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**A STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE SUCCESS OF
THE MALAYSIAN SALES PROFESSIONAL**

by
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SYNOPSIS

This paper is concerned with the empirical investigation of the factors that contribute to the success of a sales professional. The participating sales professionals are all based in Malaysia working in the high technology area, in particular the information technology industry. The success here focuses on the efforts of selling in a business-to-business selling.

The study started with about 30 participants whereby 50% of them participated through the end. In the beginning of the study, participants were asked to list down up to five factors that they consider are factors that contribute to their success. These factors were then compiled. At the end of the exercise the participants were asked to rank the factors. The study indicates that though the Malaysian sales professional success factors do show some similarity with their counterparts from the more advanced countries, they do have certain factors that are unique to the Malaysian environment. Implications from the findings are discussed from the sales management aspects of personality traits, product, marketing and support.

I INTRODUCTION

My main interest in this study is to determine the key success factors that may predict sales performance. I have been in the sales position for the past 8 years. During that period I attended training and seminars on sales. However most of the materials used in those training are based on the American models. Indeed, selling is an important business driving force. Local factors unique to the Malaysian environment that contribute to sales success are seldom discussed if not at all. There seem to be lack of understanding of the sales issues from the local perspective.

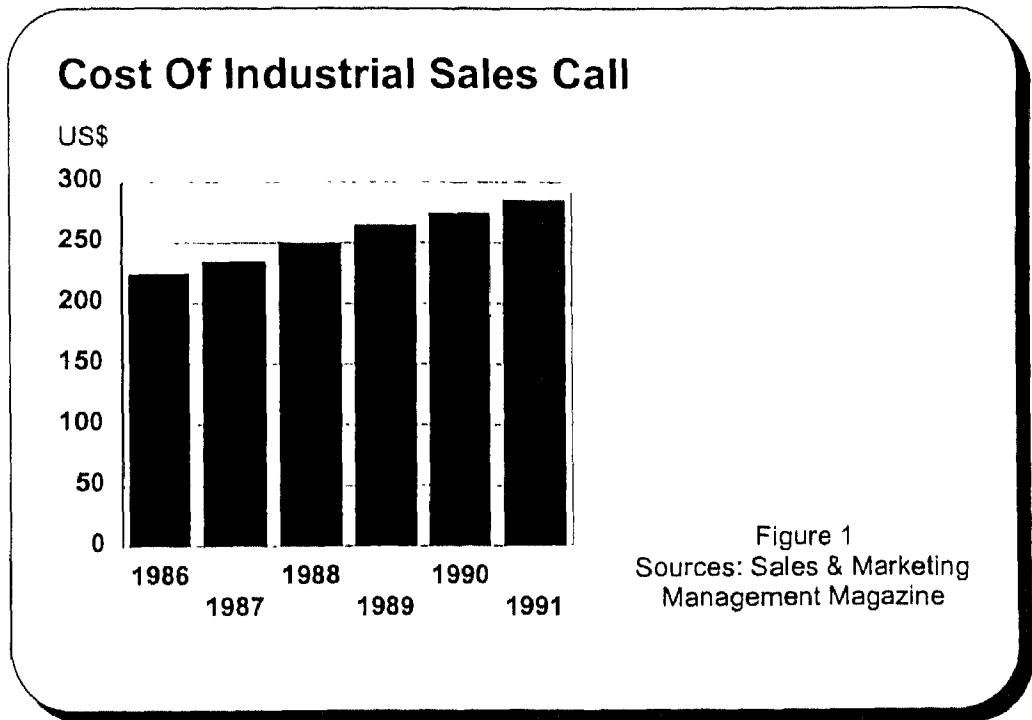
Selling is not a new profession. Everybody sells, whether they realize it or not. For example when you are being interviewed for a job, you are selling a product -- that is yourself. Personal selling consists of finding people or potential buyers who require your product or service, studying their needs, presenting your offering in such a way that the potential customers are convinced of its benefits to them, answering any objections they may have, asking for commitment, and all the time ensuring customer satisfaction is maintained. On the other hand professional selling is a process that fosters the development of a mutually beneficial relationship in which buyer and seller alike both profit and benefit. In other words a win-win situation.

