

# CHAPTER 1 – LEARNING TO SELL

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## Harder than Rocket Science

Maybe I would sell more books if I called this “Selling Made Easy!”, but the reality is that would be false advertising. Selling is not easy. In fact, I might argue that rocket science is easier than selling. Why? Because the principles behind rocket science are what we often call “hard science.” For instance, you would need to learn calculus to become a rocket scientist. Calculus has baffled many students in the past, but most who did master it at one point, can still do it today. Why? Because the third derivative of  $1/x$  will always be the same. Just as the chemical reaction of two compounds will be the same. However, selling falls into the realm of behavioral science. In this world our knowledge is heuristic in nature: meaning we create rules of thumb that often apply, but not always. Selling functions embedded in the world of human behavior, and quite simply, us humans don’t behave! What worked in the past, may no longer work. As human behavior changes, so do the answers to the questions on the selling test. To be successful at selling, we need to be comfortable with that uncertainty and fluidity, and to learn to sell we have to focus on those heuristic rules and apply them as best as possible to the ever changing landscape of human behavior. It is what makes selling so hard, and it is what makes selling so interesting.

Think about your job as a salesperson: your job is to insert yourself into other’s people’s business and see if you can help those people solve problems or take advantage of opportunities. Based on a shaky past, it hasn’t always been considered a premiere career (but at least it isn’t being a lawyer!) and it often doesn’t offer the steady, every two weeks, paycheck an accounting job might. So why do it? Here are a few reasons.

- Make things Happen. In business nothing happens until something gets sold, and thus you get to be where that action is. You get to make things happen through the energy and skills you bring to the table. And that can be a pretty good feeling. I constantly tell my sales students that they will have better good days and worse bad days than the vast majority of people in business. It’s a roller coaster ride, and like most good roller coaster rides, you can’t wait to get back on it.
- Independence & Freedom. Many who pursue sales do so in order to achieve a greater sense of control over their success. Selling is often like running your own business within the context of the organization and product you represent. There is a great deal of satisfaction that comes from knowing your specific actions and choices make a difference. Selling also involves a great deal of freedom. Salespeople tend to be out and about a lot, versus behind a desk. This freedom is attractive to many who find a traditional office bound job constraining. Put it together and many sales jobs combine both freedom and independence, and this makes selling an attractive career for many people.
- Financial Rewards: Selling can earn you a big chunk of change! At many companies some of the highest paid people are the top sales people. So while your compensation may not be in the form of a stable salary, you can make a good living selling. The other attractive component of this is that the salesperson often gets to control the amount of money they make via the effort and performance they produce. In many positions, the superstars and the slugs get paid about the same, not so in selling. This focus on individual responsibility and reward is attractive to many people.

Is selling for everyone? Heck no, but neither is accounting, or graphic design, or stock car racing, or rocket science. The key in any career is to find something you enjoy and that you are halfway good at. If each of us could achieve that then the world wouldn’t be too bad!

## Where is the state of selling currently?

Selling has undergone a major transition over the last couple of decades. It wasn't too long ago that selling followed the "Tell & Sell" model. Under that model, the salesperson worked hard to tell you why you needed the product and they closed hard to get you to buy their wares. The world of sales was very transaction oriented. Even now, some industries still follow this model, as do some poorly performing salespeople. It is not that this model doesn't work, it does. It just doesn't work as well as people think it does. Human beings like to be lead, but hate to be told what to do. The old model focused on the latter. The new model of selling involves the former. It involves viewing sales as being needs and/or solutions focused and also relationship focused. The modern salesperson needs to lead the interaction with the buyer, but respect and react to the needs, and value requirements of the buyer, not focus solely on their own desires and goals. Thus, the modern salesperson needs to be a better listener than a talker and a better relationship builder than a hard closer.

This transition has left some salespeople in a tough position as the style and approach that was once the standard operating procedure of their career is no longer well received by the marketplace. It requires them to retool and adjust their selling attitudes and actions. Many have made this transition while others have found this change too difficult. This book is designed for those who wish to function successfully in the modern world of selling, whether they are new to it entirely, or are still trying to fully master the transition.

A modern view of the salesperson is that of a relationship manager. It is the salesperson's job to harness the capabilities of their firm and match them up to the needs of the customers. The job has become more complex and often requires being more like a coach than a player. This new school of selling has become the dominant way successful sales organizations operate.

