

Secrets of Top Sellers

By Jill Konrath

Selling is tough! There's no doubt about it. Customers demand more at the same time their loyalty is plummeting. Cutthroat competitors seem willing to practically give things away just to get the business. Even setting up meetings with new prospects is a major ordeal. Busy decision makers don't want to "waste" their time with product-pushing peddlers.

There are a hundred million reasons why you can't sell today. I've heard them all. Yet some sellers are having their best year ever. They're not one bit smarter than you are. Nor are their product or service offerings superior to yours.

But they do think differently from you. Here's what you can do to be like the "best of the best."

Be Personally Accountable

Top sellers regularly encounter the same challenges you do, but steadfastly refuse to blame the economy, competitors, marketing, pricing, or even customers for lackluster sales results. These are simply obstacles that must be overcome. They assume personal responsibility for their future, believing they can impact it—a simple decision with far-reaching consequences.

When faced with difficult situations, average sellers bemoan their miserable fate then pose questions like these:

- When will management do something about these problems?
- Why is our quota still the same when it's obvious the economy is down?
- When will marketing get their act together?
- Why can't our prospects understand our products value?
- When will they offer us some good training?
- Who came up with that ridiculous promotion?
- When will customers stop being so demanding?

Perhaps you've even voiced questions like this at some point in your career. These *why*, *who* and *when* questions ensure blame is deflected towards others. If "they" do something different, then you can be successful. This puts you into a victim mode. You're stuck with a lousy situation over which you have no control. No wonder you can't succeed!

But if you talk to top sellers, you'll find they ask very different questions. For example, you might hear them asking:

- How can I meet my numbers despite the difficult market conditions?

- What can I do to help customers understand why our products are a better long-term value?
- What new skills do I need to learn to be more successful?
- What can I do to help marketing realize I need different tools to sell more?
- How can I use my customer's demands to solidify our relationship?

Because top sellers accept the responsibility for their success, their questions start with “How can I” or “What can I?” These kinds of questions also stimulate thinking. You'll be amazed at how many new ideas you can come up when you change the question. Your brain will kick into gear, making connections with other strategies you've used previously to overcome similar problems. Simply by changing the question, you find solutions you didn't even know existed.

Say I Will, Not I'll Try

This may sound too easy, but it's a key step. In these turbulent times, what you've always done to be successful in sales may not work as well as it used to. Acknowledge this and make an “I will” commitment to change. Not I'll try, but I will—there's a big difference.

For example, have you ever said you'll *try* to lose weight? Did you? Losing weight means doing things that make you uncomfortable—like watching what and how much you eat, and exercising on a regular basis. If you're like most people, you lost some weight initially but after awhile returned to your old habits and the pounds came back on.

The same thing happens in selling. Many sales professionals know new ways of selling are needed. They *try* new strategies or tactics they've heard worked for others. But the first time they *try* these new behaviors, they're miserably uncomfortable and feel like a novice again. When immediate results aren't forthcoming, they quickly revert to their comfort zone convinced the new techniques don't work—at least for their customers.

Top salespeople say, “*I will* figure out how to succeed in today's crazy market.” When trying new behaviors, they feel the same discomfort as you do but accept it as a natural consequence of learning. They keep practicing till they've mastered the new skill. If the desired results still don't come, these top sellers continue searching for knowledge and skills that lead them to success.

Do you see the difference? Top sellers don't say, “I'll try.” They know change is difficult, takes time and is an on-going process. Their “I will” commitment keeps them going even when times are tough.

Take Action

Last, but certainly not least, top sellers don't just come up with a bunch of ideas. They act on them. If they feel their selling skills need to be enhanced, they sign up for workshops. If the company won't pay, they use their own funds. If customers don't value their products, they try different approaches until they find one that works. If a customer's

service problems affect future sales, they do what it takes to resolve them. If better sales tools are needed, they work with marketing to develop them.

If top sellers are stymied by a sales situation, they get help from a variety of resources. They brainstorm with colleagues. They seek their boss's advice. They call internal or external consultants who might have valuable insights. They enlist corporate leaders to make high-level sales calls. They explore new ways of working with business partners.

Do you do that when the going gets tough? Or do you talk at length with fellow sales reps, lamenting the dire economic conditions, competitive pressures and miserable state of affairs in your company?

Everyone gets down occasionally and blows off steam. But top sellers don't wallow in self-pity. Very soon they ask "How can I" or "What can I" questions to stimulate options and move themselves to action. Meanwhile, their less successful counterparts are still on the phone playing the "Ain't it Awful" game.

An easy way to get started on this process is to analyze a sale you've recently lost. Ask yourself: *What could I have done differently to increase my likelihood of success?* Dissect your sale in detail, looking at every stage of the sales cycle to identify where mistakes may have been made, steps omitted, the process rushed or important information overlooked. Think about what else you could have done or how you could have handled things differently. You don't have to do this alone; your colleagues can provide valuable insight based on their unique perspective.

Write down all your thoughts, ideas or suggestions on paper. Then analyze the list, separating symptoms from root causes. Try to determine where changes in tactics or strategy could have impacted sales success. Again, get input from others.

Finally, commit to growing from this valuable learning experience and take action. Perhaps you need to strengthen your presentation skills—get a book, watch a peer, or role-play with your manager. Perhaps you need a better grasp of customer needs—write down questions to ask for tomorrow's sales call. Perhaps you need to call on higher-level decision makers—do it now on an in-process sale. Whatever you learn in this process is an incredible opportunity for personal development.

The Reflection in the Mirror

Being brutally honest with yourself can be painful, but top sellers willingly do it on a regular basis. To be like them, you need to take a good hard look in the mirror too.

During tough times, do you ask "How can I" and "What can I" questions or do you point fingers to assign blame? Do you say "I will" and commit to change or do you say, "I'll try"? Do you take action or wait for somebody else to do something?

No one can make you do things differently; the decision to change is yours alone. However, to be a top seller, you must commit to personal accountability for your success and act on it. There aren't any shortcuts or quick fixes. It's a life-long process of growth and development. But if you make this commitment, you will be a top seller—maybe not overnight, but over time and consistently. Results are guaranteed.

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