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The Secret of Sales Success

What really drives salespeople to chase deal after deal?

By *Inc.* Staff | Apr 1, 2010

Great salespeople are masters of psychology: The best of them can suss out pain points and imminent objections just a few minutes into a call. Their own psyches, however, are more mysterious. Are they motivated by greed and competition? Or masochism and the prospect of rejection? Perhaps both, suggests G. Clotaire Rapaille, a psychoanalyst and ethnographer who has been working with major corporations for two decades. The founder of Archetype Discoveries Worldwide in Palm Beach, Florida, Rapaille has built a career helping corporations discover the mental models that animate their customers, employees, and organizations. Much of that research has focused on salespeople, whom Rapaille characterizes with a surprising archetype: happy losers. Understanding what that means, he told editor-at-large Leigh Buchanan, can go a long way toward helping managers get the most out of their often inscrutable sales forces.

Explain the term *happy loser*.

Salespeople sometimes say to me, "I don't like that you call me a loser." But that's not what I mean. Happy losers are people who see rejection as a challenge. If 95 percent of the time you are rejected, you have to ask yourself, "Why did I choose this kind of life?" The happy loser likes it because 5 percent of the time, he wins. And all those times he loses, he sees as getting to the win.

How did you arrive at the happy-loser archetype?

We always go back to the first imprint: to the first experience in a person's life when he or she creates a mental reference. So we asked salesmen about their first experiences selling -- as children with a lemonade stand or trying to persuade their parents that they don't want to go to school. With the first experience, they feel strong emotion, and emotion is absolutely key to producing the neurotransmitters in the brain that create mental connections. The first time they are rejected is very powerful. What we find with good salespeople is that that first no stimulated them. It didn't make them want to give up. It made them want to find another way.

Are people born happy losers, or can they be trained?

Both. In some corporations I've consulted with, we've had regular meetings with salespeople and asked them, "How many nos did you get this week?" The ones that got nos got points. Then, after a month, we made the correlation: The more nos they had, the more sales they had made. Because they were trying more things, taking more chances. The response was almost Pavlovian. The more mistakes, the greater the reward.

So salespeople should be trained to embrace rejection?

Absolutely. If the manager keeps saying, "You're going to win; you're going to win; you're going to win," and then the guy goes to see the potential client and is rejected, it's a disaster. A sad loser goes down and never comes back. A happy loser comes back.

Another reason to embrace the no is that the sale isn't done until you hear it. Say a customer walks into a store to look at a dress, and the salesperson says, "It's inexpensive; it fits you; you look so beautiful." So the customer buys the dress and leaves. The boss of the salesperson says to her, "How did it go?" She says, "Well, I'm very happy. I sold the dress." The boss asks, "How many nos did you get?" "I didn't get any nos." "Then that's wrong," says the boss. "Because the sale doesn't end when the customer says, 'Thank you.' You say to her, 'You have that nice dress. You should have these shoes that go with it. This purse, this belt, this sweater, this scarf.' At some

point, the customer will say, 'No. This is enough.' *That* is when the sale ends. The sale ends when you lose."

How do you ensure people actually learn from their mistakes?

I really believe in support groups. Companies should have a kind of Happy Losers Anonymous. Salespeople get together and go around the room and say, "I'm a happy loser" -- they know that part is a joke, so it's OK -- and then confess all the mistakes they made. And the group says, "What can we learn from these mistakes?" You end up with so much more learning; it's fantastic. And we know it works, because people don't make the same mistakes again.

Do managers look for the right things when hiring salespeople?

Many managers just look for results. They look for people who can prove that they did sell. They don't understand that this is only one element of the profile. They don't understand the importance of rejection. So they eliminate some very good people. Instead, I would ask: How many things did you try in your life that you failed at? And not only in business. Did you try skiing? Did you try snowboarding? Did you try fencing? How about during your education?

What do you think of in-house sales contests and similar motivational programs with big rewards?

Rewards are good, but the symbolism of the reward is very important. I once did some work on the merger of two large banks. One question for the merged entity was, How do we reward the people who sell? One of the banks was very sales oriented, and it offered its top salesperson a cruise. The other had a slower sales culture; it spent more time building relationships and gave out small diamonds, which salespeople wore on their jackets, like stripes on a uniform. Its salespeople were very proud of those diamonds.

The message of the cruise was, Sell, sell, sell, and for one year you will be on top. But when the cruise is over, it is over. And the next year someone else wins, and you are the ex -- world champion. At the other company, salespeople would always have the diamonds. What do they say, Diamonds are forever? And so it is more like having a gold medal that no one can ever take away from you. The emphasis was on longer-term relationships built over time.

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