The graphic below illustrates that difference:

"Old School" Selling	VS.	"New School" Selling
<p><b>Transaction Focused:</b> The two companies interact through the salespeople &amp; purchasing person and do so when there is an immediate need for a product or service.</p> <p><b>Salesperson:</b> uses persuasion and closing techniques to get a yes to a current deal. Focus is on winning the interaction regardless of its impact in the long-term.</p>		<p><b>Relationship Focused:</b> The two companies interact often through many contacts, even when there isn't an immediate need for a product and/or service.</p> <p><b>Relationship Manager:</b> uses listening to uncover needs and provides solutions to create long-term relationships that deliver value.</p>

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### Is it possible to learn to sell?

The simple answer is yes. But the reality is this goal is often severely hindered by the common myths of selling. Let's face it, we are all influenced by the idea that selling isn't learned; it is something that one must be born to do. This harmful view is even reinforced today by the many behavioral tests out there that supposedly can tell the world whether you can sell or not. The problem with this idea is it fails to recognize that selling is the application of effective communication and human relation skills, and these are fully learnable things. I firmly believe that a wide range of people are fully capable of selling success if we focus on the building of skills and techniques. I have watched a great array of students come through the Sales & Business Marketing Program at Western Michigan University and in the end achieve

success. They accomplish this by focusing on skill building and by understanding how their natural tendencies interact with the varied demands of a selling position. Below I have dealt with three common myths of selling that hinder people's ability to learn to sell.

**MYTH #1: Born to Sell.** The concept that we are born to sell is insulting. It means we should just seek dull, number oriented, social introverts and assume they will be good accountants. I did not drop from my mother's womb and try to upsell the doctor into a better office location. If I am any good at selling it is because I worked my tail off to get good. This myth is also very dangerous as it lets people off the hook. If a sales manager hires the classic "people person" and throws them to the wolves and the person fails they can simply blame it on the fact that the person "wasn't born to sell." It lets companies, universities and the business community in general shirk their responsibility to develop successful salespeople. It also lets salespeople themselves off the hook by removing the focus on continuous training and development. The concept implies that training and development are not very useful. And since these things take time and effort and are hard, it is easier to just fall into the "if I am born to do this I will succeed" mentality.

I just read about an NBA basketball player who was disappointed in his shooting so in the off season he shot 1000 jump shots a day for 100 days straight. The article pointed out that this player was having a great year shooting the ball. In the born to sell world we would just say he was born to shoot, or that "he is a natural shooter." But the moral of the story is that he invested in developing himself. He took what natural talent he had and used focused and dedicated effort to enhance that talent. When was the last time a salesperson committed to working on better listening technique for 100 straight days. Yet imagine how much more successful we could all be with such effort. Again the "born to sell" mentality devalues such effort and such focus. It lets all the players; salespeople, sales managers, sales trainers, sales educators, etc., off the hook by assigning success to innate abilities.

**MYTH #2: Personality Sells.** The close corollary of the "born to sell" myth is that you need to have a certain base personality to successfully sell. Now on one level there is some truth to this: if you generally have a personality that really dislikes other people, is not interested in solving problems and helping people, and has little or no regard for integrity, then you will probably have a very hard time achieving success in selling. Additionally if you have little to no intrinsic (internal) motivation and always prefer to be on the sidelines instead of in the game, then again selling will be tough. But many people pass these baseline tests. I see them every semester in my selling courses. And interestingly enough they also fit many other personality classifications: introvert versus extrovert, driver versus amiable, and such.

My experience is that no one personality is automatically a better fit for selling than others, regardless of who wants to tell you otherwise. For example, I have always been credited with having a "natural selling personality." In some ways this is true: I naturally like to be persuasive and solve problems, I like presenting and speaking, and I love meeting new people. However, I also am a terrible natural listener, I get defensive and pushy easily, and my follow-through is terrible. Seems to me for every natural advantage I have, I have an equally important natural disadvantage. Another person may have these things naturally reversed. Who is the better salesperson?

My answer is the one who works on enhancing their natural advantages while learning to use techniques and skills to overcome their natural disadvantages. For instance, I am a lousy natural objection handler. I like to argue and win. I don't listen well. These are not good things to bring to the objection handling table. So I have focused on adopting the Clarify-Respond-Confirm model of handling objections and to the casual observer I look like I am a born objection handler. The reality is I am a very focused objection handler; focused on a productive technique that allows me to fight through my harmful natural approach and achieve success in something that goes against my personality.

So I firmly believe all salespeople should be highly focused on the natural advantages and disadvantages that their personality tendencies create, but not to condemn or celebrate themselves. Instead, we should focus our learning and training. I can't be successful without listening and presenting well. One comes naturally (but is still better with good technique), one comes from the focused application of technique. I can learn to do both well and eventually come across as someone who is fully "natural."