No matter how you look at it, the business is driven by sales. If you're an accountant you would realize that the top most line of an income statement is revenue or in other words' sales. The sales number or revenue drives the rest of the business. Without sales there will not be any profit and subsequently a company. Ask that to any entrepreneur who just started up a new company. However in some big organization, people tend to take sales efforts very lightly. Very little attention is given to the area. Selling is a personality trait that is natural they say. You either born with it or you

don't. On the other extreme some people have the thinking that sales is such a trivial job that just about anybody can do the job. Hence in some organizations, sales is not taken as an important position. This can be seen by the quality of people employed to assume sales position. The general feeling is that anybody can do sales, so why bother. However the current situation has changed. The Malaysia economy is growing and its market is opening up. Where previously foreign companies come here for cheap labor, today they see a very promising market where they can actually sell their products¹. The market will become more competitive. To succeed sales position cannot be taken for granted. Hence there is a need to understand the factors that lead to higher sales performance.

The sales profession is undergoing change. The traditional selling by maneuvering, hardsell, and cajoling the customer no longer can be applied in today's environment. Today customers are becoming more and more demanding. The buyer today is faced with so many alternatives that the easiest way out is to commoditize the requirements. Unfortunately when that happens the buyer may not get the best solution available and the best solution provider will lose. In the long run it is a lose-lose situation. Due the complexity of their own business, customers want salespeople to be their advisors, consultants and even partners. The need for effective selling has become urgent for several reasons. First, deregulation has made many industries very competitive. For example the privatization of Telekom Malaysia Berhad and subsequently deregulation of the Malaysian telecoms industry has brought in competition with the entrance of at least seven new service providers. The issues are no longer as simple as when Telekom was the sole monopoly. Consequently these industries have adopted a very careful and prudent approach in

their capital purchases. Secondly the average cost of an industrial sales call has increased (refer to figure 1). Employers are becoming ever more concerned about sales productivity. They want every sales call to count.



2 THE SELLING PROFESSION

There are many reasons for one to be interested in the selling profession. First, selling is natural. Regardless of what your job or situation is, there is a need to sell your ideas to others. Second, the selling profession comes with numerous career opportunities. Following are discussions of the unique proposition for selecting sales as a career.

2.1 Career Opportunity in Selling

Selling is kind of a unique profession. By the nature of the job, the sales person gets to interact with many people from various backgrounds. A good sales person should be able to interact at all levels of the organization. In a way the sales person may influence the people they interact with by making social contributions. The sales profession also enables the sales person to grow his career without the constrain normally found in a desk-type job. In other words, to a certain extent the sales person can control his own destiny, if he so desires. This is possible because almost all sales job comes with minimal supervision.

2.1.1 *Contribution to Society and the Economy*

A sales person has the opportunity to make genuine contribution to society. Effective selling is key to the economy because sales representatives provide the link and transactions that enable business to flourish. The industrial buyer does not have the luxury of time to search for the best solution in town. Hence they depend a lot on sales representatives to advise, educate and update them on the latest technology, market trend and new products. The professional sales person sees a benefit in

establishing a profit in the buying-selling relationship and hence provides benefits to individuals and organizations by helping them to buy profitably. Profitably here does not mean the lowest price. If sales were not made, business would be at a standstill. The economy will only flourish when a business transaction is being made.

2.1.2 *Personal Career Growth*

The sales position provides the salesperson an opportunity to learn about many areas or functions of a business. The job requires the salesperson to be involved in helping each of his customers and prospects to solve a variety of problems. In the process, they inevitably add to their own business knowledge. The sales representative has the opportunity to work with many people from various departments, whether it is the customer's or their own organization. Contrast this with a person who in only a single department.

The success of the salesperson also depends heavily on continually improving his people handling skills. These skills provide him with a special talent that is useful in interpersonal relationships. These skills give the salesperson the competitive edge in situations where people are in conflict and need to be understood and influenced. Not many other occupations provide great opportunity to meet such a wide variety of people in an intimate, personal and persuasive relationship. One study found that chief executive officers were more likely to come from marketing and sales backgrounds than any other discipline.¹

2.1.3 *Freedom from direct supervision*

Perhaps no other career provides the same opportunity to be independent of direct supervision as does a selling career. To a great extent, the salesperson is the master of his own destiny. The sales job provides independence while still having the advantages of working for an organization. Many sales people do their own schedules. They may work irregular hours. They are driven by their sales target.

