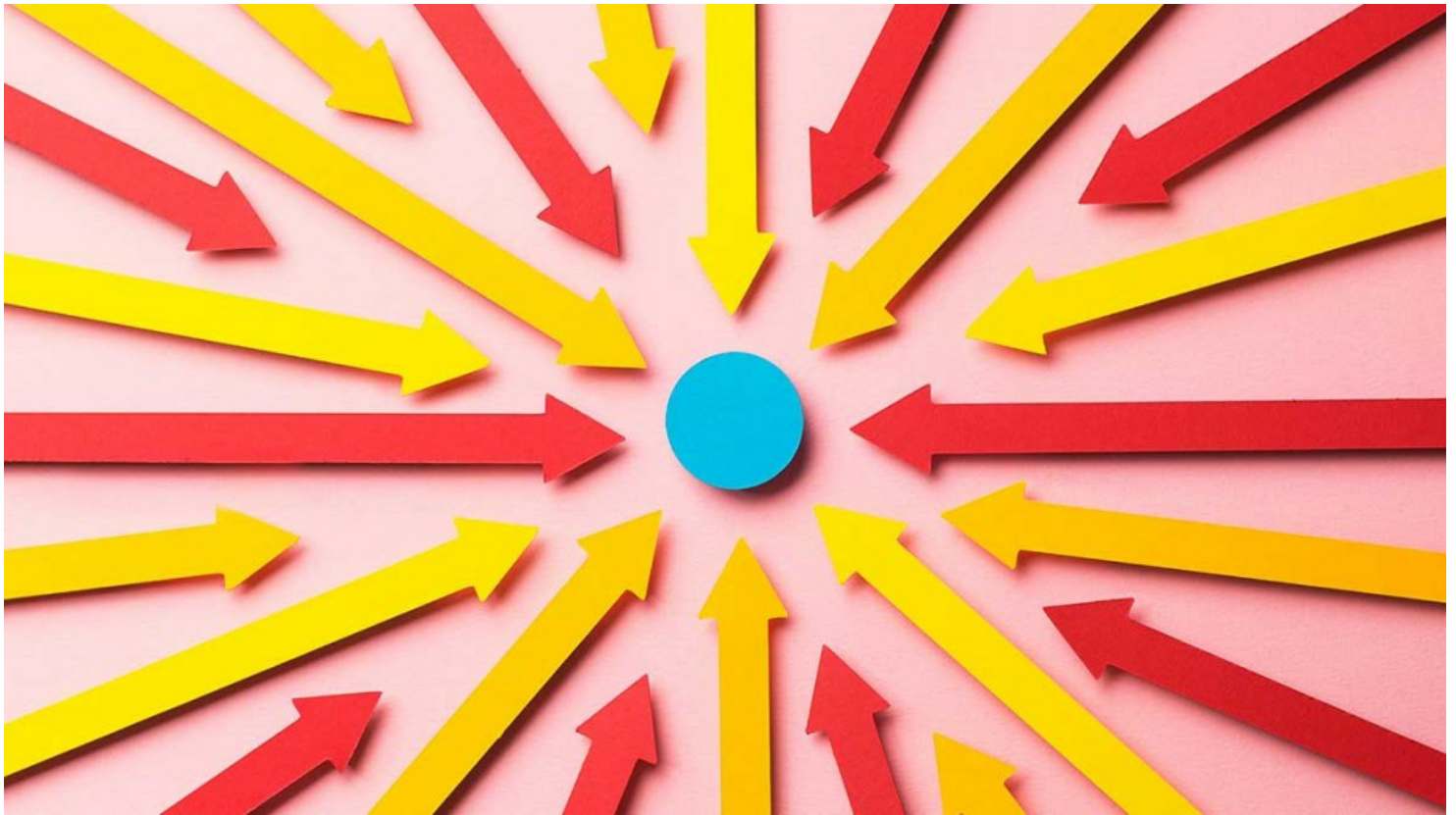


# The Best Salespeople Do What the Best Brands Do

 [hbr.org/2016/08/the-best-salespeople-do-what-the-best-brands-do](https://hbr.org/2016/08/the-best-salespeople-do-what-the-best-brands-do)

8/15/2016



It's not news that the role of salespeople and selling is changing. In the past, salespeople were often the first step in a purchase process, and could significantly influence customer decision-making by controlling information about pricing, availability, competitive advantage, etc.

But in this era of nearly ubiquitous information, customers usually engage with salespeople after they've already researched their purchase and in some cases made their purchase decision. Digital commerce and disintermediation have caused many customers to question the importance of having a sales relationship at all. Moreover, companies are learning that true sales success isn't indicated by the number or size of deals closed; it's measured by getting and keeping the *right* customers.

