acknowledging the concern and asking a clarifying question the salesperson will keep the dialogue going and uncover a real need, not one that he ‘presumes’ is correct.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to listen effectively, particularly as a prerequisite to effective questioning. Make sure you:

- Listen for content – ‘hear’ what is important, clarify all ambiguous words
- Listen for emphasis and emotions – note and explore
- Use body language – listen with your eyes.
- Check for customer feedback

A successful sale will result when there are no uncovered objections.

- Don’t assume the customer understands – ask!
- Don’t be afraid to check
- Checking questions are open-ended – what, how, to what extent...?
- Check before you move on (silence is not agreement).

Chapter 4: Ability to adapt

Weitz (1978) puts forward a 5 step sales process model (ISTEA) that provides a framework for discussing adaptive selling. The model suggests ‘...that the salesperson’s success in influencing the customer is related to ability to perform the following five activities:

- developing impressions
- formulating strategies
- transmitting messages
- evaluating reactions, and
- making appropriate adjustments’

The model implies a fluid structure to a sales call where the salesperson develops a strategy based on information gained about the customer’s needs. In other words, instead of going into the call with a pre-prepared argument, the sales person accesses appropriate knowledge, then transmits that back in a customized format. While Weitz shows his model in a linear form, I prefer to use it as a circular model where you keep repeating the steps throughout the call.

Before you can be effective using the above process, you need to have mastered the skills outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, because without accurate impressions you won’t be able to come up with the right strategy.

Tactics to avoid

Every salesperson has their favourite tactics, but unfortunately some of them are counterproductive in building strong relationships with customers and ultimately in gaining sales, particularly in a business to business environment.

DelVecchio et al (2004) in a survey of industrial buyers developed a list of tactics used in addressing objections and closing the sale, that are seen by buyers as positive and negative. If you use tactics from the negative list try to replace them with ones from the positive list.

Positive Tactics	Negative Tactics
Direct: Providing a specific response to the exact question	Postpone: Telling the customer you will answer the question later
Compensatory: Admitting the objection but pointing out advantages that compensate	Minimise: Minimising the objection by comparing it to something favourable
Indirect: Demonstrating the offering to show the objection is not applicable	Pass up: Smiling and passing off the objection
Request: Asking for the order in a straightforward manner	Emotional: Appealing to customers emotions to close the sale
Incremental incentive: attempting to eliminate a last obstacle	Feel–felt–found: talking about a prospect with a similar problem
Passive: Letting the customer make the decision	Standing room only: Instilling a sense of urgency (buy now or miss out)

I know that you will have been in a situation where one of the negative closing tactics has been effective. The important thing is to exercise judgement in their use and be attuned to your customers feelings – you don't want to be in a situation where the customer feels manipulated in such a way that future sales are jeopardized.

Compromise or collaborate?

A win-win situation is always the desired outcome of a sales call, however it is not always easy to decide how much compromise is required to not only gain the sale but also leave the customer satisfied.

David, a veteran sales manager, lamented to me that his sales people 'dropped their trousers at the first objection'. He said 'At our weekly sales meeting we will agree on a minimum acceptable position with the expectation that the team will negotiate above that, but routinely I see deals closed at the minimum.'

It is to be expected that if a sales person is rewarded primarily on sales volume they will naturally close a sale at the minimum rather than risk losing it. However, by collaborating with the customer instead of compromising the result should be better for both parties. Compromising can be seen as lose-lose where both parties go away feeling they had to 'give' too much. Whereas by collaborating together 'the buyer and seller exchange sensitive information to create solutions that resolve the conflict.' (Campbell et al, 2006)

However, collaboration won't work where there is no commitment or trust between the parties.

Chapter 5: Failure analysis and recovery strategies

The good news is that failure can be good for your business – that is, if your response fixes the problem. However, research also shows that over one-half of companies responses actually make things worse! (Gonzalez et al, 2005).

This suggests, of course, that many companies don't train their front-line people in this important area. A good example of this is offering customers a 24 hour turnaround and meeting that promise by part shipping if some stock is not available. In my experience customers are generally happy to wait longer if they get full shipment.

Gonzalez et al (2005) offer a framework for analyzing failures and developing recovery strategies. The following table is an adaptation of that framework that you could work with in your own organization.

Failure Identification

Failures relating to core business.

Failures relating to customer requests.

Failures relating to employee actions.

Failures relating to problematic customers.

Failure Attribution

Identify who is responsible.

Determine whether it is likely to re-occur.

Did the person responsible have control over the situation?

Recovery Strategy Selection

Compensatory.

Reimbursement.

Restoration.

No response.

Direct action.

