

Why Salespeople Fail

By Paul McCord, Author

Creating a Million Dollar-a-Year Sales Income: Sales Success through Client Referrals
(John Wiley and Sons, 2006)

Is your sales career floundering? As a sales trainer and management consultant, I have the opportunity to talk with thousands of salespeople and sales managers. One of the most often asked questions is a variation of “Why am I (or, for a sales manager, “my salespeople) failing?”

There is not a magic formula for sales success, but there are very specific reasons salespeople fail. Understanding the reasons for failure—and adding a hefty dose of honest personal evaluation—can help turn your career around.

Salespeople fail for one of four reasons:

Lack of Desire

A strong desire to succeed is a prerequisite for success in sales. Professional selling is a tough occupation. On most days, a salesperson will hear the word “no” more often than “yes.” At the beginning of a sales career or when changing jobs, each salesperson spends a huge amount of time prospecting for leads. In spite of the hard work that’s required up front, sales can also be a tremendously rewarding and lucrative career—if you begin with a sincere, heartfelt desire to succeed. You must have a passion to sell. This desire cannot be faked, but it *can* be fed. If the initial spark is present, training and encouragement will help it grow.

Lack of Commitment

Unfortunately, desire alone does not ensure success. I have talked with many former salespeople who wanted to succeed, viewed sales as a noble and honorable

profession, and had a strong desire to make a significant income. Yet they failed because they lacked commitment. They were not willing to take the “punishment” of being rejected more often than not; they were not willing to put in the time required; they were not willing to invest in themselves and learn the profession; and they were not willing to take the advice, constructive criticism, and guidance of their peers, managers, trainers, and prospects who chose not to purchase.

Desire is the *want or need to succeed*, while commitment is the *determination and willingness* to do whatever is needed to achieve success. Selling is a demanding occupation. Most professional sales positions require more than 40 hours per week. Generally, a salesperson can expect to work longer and harder than anyone else in his or her company does. Clients do not necessarily need you when it is convenient—they need you when they need you. And that can be any time—day, night, weekends, holidays, or during your vacation.

Lack of a Good Selling Process

Strong desire and commitment will not prevent failure unless they are accompanied by a proven way to generate prospects and close business deals. The second most frustrating thing for salespeople is the feeling of being lost in the sales event itself. Most companies, from Mom and Pop firms to Fortune 100 companies, do a good job of training their sales force on product. However, they do a poor job when it comes to teaching the sales force *how to sell*. The two issues are not the same, though many companies treat them as such.

Selling is the “how” in the sales process—how to get in front of and sell a prospect. Product knowledge is the “why”—why we sell and why they buy. Every

salesperson needs solid grounding in each of these areas. Companies tend to view the why of selling as the crucial area, and to a certain extent, they are right. Selling skills are transferable from company to company, industry to industry. Product knowledge is usually specific to an industry and a particular company within that industry. Consequently, the product and “why” to sell that particular product tops the training list for most firms.

Nevertheless, every salesperson needs a process to generate a robust pipeline of prospects and turn those prospects into customers. That proven process should include a prospecting method, a sales method, and a follow-up method that consistently generates repeat sales and fresh prospects. These prospects are converted into customers who receive a purchasing experience beyond their expectations.

A proven, reliable sales process will give you the confidence to tackle the most difficult client or work for the most demanding sales manager.

Lack of Training

Though desire and commitment are internally generated, a good selling process comes from training, and then adapting that training to your personality through trial and error and coaching. Lack of training is second only to a lack of commitment in flushing salespeople out of the business. Sales training is the foundation upon which product training should rest. Many companies assume their salespeople and the salespeople they hire already have a solid foundation in sales training. Salespeople who do not perform are simply written off as part of the 80% in the old 80/20 rule of selling: 80 percent of the sales force produces only 20 percent of the company’s sales. Or, put another way, 80 percent of the company’s sales are produced by only 20 percent of the sales force.

Studies show the top sales people in any industry produce almost four times the sales volume of the average salesperson and ten times the volume of the bottom dwellers. A survey of the top salespeople in your company would probably reveal a common denominator. Either each of them received serious, in-depth sales training early in their careers through their company, or they've heavily invested in themselves by reading sales books, attending seminars, listening to sales tapes, and discussing with one another what works and what doesn't. Virtually every top salesperson spends a significant amount of time and money on personal training.

No salesperson ever reaches the point where he or she no longer needs training. Every top producing salesperson I have met takes this aspect of the job seriously and spends a great deal of time on personal training. In fact, most sales training and coaching companies, such as mine, consistently work with the most successful salespeople rather than the new or unsuccessful. Why? They know the value of investing in themselves. They became the superstars they are because they never assumed they knew everything—or that they knew enough, for that matter.

New and struggling salespeople, on the other hand, who need the training the most, are the ones most difficult to convince to get training. Money is certainly one hindrance for many salespeople. But, books and tapes are not expensive. Many excellent seminars are less than \$100. In addition, many sales managers have a small library of sales training materials in their office the salesperson could borrow.

Do you have a sincere passion to sell? Are you committed to doing the activities—even the distasteful ones—necessary to succeed? If your answer to both of these questions is yes, yet you are still struggling, your issues lie in the areas of sales

process and training. If your company is not providing you the training you need to develop a sales process that produces the results you want, invest in yourself and the training you need outside your company.

If your answer to either of the above questions is no, you need to change career directions. Professional selling is not the right career choice for you. No one is more miserable than someone stuck in a career they hate—and better to exit on your terms than on someone else's.

About the author: Paul McCord is President of McCord and Associates, a sales training and management consulting firm in Houston, Texas. He has written numerous articles and his first book, *Creating a Million Dollar-a-Year Sales Income: Sales Success through Client Referrals*, published by John Wiley and Sons, will be released on November 17. His second book, *The Extraordinary Sales Manager*, is to be released the summer of 2007.