

StoryLeaders

The 'Missing Link' in Sales

By Mike Bosworth

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“You can't teach rapport.” This was one of my first lessons at Xerox' Professional Selling Skills (PSS). It was 1976, I was 29 years old and preparing for my new role as a sales trainer. After being the number one new business salesperson at Xerox Computer Services, I had been asked to enter “sales training.”

PSS was my first exposure to sales training. This conditioned me to believe that the chemistry between people is unique, complicated, and ultimately unteachable. I was lead to believe that the only thing that I could teach was process: including strategies, tactics and skills that would push a sale forward. Forming a connection was dependent on the inherent ability of the salesperson.

Ultimately, the impression of PSS was that it was too “pushy and manipulative” for the Computer Services division at Xerox. Our small division then took the initiative to create and teach a training model we referred to as “consultative selling.”

It was during this time that I was first introduced to the 80/20 rule (i.e., the top 20% of sellers generate 80% of the revenue). This dilemma spurred Xerox to hire Neil Rackham in 1979. He studied the top 20%, identifying those successful sales behaviors that could be taught to the bottom 80%. Thus, SPIN Selling was born. Although SPIN was an

improvement to PSS for selling copiers, it assumed the buyer already knew how to use our products, making it difficult for those of us selling highly complex B2B systems and software. We were selling disruptive systems that people could not easily visualize using.

In 1983 I formed my own sales training company, Solution Selling, a structured sales methodology that helped sellers with needs development for their products and services. My mission was to show the bottom 80% of sellers how to emulate the top 20%. In the four day workshops I spent a total of 30 minutes on “rapport.” I still believed that connecting had to be left to the individual.

By 1993 my book, “Solution Selling, Creating Buyers in Difficult Selling Markets” was published and contributed to my rapidly growing business until I sold it in 1999. I co-founded CustomerCentric Selling (CCS) in 2001 because I felt there was still more to offer in sales training. CCS was a simpler needs-development method with a broader application of B2B sales. However, once again, connecting was left to the individual.

Finally, in 2008 I had the mother of all ‘ah ha’ moments. The difference between the top and bottom sellers is their ability to *connect* with customers and prospects, and this ability is teachable. My breakthrough was brought about by three factors:

1. Despite 3 decades of progress in sales training, the 80/20 rule had worsened; it was now the 87/13 rule.

2. I was exposed to the brain science of decision making. Specifically, how trust is developed, how desire is formed, and how intuition is used to bridge gaps when making choices.
3. I was approached by an academic, James Mayfield Smith, about the possibility of using the ‘power of story’ in sales.

My partners, Ben Zoldan and Tom Albers, and I recognized the fact that people connect with and buy from those they trust. The two essential components of building trust according to Stephen Covey are sincerity and competence. For 32 years I had been teaching salespeople how to be *competent*, and the top tier sellers, who connect intuitively, were able to get even better. For the bottom 87%, however, competency was not enough. They needed to learn to connect, and stories, we learned, can build that connection.

We began creating Story Leaders in 2008, and now in 2010 we have codified connecting. Our framework teaches people to purposefully connect with, inspire, and influence others through the power of story.

One question we are regularly asked is, “What is so special about story?” The fact is, leaders in virtually all professions are superb storytellers. Before the relatively recent invention of writing, our ancestors collected and passed down crucial tribal information through oral traditions. For the past one hundred and ninety thousand years, humans have used story to communicate, educate, warn, persuade, engage, inspire, celebrate and *connect emotionally*.

Brain science further confirms what human history illustrates – a good story can have a profound effect on the buying process. The brain responds *unconsciously* to stories. When people hear, “once upon a time. . .” the limbic (emotional) brain says, “this is *safe*, it's just a story, I don't have to *do* anything - I can relax and enjoy the story.” Concurrently, it tells us, “I better *pay attention* because I might need to remember this, it could be *important*.” Long after we forget data, we remember stories.

In addition to our limbic system, our brain is composed of two hemispheres, the left and right. Our left brain has an insatiable need for numbers, examples, facts, figures and logic. The more information it gets, the more it is stimulated, leading to a never ending cycle of procrastination. (The left brain classifies things in black and white, as a series of single items, demands certainty, and remains emotionally *neutral*.)

The right brain is our creative, imaginative side that responds to images and takes in the whole picture. It is the path to all our senses, interpreting the nonverbal cues crucial to social cognition. In addition, it can access the limbic brain, through which it tolerates shades of gray and fills in gaps with *intuition*, thereby imagining the future.

Our feelings originate from the limbic brain. It is where we decide to trust, form loyalty, foster hope, take action, and, most importantly, *connect emotionally*.

When a seller begins with some variety of “I want to tell you a story . . .” the buyer’s limbic brain creates an altered state of awareness. The left brain becomes relaxed and quieted for

the imaginative right side. When immersed in a story the buyer's brain is primed to visualize. The logical left brain is shut down and critical thinking is gone, setting the stage for the listener to be accepting of new ideas.

Today, most corporate marketing departments are creating messages for the buyer's left brain, delivered by sellers trained to ask logical questions and make left brain presentations. Most sales training companies (including the two I founded) are teaching sellers to be competent for the buyer's never-ending left brain needs.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the sales industry finds itself at the mercy of the 87/13 rule. The best salespeople are intuitively connecting to the right brain. They then use their competent selling methodology to cater to the buyer's left brain AFTER they emotionally connect, thereby addressing the buyers whole brain. Those who lack the instinctive ability to connect are selling to an unsatisfiable left brain, unable to engage with the decision making limbic system.

Story Leaders provides the missing link for the majority of salespeople who can't reliably connect with prospects and customers. Story Leaders is an opportunity for innovators and early adopters in the corporate training world to leverage their sunk costs in competency training and gain a huge advantage over their slower deciding peers. Through story, salespeople can emotionally engage their buyers, while still addressing their left brain needs for a linear sales process. StoryLeaders is the perfect complement to virtually any selling methodology and belies conventional wisdom; by

teaching people to connect through story, you *can* teach rapport.