



Discussion Paper

BARRETT
**What Makes a Great
Sales Performer?**

Summary of International Research Findings
& background to forthcoming
BARRETT Australian Sales Benchmarking Survey

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Introduction

What Makes a Great Sales Performer?

Business Managers and Sales Managers are often frustrated by not being able to find great salespeople who are consistently able to achieve sales targets, even when there are inevitable set backs. The importance of this question is undeniably driven by the very direct and short line of sight between the salesperson and revenue. Identifying those factors that influence salesperson performance has been the topic of sales research and literature for many decades.

Factors that influence the salespersons performance

A large number of factors come together create a great salesperson. Their personal characteristics, knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours are only part of understanding *What makes a Great Salesperson*.

Someone who is known as a great Salesperson may not have always been that way, and may not always be that way in the future. It is not a definitive label that applies all of the time in all situations. For example, a highly competent salesperson who is demotivated may not perform well. A highly competent, motivated salesperson may not look as though they are performing well if their territory or portfolio that is in decline, or under significant attack by a competitor. Yet, their performance may be outstanding compared to what other salespeople could achieve in the portfolio. And, a high performing salesperson who does not get along with their manager, or an environment that does not effectively reward their performance (not just in monetary terms) is also unlikely to perform at their best.

There are a tremendous number of factors that contribute towards sales persons performance. In order to organise these into manageable categories, Churchill, Ford and Walker (1985)¹ developed a five-category model of the determinants of salesperson a performance. Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker (1985)² revised this model into 6 categories of variables in their seminal meta analysis, involving 116 articles;

- 1) Personal factors
- 2) Skills
- 3) Role variables
- 4) Aptitude
- 5) Motivation, and
- 6) Organisational/environmental variables

These are listed in their order of importance as they influence sales performance.

¹ Churchill, G.A, Ford, N. M, Walker, O.C (1985) *Sales Force Management*, revised edition Homewood, IL:Richard D. Irwin, Inc.

² Churchill, G.A, Ford, N. M, Hartley, S.W, Walker, O.C (1985) The Determinants of Salesperson Performance: A Meta Analysis. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 22, 103-118.



Consequently, Skills was found to be the second most important determinant of sales performance, following personal factors. Yet, up until the 1990's little research was conducted into those skills that are the most important determinants of sales performance.

Skills have now been broadened to the concept of Competencies, which is the sum of the knowledge, skills and abilities of the salesperson.

Research into competencies of highly effective salespeople have generally identified 3 or 4 broad categories; Selling Skills, General Management or Business Skills, Technical Skills and Interpersonal skills³, and more recently, emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

Interpersonal Skills were historically identified as an important category of competencies needed by highly effective salespeople. Their importance reflects the significant contribution of the salespersons ability to form and develop a relationship with their client to creating profitable and productive relationship for both parties. However, Emotional Intelligence is a psychologically more complex process than Interpersonal Skills, involving a deeper process of analysis, reasoning and responding⁴

Barrett's own research involving over 300 interviews has found that superior performing salespeople demonstrate significant competence in the area's of Emotional Intelligence as identified by Goleman (1996). They display well developed Self-Awareness, Self Regulation, Motivation, Empathy and Social Skills. A recent Australian study also found that sales performance and Emotional Intelligence are positively related.⁵

In a qualitative study, using in depth interviews with higher performing salespeople, Deeter-Schmelz and Soka (2003)⁶ found that these salespeople often and unknowingly used EI to be effective. For example, all the high performing sales people they interviewed reported using the ability to empathise with customers, with some indicating that it was important to put themselves in their customers' shoes. Another use of EI was in their seeing the importance of perceiving others' emotions as influencing how they adapt their approach to specific customers and sales calls.

Self-Awareness was also seen as important in influencing the impression they create with the customers. And, the ability to control their emotions (i.e. Self Regulation) was seen as important in keeping them focused on key issues and working to resolve customers' problems. These high performers also identified

³ Rentz, Shepherd, David, Ladd (2002; Walker, Churchill and Ford, (1977); Churchill, Ford & Walker, (2001)

⁴ Sardo, (2005) EI and Sales Performance, AIM

⁵ Sardo, S. (2005) EI and Sales Performance, AIM

⁶ Deeter,-Schmelz, D.R. & Sojka, J. Z (2003), Developing effective salespeople: Exploring the link between emotional intelligence and sales performance. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 11(3), 211-220.



how important it was to their performance that they remain motivated, which they recognised can be influenced by both internal and external factors, with a sense of self satisfaction found to be the most important contributor to their motivation.

While the role of Emotional Intelligence has been well researched in the field of Leadership, there has been comparatively little research in the field of sales. Barrett is expanding its research in this area in order to empirically investigate and understand the importance of competencies related to Emotional Intelligence, in contributing to sales person performance.

Benchmarking Research – Importance of EI in salesperson performance

Using Barrett's extensive Sales Competency Dictionary, research is currently being conducted by the Barrett research team into the importance of competencies related to EI in sales performance. EI is being compared with the importance of competencies related to the Selling Process, Business & Organisational competencies, and Technical knowledge and skills. This empirical study is important in increasing the body of knowledge and understanding of what to look for when recruiting potentially effective salespeople, but also in their development plans.

Participation in the Benchmarking Research

If you would like your sales team to participate in this Benchmarking Research then please contact us for further information on 03 9532 7677.