



The Five Most Common Mistakes Distributor Salespeople Make

And how to avoid them



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Over the years that I've been involved in distribution, I've worked with tens of thousands of sales people. Certain negative tendencies -- mistakes that distributor sales people make -- keep surfacing. Here's my top five. See to what degree you (or your sales force) may be guilty of them.

Mistake Number One: Ruts! (Chained to their comfort zones.)



It is the unique nature of the distribution business that sales people see the same customers over and over again. Regardless of how many accounts they have, whether 20 or 200, they see their customers much more frequently than almost any other type of sales person. As a result, it's very easy to slide into the routine of seeing the same people at around the same time and talking about the same things. Not only is it easy to get into ruts regarding which customers to see, it is also easy to extend that "stay in your comfort zones" mentality to the other aspects of the job. It becomes easy to stick to selling the same products, visiting the same departments and selling in the same way.

There was a time when the "same time next week" mode was a wise choice. Dependability was a desirable quality for a distributor sales person. But, alas, the market has changed and most customers don't have time for the same conversation about fishing and football that they had last month.

But more insidious than this comfortable routine is the addiction to mental and emotional comfort zones. These comfort zones appear when a sales person

doesn't present that new product the company has just picked up – because the sales person isn't comfortable with it. Or they evidence themselves when the sales person refuses to learn the new computer system – because he or she isn't comfortable with that. Or when the sales person doesn't call on a new market segment – just not comfortable.

These are all evidences of a sales person that is addicted to mental and emotional comfort zones. The comfortable rut has become an almost insurmountable chasm, hindering the sales person from reaching his/her potential.

The problem is that, as long as we remain within our comfort zones, we're destined to dwell in the past. We do what used to work, we sell what we have been comfortable with, we do our jobs the way we are used to doing them. We allow our past to determine our present and limit our future.

This may have been OK in years gone by, but the pace of change today won't reward the sales person who is addicted to comfort zones built in previous days.

Personal and professional growth means continually venturing into unexplored areas, meeting new people, selling new products, and trying new methods, all with a mindset that understands the need for constant growth.

One way to avoid this mistake is to constantly question what you do:

“Is this the best way to run this sales call?”

“Is this the only person to talk to in this account?”

“Is this the best product to show this client?”

When you form the habit of continually questioning every routine thing that you do, you'll find yourself uncovering new ways to do things, new people to meet, and new products to present. You'll bust out of the chains of comfort zones.

Mistake Number Two: Reactive modality

It is so easy for a sales person to allow everyone else to dictate the course of their days. They carve out little empires of importance for themselves so they can constantly react and thereby be busy and feel



needed. They train their customers to call them with routine questions when they could just as easily have called customer service. They need to be there to personally write down every order. They jump every time even the smallest customer calls. They must personally supervise every complex order, drop off every sample, and expedite every problem. Why? Because they want to feel important by being in such demand.

They aim to please, and they define that as reacting and responding to whatever comes their way. As a result, they develop for themselves days filled with frenzied activity. They drove this emergency shipment over to this customer, dropped off a sample to that one, checked on a couple of back orders for others, sourced some esoteric product for another. It's all so unnecessary. All this because they allowed and encouraged everyone else to dictate their activities. Where do they go tomorrow? Depends on who calls today. Instead of

developing plans and working proactively, they let everyone else determine their days, and work reactively.

The net result? They squander their talents, time, energy and wisdom in a random distribution dictated by everyone else in the world. At the end of the day, they are exhausted. They are crabby to their spouses, irritable with their families, and negative about their companies and their jobs.

Planning prioritizing are the solutions to this mistake. If you take the time to create a set of goals, and then a plan for meeting those goals, you'll have a yardstick by which to measure every plea for your time and attention. You'll discover the ability to say "no," and gradually take back your time. The first step to moving from reactive to proactive is deciding what you really want to do, and what you really want to accomplish. That set of goals begins the process.

Mistake Number Three: Wasting the sales interaction by not learning more about the customer.



There are some customers who have been called on for years, and yet the sales person doesn't know any more about them today than he/she did after the second sales call. These are accounts where the sales person cannot identify one of the account's customers, explain whether or not they are profitable, or identify one of their strategic goals.

Distributor sales people have this wonderful opportunity to learn about their customers in deeper and more detailed ways, and often squander it by having the same conversations with the same customers over and over. They never dig deeper. They mistake familiarity with knowledge.

What a shame. I am convinced that the ultimate sales skill -- the one portion of the sales process that more than anything else determines our success as a sales person -- is the ability to know the customer deeper and in a more detailed way than our competitors do.

It's our knowledge of the customer that allows us to position ourselves as competent, trustworthy consultants. It's our knowledge of the customer that provides us the information we need to structure programs and proposals that distinguish us from everyone else. It's our knowledge of the customer that allows

us to proactively service that customer, to meet their needs even before they have articulated them.

In an economic environment where the distinctions between companies and products are blurring in the eyes of the customer, the successful companies and individuals will be those who outsell the rest. And outselling the rest depends on understanding the customer better than anyone else.

