

Achieving higher levels of sales performance in a demanding world

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In today's world it's increasingly challenging to grow top-line revenue, win new business, maintain client loyalty and retain top sales talent. The organisations that can successfully align the skills of their sales professionals with current business realities and improve performance on a faster curve will have a distinct competitive advantage.

In this paper, you'll learn about:

- ◆ the pressures both customers and sales professionals are dealing with in today's demanding world
- ◆ the reasons traditional behaviour-based sales training comes up short in delivering the sustained results we need
- ◆ the role thinking preferences play in buying decisions and selling approaches
- ◆ why a foundation in thinking is critical for achieving faster, lasting performance improvement, along with shorter buying cycles, larger deals, and stronger client relationships.

"Customers want it all"

This headline from a [McKinsey report](#) on sales trends speaks volumes. Think about what a typical buyer is dealing with today, and it's understandable why their 'wants' are so wide ranging. They have higher expectations placed on them but tighter resources and increased scrutiny on their spending. Every purchase decision is expected to have a clear business benefit.

Their workloads are also escalating. Email inboxes are overflowing, not just from client, co-worker, colleague, and supervisor communications, but also from all of the people who are constantly trying to sell them something.

With the time, attention, budget, and responsibility pressures adding up, customers want fast and highly efficient transactions, flexible approaches, and solutions that can simplify and address complex challenges. Tallying up the list of 'wants' ultimately boils down to a desire for partners who aren't just going to sell to them, but who will add value by solving their problems and making

their jobs easier and faster. If the sales professional can't make a connection quickly and understand what's most important to the customer, the customer is going to find a salesperson who can.

In addition, sales professionals are dealing with pressures of their own.

We need the sales professional to be building the kinds of relationships that lead to shorter buying cycles, larger deals, and long-term loyalty, but that is a tall order when the customer simultaneously 'wants it all' and doesn't have any time to spare.

How do we help sales professionals quickly develop the savvy to deal with the dual realities of ever-more-aggressive sales targets and customer demands for what Tom Searcy calls '[silly putty contracts](#)' that keep options flexible in favour of the customer, depending on the economic environment?

How do we keep sales professionals focused on generating revenue and making the most of every opportunity, when there are so many new ways to 'lose'? Customers will begin looking at the entire set of experiences that a company provides, not just a single service, transaction, or product.

To be successful, sales professionals have to:

- 1. Recognise that speed of learning is critical:** Whether it's learning the organisation's sales processes, understanding prospects' business issues, or becoming familiar with the ins and outs of a new product release, heightened competition, an uncertain economy, and an increasingly informed customer base mean organisations need salespeople who can quickly learn what they need to know so they can start selling.
- 2. Personalise their sales approach in a more meaningful way:** Sales professionals know they need to tailor their approaches, but superficial tactics aren't enough. It's not just about explaining product features and

“Research has shown that 85 to 90% of sales training results in no more than a 120-day uptick in productivity.”

benefits, or demonstrating a value proposition. Salespeople have to quickly figure out what their customers care about, what they pay attention to, how they prefer to communicate, and how to present information in a way that respects those preferences and doesn't require more time—from either the sales professional or the customer.

- 3. Communicate and collaborate effectively within their organisation:** Complex deals and customer 'wants' are requiring greater collaboration with others in the organisation, from customer service, marketing, and product development, to finance, operations, and legal. Sales professionals have to be able to work effectively with their internal partners to make sure the company delivers what the customer expects.
- 4. Adapt, shift, flex, repeat:** Changing business and customer requirements are the norm, not a passing phase. Sales professionals need to learn how to manage their own thinking and become comfortable shifting strategies on a dime, processing last-minute information, and responding to novel ideas in a way that meets everyone's objectives. Agility is now a must-have competency.
- 5. Leverage stress to their advantage:** Selling is a high-stress job and never more so than today. The most successful sales professionals know how to use their mental resources effectively so they can stay focused and productive.

Why sales training comes up short

Sales training and coaching programs are often designed to address many of the aforementioned issues, and by and large, they aim to do so by focusing on behaviour—changing behaviour on the part of the salesperson and looking at the behavioural patterns of potential buyers.

Yet a recent *Sales and Marketing Management cover story* noted that “85 to 90% of sales training results in no more than a 120-day uptick in productivity.”