As I always say, good salespeople aren't fully natural, they just make it look that way by utilizing appropriate techniques and skills. The moral of the story is that no matter what base personality and tendencies you bring to the table, you will have some natural advantages and some natural disadvantages. So, what is the correct selling personality? Any of them as long as you are willing to work past your natural disadvantages while simultaneously enhancing your natural advantages. Both of these can be accomplished by focusing on good technique.

**The Three P's of Selling.** Let me take a quick detour for a moment before I get to the third myth and discuss what three traits that I think successful salespeople need to bring to the table. I use the word trait in the following way: an attribute that you possess as the result of your natural tendencies and your learning. In other words, these are the three things I think all salespeople should possess, but whether they come naturally or whether they come from learning and focus is irrelevant. And since I am a marketing professor, the discipline home to the four P's, I will stay with that theme and call these my three P's of selling!

- Persistence (but the Smart kind): Persistence means consistently dedicating energy and resources to achieving a goal until that goal is achieved. It has always been part of selling. The problem has been it has often been misapplied. Being overly persistent is a common problem in selling because people apply persistence dumbly. When I pressure someone to say yes to my offer I am being dumbly persistent. When I ask what is holding them back and then deal with that answer I am being smartly persistent. Notice both take energy and resources, but the smartly persistent approach uses these for good versus evil! Successful salespeople need to cultivate their smartly persistent side and as you read on you will find many of the techniques and ideas in this book are aimed at making you smartly persistent.
- Preparation: We have a serious "winging-it" problem in selling. Too many salespeople approach selling with a "I can sell ice to the Eskimos" attitude, and it is this attitude that relegates them to the survive, versus thrive category. Great salespeople have a serious commitment to preparation. They know more through preparation, they are able to do more through preparation and they achieve more through preparation. For many of the people who self-select into selling jobs, preparation is not something that is highly natural to them. The classic "people-person" is often not a "preparation-person." But it is preparation that will achieve more success than any specific personality attribute. Again, the techniques and ideas within this book (especially within chapter six and sixteen) are all built around the idea that the salesperson will prepare first, execute second: the complete opposite of the winging-it mentality.
- Purposeful: The title of the book is "Purposeful Selling" because I believe the final trait that successful salespeople need to bring to the table is being purposeful in their approach. This is closely related to both persistence and preparation. The successful salesperson needs to be acting purposefully, meaning they are consciously using their intellect, their learning, and their experience, to guide their actions. They are not just letting the selling situation unfold, but instead they are reading it, shaping it and specifically selecting the actions they take to be most successful. In some ways it is the intersection of great preparation and smart persistence that makes one purposeful in their actions. It ultimately makes selling an intellectual pursuit where we are never satisfied with what we know, how we do it or what our outcomes are. We become like the great leaders of the world: we are never satisfied! We always believe we could do more, do it better, achieve more. When a salesperson brings this attitude to the table they become much more purposeful in their approach and ultimately more successful overall.

These are the three traits to bring to the world of selling, and these do NOT have to be pre-existing traits, they can be developed traits. So while some of you may be introverts and others extroverts, some may be Drivers and others Amiables, some may be tall, dark and handsome, and others not-so-much, if each of you can be smartly persistent, have a strong commitment to preparation, and be purposeful, then selling success is within your reach regardless of your whether some misguided soul tried to tell you what you were born to do

And this leads us back to our final myth of selling....

**MYTH #3: Experience Sells.** Job ads for sales drive me nuts. Most ads focus on how many years of sales experience the person has. Very few actually demand success, even fewer demand skills. Sales success doesn't come from experience, it comes from mastering the skills required to be successful. I have played golf for well over 20 years, and guess what – I still stink at it. Why? Because I lack the required skills! I have never committed to learning the correct techniques of golf. So while I can get around a course in decent shape, I will never be confused with a real golfer, because experience only allows me to be decent, and very smooth. It doesn't allow me to be good. No amount of experience will make me better if I don't address my skills deficiency. I do sales training and I can tell you for a fact that there are very experienced salespeople who really still stink at their job. You want to be successful: build skills. If you want to recruit success: recruit skills. Experience will polish and fill in the details, but skills will drive the real success.

Experience is a lazy proxy for actual success. It is more difficult to assess someone's actual skills, so it is just easier to assume if you have been selling for five years you must know what you are doing. That is a dangerous assumption. I spend a lot of time convincing my students not to fear their lack of experience. When they finish our sales program at Western Michigan University they have the skill foundation to be successful.

