



## SPECIAL REPORT

# ACQUIRING SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE SELLING

A Gazing Performance perspective by Dr Ceri Evans

From our perspective, selling is neither an art, nor a science. There certainly can be elements of both artful judgement and systematic analysis in the selling interaction but in our view, it is very useful to understand selling as a skill. As such it can be improved, taught and transferred. Adopting the skill acquisition approach to selling means that whether you are an expert or a beginner, you can still improve and develop your skills. This is particularly true if there is clarity around the specific nature of the skills and how skills can be acquired.

### Skill acquisition in Selling: Main concepts

- Is selling an art or a science?
- The two main factors of skill acquisition
- **Structure:** Principles, concepts and practical detail
- Performance under pressure
- **Gazing Maps:** an innovative platform for acquiring skills in selling
- **Properties of maps** (and how they relate to effective selling)

### Selling: An art or a science?

The ability to sell is often seen as something that is innate, or at least part of the individual's personality: you either have it or you do not. People who are good at selling are often perceived as having natural ability in this area. This approach emphasises the importance of interpersonal skills and conceptualises selling as something of an art form.

Limitations of this approach are that it does not explain how people improve in their ability to sell over time, and it hardly encourages dedication to the selling process in those deemed not to have the magic personal ingredient. What do you do if you don't appear to have the 'right' personality? Furthermore, there doesn't appear to be one personality type that makes a good salesperson.

Some individuals take a more impersonal approach, emphasising territory management, market research and the importance of data and technical aspects of the products. Time is spent analysing potential markets, demographic characteristics, and competitive analysis. This approach conceptualises selling as something of a science. Limitations of this approach are that it can be seen to lack the appropriate degree of engagement with the customer and an understanding of their needs.

### The Gazing Perspective

From our perspective, selling is neither an art, nor a science. There certainly can be elements of both artful judgement and systematic analysis in the selling interaction but in our view, it is very useful to understand selling as a skill. As such it can be improved, taught and transferred. Adopting the skill acquisition approach to selling means that whether you are an expert or a beginner, you can still improve and develop your skills. This is particularly true if there is clarity around the specific nature of the skills and how skills can be acquired.

### The Two Main Factors of Skill Acquisition

Research has shown that whether you are learning mental or physical skills, there are some important factors to consider when designing a skill acquisition programme. The main two determinants of skill acquisition appear to be repetition and specificity. Both are required; one without the other doesn't work. We need to practice our skills, repeating them over and over until we have 'overlearned' them. But we also need structure or specificity: we need to have a clear understanding about what, exactly, the skill involves, and the outcome we are after. How can this clarity around specificity be achieved? The remainder of this article will focus on this aspect of skill acquisition.

### The Steps to take to improve your selling skill

**1.** The first step is to have a **guiding principle** or clear overview that makes sense of the selling process. For Gazing, this requires an understanding about the 'location' of the sale, or the site of the decision-making process. Often sales people concentrate on their own performance, neglecting the insight that the decision to buy is actually made within the customer's mind. It is their perception of the product or service that is important, not necessarily yours. The purpose of the selling process from the seller's

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perspective is to influence the customer's decision making process. Appreciating the location of the sale has important implications for the 'content' of selling models: the basic knowledge underpinning the skill should involve what goes on in the customer's mind rather than your own.

**2.** Once the overview is established, it is obviously helpful to have an explanatory framework or structure that breaks the decision-making process down into a few more manageable chunks. These chunks represent the different stages or phases that a customer goes through in their mind before committing to a product or service. This level can be described as 'guiding concepts'. They are useful because they initiate our thought and action without getting us bogged down in unhelpful detail.

**3.** Within the general framework, it is necessary to have practical detail about how to actually go about interacting with the customer at each stage. In this way there is an overall framework that has a guiding principle, some organising concepts and some practical detail. All of these levels are important. Often approaches to selling are weak because they lack one component. For example, they might not have an organising conceptual overview. This means that the salesperson is left only with a series of questions or techniques, but little assistance in making sense of the responses. Alternatively, they might have the overview, but lack the specific detail about what to actually ask or say, undermining the practical nature of what is required in making a sale.

**4.** The more pressured a task, the more structure it needs to have in place to support the process. Imagine a heart surgeon operating without the necessary framework, training and structures in place allow him or her to perform under times of extreme duress. Being able to perform under pressure in the real world requires clarity of process. This is important because when we are under pressure we easily revert to what we are familiar and comfortable with, and if our familiarity is with an inadequate process, performance levels will consequently be poor. In contrast, having a reliable framework in our minds allows us to follow an established procedure with confidence. We can always veer away from the model if it seems appropriate, but this is done deliberately and the sales person always knows where they are in the process, so they can return to the usual selling pathways when appropriate. Gazing uses a special map that shows how pressure causes us to become diverted away from our key processes. Part of skill acquisition is learning how to cope under pressure.

**5.** Breaking an overall task, such as achieving a sale, down into (a) the component parts, and (b) the connections between them, provides a structure or framework that increases the likelihood of successful completion of that task.

**6.** Good frameworks provide both breadth (i.e. they describe, in general terms, all the stages or steps required for the task to be completed), and depth (i.e. they provide

practical detail about how to go about completing each step). In other words, good frameworks have both the overview and the detail. One without the other weakens the practicality of the framework.

**7.** Frameworks or structures that can be drawn as a diagram are more practical because they are easier to recall, particularly under pressure e.g. in the middle of a sales interaction. Frameworks provide flexibility rather than rigidity if they are used appropriately. At Gazing our maps contain the necessary information and provide a visual prompt, and like maps, a good framework means that the user can always divert from the beaten track because they are aware of how to get back onto it if need be. The deviation is deliberate and purposeful rather than unplanned and chaotic. It is important to remember that the user of the map or framework is in control. The map just provides guidance. It is up to the user of the map to make decisions based on the situation they are in, utilizing information from the map as necessary.

**8.** The 'map' metaphor is appropriate for Gazing frameworks because the user can:

- (1) Identify where they are on the model,
- (2) Identify where they want to go (the destination)
- (3) Work out the pathway to get to the desired destination,
- (4) Identify potential hazards along the way,
- (5) Make informed choices about next steps
- (6) Provides both overview and detail

In summary, Gazing uses graphically designed 1-page maps to capture and organise the general principles, guiding concepts, and practical detail involved in the selling process. These are unique because they make the psychological states that a customer moves through before making a decision to buy explicit. Feedback tells us that the 1-page maps are an extremely efficient way of illustrating the seemingly complex process in a practical and simple way. Individuals are not required to recall thick manuals: they have the framework in their head, through the use of repetition and training. The visual maps are very effective memory structures. This gives them freedom to concentrate on the most important interactive processes, focusing on the customer's requirements and responses. In the final analysis, selling is really about understanding the buying process.

In conclusion, skill acquisition in the selling process can be greatly aided by the use of diagrams or maps. They are engaging because (1) their content is different: they focus on what goes on in the customer's mind, and (2) their form is different: a wealth of information is organised with a very efficient mix of structure, graphics, sequence and hierarchy to produce easily recallable guides for the sales interaction. Once the specifics and structure of the selling process is established with the help of the maps, practice makes perfect!

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