

# *Sales skills*

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**Sales force Entrepreneurs are good at starting businesses, but not selling products. Time to call in the experts.**

"Move heaven and earth to fund from revenue." That was the message of our last piece. Great. So how do you get the revenue in? The answer is blindingly obvious—sell stuff. We have met so many people who haven't taken this "obvious" truth on board. They may have done so intellectually, but not in the actual way they are running their businesses.

So many start-ups have an entrepreneur plus a couple of techies, plus maybe someone who's worked in marketing. Everybody "does a bit of selling", just as everybody will clean the loo if necessary (start-ups are like that, everybody has to muck in). The trouble is, selling isn't like that. It's a specialist, professional job.

Recently, we were talking at a major business school and we asked how many had done sales training, expecting most to say "of course". Not a single hand went up. Selling clearly has an image problem, caused by pushy "forecourt" salesmen or those people who phone you up in the middle of your favourite TV programme to talk about kitchens. Serious selling is nothing like that. It's about listening to customers, finding out their needs and how to meet them, closing a deal and following up the deal to ensure customer satisfaction (and to make further sales). It is disciplined, long-term and co-operative.

Of course, everyone thinks they can sell—entrepreneurs, who have a natural tendency to think they can do everything, are particularly guilty of this. But while entrepreneurs may be able to dazzle the customer with their enthusiasm, they usually fail at two crucial sales tasks: qualifying customers (selling to those with real needs and real money, not just anyone within earshot) and closing (asking for payment, something most non-sales people find difficult).

Start-ups need customers quickly, and these are best found by sales people. Everyone thinks they can sing My Way, and yes, most people can get the words out roughly in time with the karaoke machine. Most people can enthuse about a product and get someone else's head nodding too. But a professional sales person does so much more than that. Get a proper sales cornerstone in your team.

Where do you find people to be your cornerstone? You could visit our website, where several such individuals have left their details. But you should be networking as much as possible—it's amazing how soon someone will probably come up with an answer. Or you could try creating your own sales cornerstone. Look around your friends and acquaintances for someone who is particularly popular—the kind of person who always has a group of people around them at parties. Check your intuition, that you do really trust and like this person. Then suggest the idea to them. If they're up for it, send them on a standard sales course.

The old adage "people buy from people" should be engraved above the doorway of every start-up. Critics of this adage say that it is fine for business-to-business (B2B) operations, but what if you want to sell to consumers directly? One person won't be enough—we're back to marketing and sales teams.

First, many of the entrepreneurs we meet are trying B2B, and still haven't got sales cornerstones. But even if you are planning to sell to the consumer, must you do so directly? Instead, you could do a deal with a big intermediary—a good sales cornerstone will make this deal a "win-win", not the one-sided deal some big company purchasing departments impose on start-ups.

So whatever your business, get a proper sales cornerstone in your team and you're half-way towards "funding from revenue". Next month we'll look at the other half of the trick. You didn't expect us to give the whole game away in one go, did you?

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