2.2 Traditional Selling Versus Modern Selling

The job of a modern salesperson is very different from selling jobs in the past. In today's complex high-tech society and with the information superhighway at our fingertips, it is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate in simple terms. Alvin Toffler in his first big seller, *Future Shock*, described the current situation as follows; "No generation has witnessed so many simultaneous changes that are interrelated and of global nature On many, many fronts, we're in for a couple of decades of rattling, shaking and reorganization." One of the driving forces is that the world has become very competitive. Product and services offered by one company are very much likely to be matched point by point by many other companies. For example the computer business, how can one differentiate a personal computer from HP to those from Compaq, IBM or Dell. As a result, from the eyes of the customers there is not much difference between one company's offer and what its competitor's offer. However one thing does not change, as succinctly put by Theodore Levitt, "The purpose of business is to find and keep customers and to get existing buyers to continue doing business with you rather than your competitor."

The approach to selling has also gotten to change. The traditional sales approach was very much salesperson-oriented; it tried to create needs in customers by talking at them. The goal was to make sales. On the other hand, the modern view is that selling should be customer-oriented and the salesperson should try to discover customers' needs by discussing with them. The goal of modern selling is to create long-term relationships and to create customers who will potentially provide repeat business, as opposed to just generating sales.

Comparison Between Traditional and Modern Selling

Traditional Selling	Modern Selling
Salesperson-oriented	Customer-oriented
Creates needs	Discover needs
Talks at customer	Discusses with customers
Makes sales	Makes customers
Flexible	Adaptable

*Source: Adapted from A. Alessandra and P. Wexler, "Non-Manipulative Selling",
Prentice Hall, 1975, p. 6*

2.3 Roles of the Modern Salesperson

A modern salesperson assumes a number of roles to be successful. Which role the salesperson assumes depend on the situation. The important thing is that the

salesperson must be able to adapt himself to the changing customer environment and able to impeccably execute the assumed role. The possible roles are discussed.

2.3.1 *Educator*

The modern salesperson educates their customers about new products, services, processes or even approaches to doing business. It is important to keep customers and prospects learn about the changes that are taking place.² The better educated the customer is the more successful will be the salesperson.

2.3.2 *Problem Solver*

One of the key contributions of the modern salesperson is identifying and solving customer problems. As a problem solver the salesperson would identify the prospect's needs, assists in coming out with possible solutions to the needs, and help the customer to select the best solution. By being a problem solver, the salesperson remains in control of the buying-selling relationship.

2.3.3 *Innovator*

One trait that distinguishes outstanding salespeople is their ability to innovate. Success depends on seeking out new ways to do business and not being content on old approaches.³

2.3.4 *Communicator*

The modern view of selling encompasses a broad communication task. Apart from the required communications skills expected of every salesperson, he or she must be

able to demonstrate understanding and empathy to the issues rose by the customer. The salesperson must also be able to articulate and discuss various issues with confidence and ease.

3 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO SUCCESS

Among the factors that contribute to the success of a salesperson are personal traits, the sales organization, the competition, the market and industry, and lastly the environment. Each factor cumulatively contributes to the salesperson's success. A deficiency in one factor may result in less success rate. For the purpose of this paper only personal traits will be discussed because this factor is within the control and influence of the salesperson. The other factors are all out of the salesperson locus of control.

3.1 The Desired Qualities (traits) of a Successful Salesperson

The sales job requires a lot of interaction with other people. Sales is also among the most diverse jobs around in terms of age, gender, experience and education. Following is a discussion of some the important traits that would enhance the salesperson success rate.

3.1.1 *Intelligence*

The modern selling activities are no longer like the past. Technology has tremendously advanced. With it also bring new sophistication and challenges to the salesperson. In general, the more technical is the product line and the more sophisticated are the customers, the greater is the expectation and the need for a high level of intelligence of the salesperson. Intelligence here means the ability to understand and master the information about new products and technology that come with it and learn quickly about the customers' problems and communicate to them the best solution in clear, concise and fast. The customers today are also more

sophisticated and very knowledgeable. Hence the ability to articulate complex solution is very important.

3.1.2 Knowledge

The knowledge needed by the salesperson can be thought as three areas: general knowledge, business knowledge, and technical knowledge. General knowledge is related to background of the customer and the industry in which the customer operates. Sales people use this knowledge to create a common base with the customer. The salesperson also needs a strong general knowledge of their own company's structure. This is important because salespeople will have to be able to manage the resources available to them.