Recovery Implementation

Apologetic.

Fixing underlying procedures.

Fixing any human interaction issues.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Tracking responses.

Adjusting as required.

Evaluating effectiveness of strategy.

Note that the purpose of failure attribution is not assign blame, but to uncover any underlying training needs or process deficiencies. It is also important to empower people to make immediate decisions (within agreed guidelines) to fix a problem when it occurs. By following this process you should find that your company is amongst the 50% for which failure is good for business!

What makes a customer loyal?

Corcoran et al., in their book *High Performance Sales Organisations* (Irwin Publishing, 1995) presented research by Learning International Inc which identified factors important to the buyer–seller relationship.

The factors they came up with are listed below. Against each of these factors, place a tick in the column that best represents your opinion of how your company meets each expectation. If a factor is not applicable to your organisation, leave that line blank.

Expectation

Good Average Poor

A salesperson who:

- knows their competition
- wants business
- brings in others to meet needs
- is honest
- has a pleasant personality
- helps customer solve problems
- is backed by their company
- provides a total package
- helps the customer be successful
- anticipates problems
- suggests creative solutions
- provides guidance
- instills confidence
- presents products understandably
- meets customers' emergency needs
- keeps promises
- takes a long-term perspective
- helps sell recommendations
- lets customer know of changes
- has a good personal appearance
- can be reached when needed
- responds to customers concerns
- acknowledges product/service weaknesses
- understands business and economic trends
- understands decision-making process
- helps customer provide better products/services
- works to develop smarter ways of doing business

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Expectation

Good Average Poor

Customer service providers who:

- are sensitive to customers' needs
- have customers' best interests in mind
- are dependable
- ask appropriate questions for information
- pay attention to what the customer says
- are always willing to help
- understand customer concerns
- are courteous
- are knowledgeable
- indicate plans to help the customer
- explain when services will be performed
- provide prompt service
- are easily accessible
- solve customers' problems
- make the customer feel confident in business dealings

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Once you have completed the list, look at the areas you rate as average or poor and rank them in order of importance to the customer. If you are unsure, conduct research to find out.

You could use the complete list and ask customers to rank your performance on a Likert scale and also rate how important each factor is to them – that way you can choose the areas to work on that will be of the most benefit.

Chapter 6: Follow-up ability

It is well recognized that reliability is an important factor in maintaining good customer relationships (Stock & Hoyer, 2005). Perhaps the most important one. Yet it never ceases to amaze me how often salespeople fail in this area.

One Friday afternoon I had an angry customer on the phone saying the sales person had promised delivery of products needed for a special promotion they were running on the weekend. It was 4pm and the business owner was getting very worried. He had spent a considerable amount of his monthly promotional budget on this campaign. ‘When will the goods be here?’ he said.

I promised to find out and get back to him within half an hour. I called the rep, who was just getting ready to have his first beer after a long week. His response was interesting: ‘Yes I did promise Brian that the stock would be there. I sent an email to the warehouse manager along with the order asking him to make sure it happened.’

What I heard was ‘It’s not my fault!’

Did the rep bother to find out if the warehouse manager was even there that week? Did he check that all the products were in stock? Did he check when the goods were dispatched? Did he have another plan in place if there was some problem? The answer to all those questions was NO!

That’s why it was his fault. He also had plenty of time to reflect on this as I made him take a 4 hour drive to deliver the goods personally that night.

The result was a happy customer who had a successful promotion. But it could easily have been so different.

As a result of that episode, I developed a checklist for my team and had it laminated on a small card and got them to put it in their cars where they could see it and refer to it after every call.

Follow-up Checklist

- What promises did I make in the call?
- What follow-up action do I need to take to make sure the promises are met?
- Who is going to help me keep the promise?
- When am I going to check progress?
- How am I going to keep the customer informed?

As a result of this simple list of questions salespeople started taking more responsibility for their promises both in being careful about what they promised and also in following up to make sure they were kept.

As I said at the start of the book:

‘If it’s to be, it’s up to me’

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If it's to be, it's up to me! That's what the sign said. It was pinned to the wall above Michael's desk. Michael was a very successful insurance salesperson and the sign summed up his philosophy: 'This is a tough business. We're in effect selling death, which is something no-one wants to think about. But I've found that success is not about the clients themselves, or how good a prospect they are; it's all about me and my attitude. I alone have responsibility for my success. If it's to be, it's up to me.'

Sales Fit takes you through the 5 steps to sales success, and explains why ordinary people like Michael become top performers. Take control of your sales fitness today!

Sales Fit is the second title in the *Business Bites* series which aims to present mission critical information in a concise, actionable format.

