

SALES VERSATILITY: connecting with customers Every Time

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as a sales leader, you probably debrief sales calls, review sales campaigns, analyze prospecting activity, and ride along on certain customer calls to observe or assist. No doubt you have noticed that each salesperson has some customers and prospects that they easily connect with, and others that they don't. And you might have seen cases where the same approach that succeeded with one prospect or customer caused another to become impatient and tense. Perhaps certain salespeople appear to waste time on social chit chat or having coffee with a customer – and

yet they seem to succeed in closing good business. And some established customer relationships end up being downright difficult – fraught with tension and frequent communications issues and misunderstandings for reasons that are hard to understand.

It is difficult finding a common thread that explains which salespeople communicate well with which customers. The reasons for success seem as mysterious as the reasons for failure to connect. But the ability to consistently build productive, trusting relationships with many types of customers is the best predictor for getting second appointments, closing

important sales, acquiring referrals from customers who buy, and avoiding the wasteful process of damage control in rocky relationships.

What is it that makes the difference between those successful communications with customers and the difficult interactions that lead to failed calls and sales campaigns?

The 75% Problem

At first glance, some salespeople just seem to have a knack for reducing relationship tension and quickly putting almost anyone at ease in any situation. They gain access to more contacts and enjoy greater customer loyalty, higher close rates, and more



When it comes to sales, the most important thing is the customer. By improving your salesteam's adaptability to different customers and situations, you can increase your sales noticeably.



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repeat business. They are often described as possessing good “people skills” – apparently inborn and hard for others to acquire.

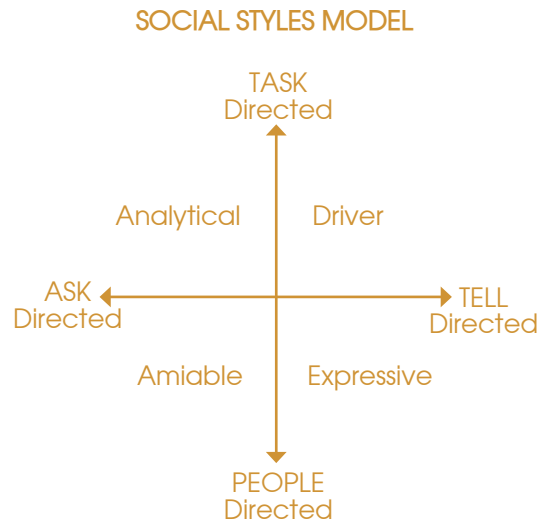
But Wilson’s Social Styles research indicates that these fortunate few are so successful because they are using interpersonal versatility – the ability to understand differences in communication preferences and adapt to make relationship interactions more productive. Versatility is a skill that can be learned, and people who have it are measurably more capable of building and sustaining open, trusting relationships with a wide variety of different kinds of customers.

According to the Social Styles model, everyone displays a recognizable set of preferences and habits in interactions with others. These preferences add up to our social style. The four primary styles are labeled as Driver, Expressive, Amiable, and Analytical.

Social Styles Model

As the model shows, the four styles vary in terms of behaviors

reflecting the dimensions of Assertiveness (Tell versus Ask) and



Responsiveness (People versus Task orientation). Drivers and Expressives tend to be more Tell oriented, while Amiables and Analyticals are more Ask oriented. Analyticals and Drivers are more Task oriented, while Amiables and Expressives are more People oriented.

When salespeople find it easy and natural to communicate with a customer or prospect, the likelihood is that they share the same social style.

But only about 25% of people fall into each of the social style categories; this means they will likely share a social style with only about one quarter of the people they meet – and that there could be potential difficulties in communicating with the other 75%.

Think of the implications if a salesperson can only interact successfully with customers using their own style. If a salesperson is interacting with everyone in the same style, there’s a good chance there will be customers who, for example, will feel they are being given too much information – or too little. Some customers will find the salesperson to be overly friendly, while others might perceive him as aloof or not friendly enough. Other customers will want a lot of different options to consider, while others want to cut to the chase and know the bottom line right away. These differences create tension in the relationship and can become barriers to making sales.

Versatility: the Key to Improved Business Results

In the current uncertain market,

it's especially difficult for sales leaders to manage all the variables affecting the ability to increase sales. You may have little control over the external factors affecting the business, or the strategies adopted by executives in response. You can, however, act to help your entire sales team become more versatile in how they interact with prospects, customers, and the internal support team and their own peers. Imagine the results if your whole team could connect successfully with 100% of the prospects and customers they meet.

The good news is a sales team can experience dramatic, measurable improvements in performance when salespeople learn how to adapt to others' social styles. In one study, building the versatility skills of the sales force yielded a 53% improvement in market share. To illustrate the impact of this kind of result, consider a company with 6.29% market share. Suppose it has 1,000 customers, each purchasing \$1,000 in product, making each one-percent increase in market share worth \$158,982. In this example, an improvement from a 6.29% market share to a 9.65% market share (or 3.36%) is equal to \$534,179 in increased revenue. For the pharmaceutical firm involved in the above study, improving the versatility of their sales force brought a highly profitable return on investment.[1]


Depending on your company's

industry, product offering and market, increased versatility may make different kinds of contributions to the improvement of business results. What are the critical issues that are most important in your organization right now? Sales organizations challenged by the erosion of their existing customer base and price cutting competition can expand their opportunities by building stronger relationships with current contacts and developing a wider range of new business partnerships. If the company is seeking to expand into new markets and increase prospecting activities to find new opportunities, versatility can make all the difference in establishing new relationships quickly and sustaining them to close sales and get repeat business.

Increasing Versatility

For most of us, interpersonal behaviors and preferences are habitual and largely out of awareness. The critical factor in becoming a more adaptable, versatile communicator is the powerful insight that we do have different styles and that each style has unique strengths. As salespeople come to better understand their own style and recognize style differences, they also learn how to respond to their customers' styles in a way that makes it easier to exchange information, reach mutually agreeable decisions, and work smoothly for successful sales clo-

tures, implementation and follow up. Over time, as they develop higher levels of skill, salespeople become adept at recognizing the indicators of different styles and adapting to them. This adaptation becomes an integral part of how they communicate. A highly versatile individual is almost always perceived as a highly effective communicator – someone who has those “good people skills,” is a trusted business partner, and is a very successful negotiator.

While there are multiple ways to improve communication in a given situation, the single most important factor for enhancing communication effectiveness across the board is style versatility. As salespeople must work harder for every sale, building this kind of capability provides a real competitive advantage for the team the company as a whole. 

[1] Michael Leimbach, *Versatility: The Key to Sales Performance*, Wilson Learning Corporation

Michael Leimbach, Ph.D., is Vice President of Global Research and Design for Wilson Learning Worldwide. With over 25 years in the field, Dr. Leimbach provides leadership for researching and designing Wilson Learning's diagnostic, learning, and performance improvement capabilities. He has managed major research studies in sales, leaderships and organizational effectiveness, and has developed Wilson Learning's Impact Evaluation capability and return on investment models. Dr. Leimbach has served as a research consultant for a wide variety of global client organizations and is on the editorial boards for the ADHR professional journal, as well as serving a leadership role for the ISO technical committee *TC232: Standards for Learning Service Providers*. He has co-authored four books, has published numerous professional articles, and is a frequent speaker at national and global conferences.