Skills are often described as the intersection of knowledge and experience. The problem is that when experience comes before knowledge, when we try to teach ourselves things solely through experience, we often learn poor technique. Thus, the problem is that many people get experienced doing the wrong thing, and ultimately there is nothing more dangerous than a person who is very comfortable and smooth at doing the wrong thing (again that describes my golf game!).

If you want to learn to sell you will need to get comfortable with the following concept:

**IT IS BETTER TO BE AWKWARD AND RIGHT,  
THEN SMOOTH AND WRONG.**

Why? Because with time and experience, awkward and right becomes smooth and right, while over time, smooth and wrong becomes smoother and wrong. But being awkward is not a state most of us like to be in. Yet it is absolutely a required state for learning anything. If we are truly committed to learning something then we need to allow ourselves to be comfortable being uncomfortable. We need to put away our ego and try new techniques and new ideas. It is a given that our use of those ideas will cause us to be awkward and clumsy. Yet, with a focused approach it won't take too long before we have shed our awkwardness and thus allow the value of the better method, the better approach, to fully shine through. Thus, ultimately it won't be our experience that makes us sell, it will be our skills.

I saw a wonderful example of this last semester. A very nervous student was faced with the "it's too complicated" objection while trying to sell a corporate Blackberry account in our final exam role-plays in our basic selling course. He received the objection and stammered and hawed and eventually sputtered out, "why do you think it is too complicated." He was about as awkward as possible, but asked the right next question. His correct (yet awkward) approach was rewarded as the buyer explained her underlying concern.

A few students later a very polished student with two or three years experience selling cell phones had a turn. This student also received the "too complicated" objection, but instead of clarifying, he went smoothly into his "no it really isn't" speech. He was "good" in that he was smooth, but his response was completely off base because he substituted his assumption as to the meaning of the objection for the actual meaning.

I would much rather have the stammering, "um" laden salesperson selling for me, because with some repetition I can smooth out his awkwardness, but fundamentally he is already doing the right thing

(seeking clarity before answering the objection). The second salesperson's experience made him smooth, but he was doing the wrong thing. Until he is willing to forgo smooth and wrong in favor of awkward and right, he will continue to be smooth and wrong.

If I were betting, my money is on the salesperson curing his awkwardness before the other student cures his wrongness. Both can be cured but it is my experience that those that have obtained smoothness are less inclined to back up to the point of learning required awkwardness. Instead, smoothness becomes valued above all else. It is the negative side of experience when that experience is with techniques and approaches that are less than optimal. Those habits get ingrained and are harder to break than if the person had no experience at all. Again, I have seen both type of students become successful, but the odds are still on the first student. He doesn't have to back up and re-learn good technique; he just has to get more confident in executing it.

**So can we learn to sell?** Back to our original question; can we learn to sell? The answer is yes! The keys are that we are committed to building skills and we are committed to the process of learning. Let's discuss some of the keys to learning to sell.

**Learning Takes Time.** I have participated in, and given, the multi-day "everything you should learn about selling" seminar. In most cases the end results of these are nearly zero. Why? Learning takes time and requires incremental steps. And the week of training in Cleveland approach does not allow for the needed time. It is what I call the fire hose approach. Put the person at the end of the fire hose and turn the water on – no one can swallow that fast!

Think of the way a coach might introduce a new play, or the way a director first stages a scene in a play. They don't give a lecture on it, send you out in front of a live audience and expect you will execute it. Yet that is essentially what we do in many sales training environments: we aim the hose, put it on full blast and somehow expect results. What we need to do when attempting to learn or teach selling approaches is to first discuss it, then try it in a protected environment, slowly repeating this in situations more and more like the final one, and then finally let the actors or players try it in front of a real audience. And then, go back and practice and refine some more until it is really ready to be used in a prime time, full risk environment. It is why Broadway shows often start off- Broadway, and why professional sports leagues have pre-seasons. Yet in selling we often give the one lecture, tell people to alter their behavior, and then act stunned when very little actual change occurs.

I teach in the Sales & Business Marketing Program at Western Michigan University. We take three full semesters (42 total weeks) to teach the basics of selling (sales management topics are covered in other courses). Starting with lectures and readings and then progressively adding in exercises, low-stake role-plays and then concluding with high stakes role-plays we achieve significant behavior changes within our students. It is this kind of approach that makes learning selling very doable, and starts to truly breakdown the "born to sell" myth. We can, and we do every year, teach people to sell. We teach them good selling technique, we teach them to be better sales focused thinkers, and we teach them to be continual learners. When this approach is compared to the week of training in Cleveland, the clear winner is the slower, more incremental approach.