Customers today demand that salespeople be knowledgeable of the fast-moving business environment and offer up-to-date advice. Salespeople are required then to learn and understand the customer's business environment. They need to know what makes the customers succeed. Salespeople achieve this quality by keeping up-to-date with the business world at large and monitoring business trends.

As customers become more technically sophisticated, of course they would only like to deal with people has deep technical knowledge. Salespeople do not need to be an expert but project a perception of expertise. With strong technical fundamental, the perception can be achieved by looking at the big picture or at the system level.

3.1.3 Planning Skills

Planning is crucial in the field of selling. The amount of planning required depends very much on the situation the salespeople operate. First, the more decentralized the

sales organization, the more important it is for the salesperson to be a good planner. Empowerment and autonomy come with heavy responsibility. Proper planning helps to ease the burden of responsibility. Second, resources are scarce. Very likely many of the company's resources need to be used to close a sale. Proper planning can avoid conflict and frustration. Third, some buying process are so complex that good planning and strategy need to be formulated. A complex deal normally would involve people from various parts of the organization. Again proper planning can avoid conflict and frustration.

3.1.4 Flexibility

The modern salesperson must have the ability to adjust and adapt to a wide variety of situations. They should be comfortable at juggling priorities and responsibilities, selling a variety of products and services, and working under deadline pressures to meet request and expectations from multiple customers.

3.1.5 Drive and Motivation

At times selling can be a lonely job. The salesperson may be required to put in long hours, irregular hours as well as almost daily adjusting to the frustration of refusals, rejections and unexpected or even unprofessional competitive behavior. Many times the salesperson faces these situations alone. Hence the salesperson must be able to direct their energy toward worthwhile goals and reset goals as the need occurs. Throughout all this the salesperson has to maintain his enthusiasm. As the saying goes, enthusiasm is contagious.

3.1.6 Perseverance

As experienced by many salespeople there are actually more losses than wins in selling. However a good salesperson continues to hit the road to call on the next prospect. A good salesperson must be able pick himself up and learn from past mistakes. Giving-up is not in his vocabulary.

3.1.7 Self-Efficacy⁴

Self-efficacy refers to people's judgements about their ability to execute their particular course of action. As Barling and Beattie pointed out, self-efficacy are expectations of personal mastery, i.e. the belief that if sufficient effort is expended, successful performance will follow. In a study conducted by Dr Nik Kamariah Nik Mat, indicated that those people who have strong self-efficacy beliefs, are likely to exhibit better performance. Salesperson who continually exhibit good performance will be more likely to feel motivated and assured of their capabilities to achieve specific performance level. Conceptually, salespeople with high self efficacy are likely to perform better because they believe that they have the capabilities (i.e. negotiating, perseverance, persuasive, self-motivated) of meeting the demands of the selling job.

3.1.8 Self-monitoring⁵

The theory of self-monitoring suggest that individuals have a consistent pattern in terms of the degree to which they alter their self-presentation to situational cues. High self-monitors are persons who can readily adjust their behavior in any situation so as to produce positive reactions from others. In selling situations, self-monitoring

or salesperson adaptability is necessary for improved sales performance. In the same study Dr Nik Kamariah found that Malaysian salespeople who able to adjust and adapt to different selling situations are likely to win more business. It is possible that self-monitoring is needed more in Malaysia because the salespeople has to adapt to different and distinct groups of multicultural customers (Malays, Chinese, Indians)

4. INDUSTRIAL SELLING

Industrial salespeople sell goods and services to organization such factories, government, business enterprise, and to institutions like universities, hospitals and public utilities. In this situation salesperson typically do not sell to another person but to an organization. Usually the organization has its own buying process and policies. In general, industrial buying behavior is more complex than consumer buying behavior, because additional elements intervene and interact.⁶ Industrial purchases involve individual's needs and also the needs of the organization. This means that the salesperson will have to consider the human factor and organizational objectives alike when attempting to make a sale to a business firm.

As customer needs become more and more complex, many customer organizations have buying teams to ensure that their organization accurately convey their complex needs and thoroughly evaluate the suppliers' recommendation. In addition they demand more information, ideas, and resources from sales organizations so they can comprehensively address these needs and achieve their goals.

Listed below are some unique aspects of industrial selling.