A simple way to avoid this is to create a written objective or two for every sales call. Give yourself the task of learning more about the customer, every time you see him or her. Now, you won't be able to accomplish that 100% of the time, but just the process of putting it into your mind, and trying to do it will improve your proficiency.

Mistake Number Four: Poor questioning



This is a variation of the mistake above. I am absolutely astonished at the lack of thoughtfulness that I often see on the part of distributor sales people. Most use questions like sledgehammers, splintering the relationship and bruising the sensibility of their customers by thoughtless questions.

Others don't use them at all, practically ignoring the most important part of a sales call. They labor under the misconception that the more they talk, the better job of selling they do, when the truth lies in exactly the opposite direction.

And others are content to play about the surface of the issue. "How much of this do you use?" "What do you not like about your current supplier?" Their questions are superficial at best, redundant and irritating at worst.

The result? Sales people never really uncover the deeper, more intense, issues that motivate their customers. Instead, they continually react to the common complaint of customers who have been given no reason to think otherwise: "Your price is too high."

Fewer sales, constant complaints about pricing, frustrated sales people, impatient managers, and unimpressed customers – all of these as a result of the inability to use the sales person's most powerful tool with skill and sensitivity.

The vaccine for this is to create a set of good sales questions, word for word, in advance of your sales call. By taking 5 or 10 minutes to craft a set of questions, you'll dramatically improve your use of those questions.

Mistake Number Five: No investment in themselves.



Here's an amazing observation. No more than 5% to 10% of active, full time professional distributor sales people ever invest in their own growth. That means that only one of twenty sales people have ever spent \$20.00 of their own money on a book on sales, or subscribed to a sales magazine, taken a sales course, or attended a sales seminar of their own choosing and on their own nickel.

Don't believe me? Take a poll. Ask your sales people or your colleagues how many of them have invested more than \$20.00 in a book, magazine, tape, etc. in the last 12 months. Ask those who venture a positive answer to substantiate it by naming their investment. Don't be surprised if the answers get vague. You'll quickly find out how many sales people in your organization have invested in themselves.

Distributor sales is the only profession I know of where the overwhelming majority of practitioners are content with their personal status quo.

Why is that? A number of reasons.

Some mistakenly think that their jobs are so unique that they cannot possibly learn anything from anyone else.

Still others think they know it all. They have, therefore, no interest in taking time from some seemingly valuable thing they are doing to attend a seminar or read a book.

Some don't care. Their focus is hanging onto their jobs, not necessarily getting better at them.

But I think the major reason is that the overwhelming majority of distributor sales people do not view themselves as professionals and, therefore, do not have professional expectations for themselves. They worked their way up from the customer service desk or the warehouse, and they view their work as a job to be done, not a profession within which to grow.

They are content to let their companies arrange for their training or development. And between you and me, they would prefer that their companies really didn't do anything that would require them to actually change what they do.

These are the most common negative tendencies that I see. It may be that you and your colleagues are immune to these dampers on success. Good for you. But if you are not immune, and if you spot some of your own tendencies in this list, then you are not reaching your potential for success. You have tremendous potential for success -- for contentment, confidence and competence

– that is being hindered by these negative behaviors. Rid yourself of these negative tendencies, and you'll begin to reach your potential.

Here's a simple way to avoid this mistake. At the beginning of every month, identify one thing – just one thing- that you will do to improve yourself that month. Read a book, watch a video lesson, go to a seminar, etc. Just one thing, once a month, times all the months of your career will make you into someone more capable and successful.

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About the Author



Dave Kahle is a consultant and speaker who specializes in helping distributors and their suppliers grow their sales and develop their people. He's a world-class speaker who has presented in eleven countries and 47 states.

He has acquired his message through real-life experience. As a distributor salesperson, Dave took a new territory to over \$5,000,000 in sales in 5 short years, becoming the top sales person in the nation. He's been the number one

salesperson in the country for two different companies in two separate industries.

As a general manager of a start-up division of a distribution company, Dave directed that company's growth from \$10,000 in monthly sales to over \$200,000 in just 38 months.

His programs are powerful and career-changing because he combines his unique understanding of proven educational principles with 30 years of exceptionally successful sales experience. He has both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Teaching.

Since 1988, he's served as president of the DaCo Corporation. Dave has trained thousands of salespeople, and has authored twelve books, 32 multi-media programs, and has been published over 1,000 times. His credits include: ***How to Excel at Distributor Sales, 10 Secrets of Time Management for Salespeople, Question Your Way To Sales Success, How to Sell Anything to Anyone Anytime***, and his latest book ***The Heart of a Christian Sales Person***.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toledo, and a Master's degree from Bowling Green State University. He and his wife live in Grand Rapids, MI and Sarasota, FL, where he is a father, a step-father, an adoptive father, a foster father, and a grandfather.

Dave is a member of the Author's Guild, the Christian Businessmen's Committee, and a Chapter President for Truth@Work Christian Business Roundtables.

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