**Why not the sink or swim approach?** There is a love affair with the sink or swim approach in the world of selling. It is a romantic notion. What we often forget is that many people drown. We just don't hear about those people because they failed. And it wasn't really their fault. No other business discipline just puts people into a high skill role without first ensuring that the basic skills are in place. Have you met accountants who didn't even know the difference between debits and credits who were sent into the accounting department? But we regularly take "people people" and throw them into sales. And these people routinely fail.

The other problem with the sink or swim method is that most people learn not to drown, but they don't learn to swim. Ultimately, success requires swimmers, not non-drowners. Most people can figure out how not to drown, but few would ever figure out the most efficient and effective swimming strokes without someone teaching them those strokes. In addition, even if non-drowners eventually get swimming

lessons, they are often so warped by their anti-drowning approaches that it is difficult for them to let go of those methods to adopt the better, albeit new and awkward, techniques of swimming.

So what is the best method for learning to sell? Long-term commitment to proper technique supported by incremental learning that slowly, but firmly achieves actual behavioral change. This book tries to offer all of these things. It starts by offering proper, effective selling technique, and then it continues to offer incremental ways to begin to incorporate these techniques into your approach. It will require you to be open to new ideas and even more open to trying these ideas. Most sales training doesn't fail because the techniques are poor, but because of the erroneous expectation that people can go from zero to full speed with these techniques instantly.

## **Final Thoughts on Selling**

There are three foundations for successful selling that I espouse, and these can be summed up with three words: Adaptive, Relationships, and Value.

- Adaptive: Chapter two of the book is entirely focused on this concept. It is the idea that a successful salesperson will need to alter their selling behaviors to best match-up with the underlying situation and the people involved in a selling interaction. It makes selling harder, but more effective and efficient. As you read through the chapters of the book you will find that the majority of the techniques are rooted in this concept. From asking better questions, to using the VPC+ presenting model to betting past a stall, all of these techniques allow the salesperson to use a base technique to best read and react to the selling situation.
- Relationships: Chapter three (and really chapter fifteen also) is devoted to this concept, but the reality is it also part of each and every technique in the book. Selling is hard, and is especially hard when we try to do it transaction by transaction. When we can build a mutually beneficial relationship with our customers, we can benefit in many ways. But to achieve this long-run success we have to have a long-run approach to our selling that is rooted in integrity and never loses sight of the mutuality of long-term success. We don't have to be best friends with all our customers, but we do need to consistently focus on creating long-term value for them and also make the process of doing business together as easy as possible.
- Value: Value is often defined as the tradeoff between costs and benefits. When this equation tilts towards the benefit side we have strong value. Ultimately buyers buy based on value, and thus it is the salesperson's responsibility to uncover and shape the buyer's value equation and then deliver the needed solutions to tilt that equation as strongly as possible to the benefit side of the equation. Throughout the book the ideas, techniques, and models are designed to help you identify, craft, communicate, and deliver value to the buyer.

As you read the book and as you approach selling, keep these three concepts in mind. Adaptive salespeople who can deliver value over the long-run are going to be more successful than those who don't. However, these are big picture concepts that you can't just wave a magic wand and make occur, instead the successful salesperson must choose their actions on a day-to-day basis to create these three concepts. This book gives you the day-to-day techniques, that when purposefully and consistently practiced will allow you to be an adaptive, value producing relationship builder.

### **How to Use this Book.**

To get your money's worth from this book it should become your companion for a relatively long, but highly productive journey. Read through the chapters. Gain an understanding of the rationale and mechanics of the suggested techniques. Then commit yourself to incrementally introducing those techniques into your approach. There are suggestions for this in each chapter. Should you expect immediate results? Yes and No. Yes because some of the simpler pieces of advice could be adopted immediately and will reap benefits. And no because to truly master these techniques will take some time, some repetition and some adjustment. You will have to remain committed to this process.

**Guaranteed Results?** Can I offer a guarantee? I believe I can. If you take the time to invest in reading the book, adopt these techniques and approaches, and give yourself some time to move them from awkward and right to smooth and right, you will sell better. If you do this and find a different result I will be glad to refund your money. Just send me an email at [jim@purposefulselling.com](mailto:jim@purposefulselling.com) and tell me your story. But I am highly confident that you can make money from this book by becoming a more skilled and effective salesperson.