1. Buying is done by a group of people, for example buying teams or evaluation committee.
2. The composition of the buying teams is dynamic, that is they change according to the requirement of the organization.⁷
3. Different buying teams have different buying motives and needs. Hence the salesperson cannot use an organization-wide strategy for all buying teams.

4. The buying teams want access to supplier's full range of resources. The salesperson must be able to coordinate the interaction of the selling team and the buying team. The interaction may be from the lowest to the highest level of both organizations.
5. Buying teams normally prefer to deal with a selling team rather than just a salesperson because during the interaction, strategic information may be shared to address certain problems. As such customers would feel more assured and confident that an organization, not a single individual, is committed to the relationship.⁸
6. Customers tend to be more sophisticated and analytical.⁹ Customer's buying decisions are more closely linked with key business strategies and require difficult choices about how best to use their organization's limited resources.

5. FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SUCCESS IN INDUSTRIAL SELLING.

To some extent there exist little difference between industrial selling and other type of selling. It is true that industrial selling may require some specialized knowledge of the respective field. However the basic sales dynamics are the same regardless of what and to whom the salesperson is selling. This was proven in a study undertaken by Mayer and Greenberg.¹⁰

Hence regardless of what and whom you are selling the most critical every salesperson need to have before embarking on his selling efforts is to know the customer's reason for wanting to buy. This sounds simple. All you have to do is ask. True you may ask but you not get the right answer. To really understand the customer's needs salespeople have to understand and get into the customer buying process. By pacing the customer's buying process and cross-linking to the salesperson's selling process, the basic need of the customer can be uncovered.¹¹ Below is a discussion of the selling process and the buying process.

5.1 The Selling Process

Typically the selling process follows the steps below.¹²

Step 1: Establish Relationship

- Activities:
- Qualify the prospect.
 - Gather information
 - Introduce the product, service and firm's capabilities.

This step is very important because it sets the tone of the remaining steps. At this step also the salesperson will decide with the information given by the buyer if he

should continue to pursue deal. If an opportunity exist, then the salesperson shall gather as much information as possible and have more discussions with the customer to help him finally when proposing a solution.

Step 2 Analyze the customer's requirements

- Activities - Define customer requirement
- Clarify the buying process
- Validate requirement by cross-checking within the customer organization

Usually in an organizational buying, the product to purchased shall be used by more than one person. Hence it is important that the salesperson discuss the requirements with possibly all stakeholders. This will help the salesperson also to understand the want and nice-to-have features from the customer. It also helps the salesperson to understand the political scenario of the purchase.

Step 3. Recommend solution and gain commitment

- Activities: - Validate proposal with customer
- Prepare a presentation
- Gain commitment to specific recommendations

At this point a draft proposal will initially be presented to customer. After further discussion with the customer the final proposal shall be presented. It is important to always get the customer involved during the proposal preparation. The best proposal shall not contain any surprises and better still if it makes the customer feels that the ideas came from him.

Step 4: Implement the recommendation

- Activities:
- Initiate setup
 - Monitor installation
 - Initiate follow-up

Step 5: Maintain and expand the business relationship

- Activities:
- Institute follow-up procedures
 - Initiate formal review of customer satisfaction
 - Identify new opportunities

This is where most salespeople fails. Somehow after the sale is made nowhere is the salesperson to be seen. To develop a long-term relationship the salesperson must continue to serve the customer even though there is not much short-term opportunity. Long-term relationship can bring-in repeat business. A study in the US has shown that the profit margins from new accounts are often much lower than those of subsequent sales.¹³

5.2 The Buying Process

From a customer's point of view their buying process starts much earlier than what an ordinary salesperson would think. Before the customer even thought about buying anything, they go several phases. We can call this process as the customer business process. It is highly beneficial to salesperson if he can get involve and at least

understand the drivers behind this process. In modern selling what you know is more important than what you have.

A typical business process goes as follows. (*Adapted from Hewlett Packard's Order Management Guide*)

Phase 1 Environmental Analysis

Assess the driving forces from the environment such as legal and political situation, demographic and economic, cultural and social, and technological changes and trends. Basically, this is looking at the macro view of the business environment.

Phase 2 Strategic Planning

At the face the customer tries to answer what do they have to do strategically to being successful. They will study the market, products, customers, and competition.

Phase 3 Operational Planning

Looking at operational objectives to support the strategic initiatives

Phase 4 Operational Analysis

Evaluating existing capabilities and doing gap analysis