Great salespeople succeed in this new business environment by doing what great brands do. I laid out seven critical brand-building principles that great brands follow when I wrote my first book. I've now found that these principles are as instrumental to restoring sales to its role as a valuable, sustainable, integral business function as they are to building great brands.

- Great brands **start inside**. Great salespeople **sell inside first**. Just as great brands start brand-building by cultivating a strong brand-led culture inside their organizations, great salespeople know the first step to sales success is actually one taken inside their own companies. They contribute tremendous value to their organizations through their market insights and direct communication channel with customers. So they help their companies with product development, marketing strategy, and customer service by serving as the Voice of the Customer internally.

- Great brands **avoid selling products**. Great salespeople **cultivate emotional connections with customers**. In the book [What Clients Love](#), Harry Beckwith explains that relatively few businesses actually sell products, services, or even expertise; most sell satisfaction. “Progressive does not sell car insurance. It sells comfort: the comfort of knowing that if you have an accident, they will be at the scene, ready to write a check.” In the same way, great salespeople don’t try to sell items or programs. Instead, they appeal to and connect with their clients through emotion, brand story-telling, and thought-leadership. In doing so they take the attention off price and features and appeal to the feelings customers value and the identities they want to experience and express.
- Great brands **ignore trends**. Great salespeople **don’t imitate, they innovate**. Great brands don’t follow what everyone else is doing, nor do they wait to take their lead from customers. In the same way, great salespeople offer their customers unique perspectives and often seek to push their thinking. They present a differentiated sales experience by challenging customers’ status quo and teaching them something new and valuable. They are the “Challengers” that Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson identified in their [research](#) into what distinguishes high sales performers.
- Great brands **don’t chase customers**. Great salespeople **attract the best customers for their company**. Just as great brands know they’re not for everybody and so they seek to attract loyal and profitable customers through shared values and common interests, great salespeople are selective when engaging prospects. [Research by VoloMetrix](#), a sales productivity firm, shows that top sellers build deeper relationships with fewer customers rather than casting a wider net of shallower engagement. Salespeople cultivate profitable, sustainable customer relationships if they’re savvy enough to focus on accounts that inherently represent a good fit with their company instead of trying to close as many deals as possible.
- Great brands **sweat the small stuff**. Great salespeople **create extraordinary experiences that embody their brand**. Great salespeople know that they can strengthen their brand if they interpret and reinforce it and its differentiating value throughout the sales experience. So they examine all the different touchpoints between the customer and the brand in the sales process and seek out opportunities to infuse the most influential ones with the brand’s key values and attributes. They’re also aware of the power of social selling today and they carefully manage their social network activity to make informed, authentic, personal connections.
- Great brands **never have to “give back.”** Great salespeople **create real value for their customers**. Great brands don’t engage in questionable business practices and then try to make up for them with charitable activities and social responsibility programs — they create a positive social impact in the way they design and run their businesses. Likewise, great salespeople don’t engage with customers simply to make a sale — they look for ways to make their clients more successful. Leadership consultant Scott Edinger [observed](#), “Sales-training programs rightly focus on finding clients’ ‘pain points.’ But great salespeople also know there’s value in pointing out successes waiting to be exploited.” They know improving a customer’s condition may not always involve a sale and they do it nonetheless.
- Great brands **commit and stay committed**. Great salespeople **impart the unique value of their brand**. Many salespeople feel pressure to gain new business or retain accounts at any cost, but the most effective ones do not give price concessions just to win deals. They are convinced of the value their company offers and they skillfully help their customers understand it as well. They employ the techniques put forth by the writers of the book [Value Merchants](#), drawing on their knowledge of what clients value to convey their offer in a way that resonates with them.

Great salespeople implement all of these principles in a cohesive, coordinated approach that mirrors the [brand-as-business management approach](#) used by great brands to develop powerful and valuable brands. Just as great brands cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with their customers, great salespeople cultivate a deep connection between their company and their client’s business. To borrow a term, the best salespeople are *brand evangelists*.

[Guy Kawasaki](#) first adopted the term “evangelism” into the business world by applying it to an innovative approach to sales, marketing, and management. Evangelism, as he defined it, means “convincing people to believe in your product or ideas as much as you do” because evangelists believe that what they offer is truly helpful and valuable to others.

Over the years, many technology companies have developed the role of a technology evangelist or “chief evangelist.” These people are charged with building up support for a given technology, and then establishing it as a standard in the given industry. Like these technology evangelists, brand evangelists — that is, great salespeople — build up support within a market for a brand so that it becomes the brand leader in its category.

Importantly, brand evangelism is not another one of the customer-centric or customer-driven sales approaches that have become popular in recent years. Customer-centric sales and most other sales improvement approaches are pursued for the sole purpose of increasing sales. Brand evangelism is about engaging customers in a way that produces stronger and more valuable brands and sustaining long-term business success for their companies and their clients.

This is what great salespeople do.