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The science behind SPIN Selling

Create value for your solution, shorten sales cycles and
increase sales at higher margins

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The Science

Huthwaite Research Group was not formed as a sales training organisation. It was originally founded in the early 1970's by a small group of psychologists and consultants who adopted a behaviourist approach to management interaction and skills training. The group pioneered the use of a research tool, now widely used and universally known as 'Behaviour Analysis'.

Behaviour Analysis is a method for observing, categorising and quantifying objectively what people say to each other in interactive situations such as meetings, job interviews and training sessions.

If sufficient interactions are observed and analysed it becomes possible to predict, with considerable accuracy, which behaviours are associated with successful outcomes in the different situations. The reverse is also true: it is possible to specify which behaviours will contribute to a confused meeting, a weak interviewing technique or an ineffective training style.

From this data we can build a 'Success Model', the ideal profile of behaviours which are most likely to give a successful result. Furthermore we can train people to modify their existing behaviour to match the Success Model more closely and thereby improve the probability of success in their chosen task. Considering the tens of millions which are spent annually in the hope of improving sales productivity, it was, perhaps, inevitable that Behaviour Analysis would eventually be applied to selling. In the mid-1970's one of Huthwaite's largest clients commissioned just such a research project; a massive study to validate the company's sales training methods, many of which were based on theories fifty years old.

The research

Very early in the research project it became apparent that there is a great difference between what top sales performers say they do and what they are actually observed doing in front of customers. The problem seems to be that the things which make top performers consistently good are the things they do naturally, whereas the points they will stress in an interview, or pass on to others as tips, are the small extra sophistications they have either invented themselves or had to work hard to master.

Having identified this discrepancy between perception and reality, the Huthwaite team implemented a programme of field accompaniments to conduct live behaviour analysis of sales transactions. So controversial were the initial findings in their contradiction of conventional sales theory that the scope of the study was expanded several times until the research results were statistically incontrovertible.

The process is on-going. In almost forty years Huthwaite has analysed over 35,000 sales interviews in forty seven countries and studied 116 factors which might play some part in improving sales performance. This remains the largest ever investigation into sales success.

The nine key behaviours which lie at the heart of the SPIN® selling model are the distilled results of this research.

The researched success model

A full explanation of the research method and the development of the SPIN® Selling model can be found in *Making Major Sales - The Story of SPIN®* published in 1987 by Neil Rackham, the founder of Huthwaite Research Group.

Some of the most important findings are as follows:

All needs are not the same

There is critical distinction between needs which are expressed in the form of a dissatisfaction (Implied Needs) and needs which are expressed as a desire for a solution (Explicit Needs). In major sales Implied Needs have no relationship, per se, with success; whereas Explicit Needs are key indicators of a successful outcome.

Successful salespeople have a technique which helps the customer to express needs in the Explicit form. Conventional probing does not work. Probing (sales jargon for asking questions) is supposed to uncover customer needs. To achieve this, traditional training identifies two types of question: Closed questions, which have yes/no answers; and Open questions, which require a longer answer. While this may seem logical, the research shows that, in practice, human nature intervenes and 60% of Closed questions receive long answers anyway!

Classifying questions by their form, Open or Closed, has no relevance in creating major sales. As we can see below, exceptional sales performers use a wider range of questions which are categorised by their purpose.

Successful salespeople use a four stage questioning model

- Situation Questions: to gather background information and understand the context of the sale.
- Problem Questions: to explore the customer's dissatisfactions and concerns.
- Implications Questions: which develop apparently isolated problems by examining their 'knock-on' effect in other areas of the customer's business.
- Need-payoff Questions: which invite the customer to consider the benefits of solving his/her problems and, having done so, to express an Explicit Need for a solution.

Closing techniques are counterproductive in major sales

In fact, if you are selling anything other than a petty cash item, continual use of closing techniques dramatically reduces the chance of success. Furthermore, top performing salespeople do not even 'ask for the order'. They propose the highest realistic commitment the customer is able to give. In the majority of cases they are successful in obtaining commitment at the first attempt; not because of their closing techniques, but because they have shown how they can satisfy a range of Explicit Needs expressed by the customer.

'Benefit' statements are the major cause of objections

Generations of salespeople have been taught to make Benefit statements by explaining how their product will be of advantage to, or will help the buyer. Yet the Huthwaite studies show that the easiest way to create an objection is to offer the customer an advantage he has not asked for.

The true Benefit Statement, the behaviour most closely associated with success, shows how your product satisfies an Explicit Need for which the buyer has said he desires a solution.

At this point the circle is complete.

- Successful salespeople realise that before they can present their product to maximum effect the customer should have expressed an Explicit Need for the solutions they can offer.
- They have a questioning technique (SPIN® which develops needs and turns them into desires for solutions).
- Customers do not object when they are offered something they have just asked for and usually agree readily to any reasonable commitment proposed by the salesperson.

The application

We have seen that the SPIN® model reproduces the behaviour pattern which makes top salespeople successful.

It follows, logically, that if you are not presently a top performer you will have to modify your behaviour to match the SPIN® model more closely if you wish to be more successful.

Changing behaviour, or, in everyday language, learning new skills, is not easy. It can seldom, if ever, be achieved simply through academic understanding of a different and more effective behaviour model.

The proven and time-consuming method for developing new skills takes the following sequence:

- **Step one**
Show and explain the skill model to give a theoretical understanding
- **Step two**
Give practice opportunities in a controlled environment
- **Step three**
Give constructive feedback so that trainees can identify and improve areas of weakness
- **Step four**
Repeat steps two and three until skills are developed sufficiently for use in a live situation
- **Step five**
Support on-going skill development with observation, feedback and coaching on-the-job.

Developing SPIN® Selling skills

SPIN® skills are easy to understand but much more difficult to put into practice. Implementation is further complicated by the very diverse sales structures, internal training resources, time scales and budget restrictions of different organisations.

Recognising these varying needs, Huthwaite has designed several implementation options, offering considerable flexibility while retaining the crucial elements of the skill development model described above.

- Traditional classroom training programmes remain the most widely used vehicle for face-to-face sales performance improvement.
- e-learning is increasingly used to deliver skills models prior to the training event, which then focuses on skill development, keeping classroom time to a minimum.
- We can train your trainers to deliver the programmes under license, significantly reducing the cost of large projects.
- SPIN® Selling learning can form part of any sales academy, integrating seamlessly with solutions for other areas of sales performance improvement.
- Coaching skills and tools can be delivered to managers and coaches, enabling them to support lasting skill improvement back at work.
- We have the capability to implement international projects world wide via our offices in 47 countries, providing training in 33 languages.
- Programmes can be designed to match the requirements of specific clients, including the development of exercises and case studies that reflect the real selling situation.

Our ultimate objective is to ensure that SPIN® works for our clients. Feedback, and some very objective measurement, including independent studies by third party consultants, shows that it does.

Independent studies show that the typical sales productivity improvement following controlled implementation of SPIN® projects is 17%, with individual results ranging from 10% to 63%. What's more, most studies show that in addition to an increase in sales volumes, many clients experience an increase in sales profitability. This probably explains why the worldwide list of SPIN® users includes such companies as Atlas Copco, Baxter Healthcare, BT, IBM, Kodak, Oracle, Royal & Sun Alliance, Siemens, UPS, and Wheelabrator.

The logo for Huthwaite International, featuring the company name in white text on a red square background.

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