Clearly something is missing. Behaviour is important, but it's not enough.

Although helpful in creating comfort and building relationships, a sole focus on behavioural approaches in sales training doesn't give the salesperson the complete set of tools to be persuasive, effective, and responsive, and it misses the most critical aspect of decision making: thinking!

Buying decisions are rooted in thinking, not behaviours. That means sales professionals need to know:

- ◆ what information does the customer need to make this decision?
- ◆ how do I need to present the information to satisfy the customer's needs?
- ◆ what strategy do I need to use to influence or shift customer perceptions?

Understanding how the salesperson **and** the customer are thinking can make all the difference, because **our thinking styles impact how we process information, how we buy and sell, what we pay most attention to, and how we make decisions.**

Behavioural approaches can help the salesperson manage a sales conversation in an efficient way. However, these approaches don't reflect the mental processes that actually drive the sales activities or the purchasing decision. Many external factors impact behaviour; **thinking is what's constant.**

Because companies are missing this essential thinking focus, many of them do not realise the full benefit of their investment in sales training. To make sure sales programs, processes, and methodologies really deliver the results the organisation needs, **we have to start with the best tool available—our brains.**

Getting inside the buyer's head

"Too many times we really don't understand what our customers value. We impose what we think they should value instead."

—David Brock, *Partners in Excellence*

A pharmaceutical sales rep recalls how her sales calls typically went when she was selling to increasingly time-strapped physicians: She would arrive, unpack her bag, take out visual aids, talk about the patients, discuss detailed information about the medication to help the doctor feel comfortable prescribing it, and then be greeted with blank stares.

She could see from the physician's behaviour that she wasn't making a connection, but she couldn't pinpoint the problem. She was presenting the information she thought mattered most in an organised and enthusiastic way. What was she missing?

When she learned that the way she preferred to think (detailed and thorough, concentrating on individual impact and interpersonal connections) conflicted with the way most physicians prefer to think (quickly synthesising information and favouring logical, fact-based arguments), **it was clear what she was missing: the thinking that was driving her and the physician's behaviour.**

Changing how she presented the information and tailoring it to the physician's thinking preferences instead of her own, made a big difference. She said, "I saw a different response to me as a sales professional, and gained more credibility in building relationships. It helped increase my sales on a faster curve."

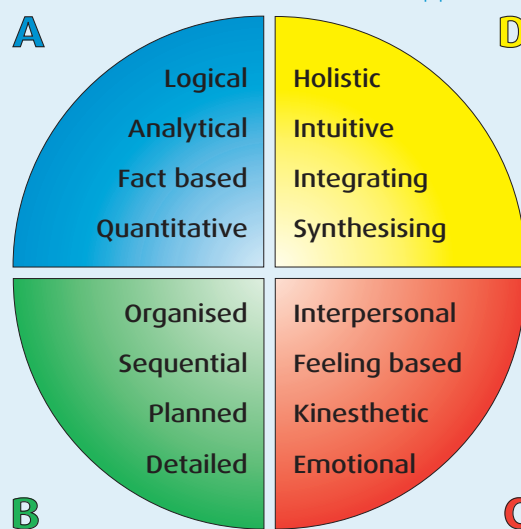
One of the reasons this is such a powerful approach to selling is that it shortens the process for both parties. Sales and Organisational Performance Consultant, David Brock, notes that, when we don't know how the customer thinks, we don't know what they value, and as a result:

"We substitute by imposing everything on the customer—throwing all the value we create at them, hoping they can sort it out and determine our solutions create value for them. More value is not better! More value is confusing

and distracting. More value can create complexity from the point of view of the customer. More value wastes customer time and resources. More value, in the eyes of the customer, becomes less value!"

When it comes down to it, customers don't really 'want it all'. They simply want the information they need and value, and they want to receive it in the way that's most efficient for them.

Figure 1: The Whole Brain® Model and Approach



The Whole Brain® Model graphic is a registered trademark of Herrmann International

The highly validated Whole Brain® Model, originally developed at General Electric for business use, is the most comprehensive, application-oriented approach to understanding thinking preferences. This model is easy to remember and intuitive, as most people are already familiar with left brain/right brain concepts, upon which the model builds. Not an 'either/or' approach, the Whole Brain® Model depicts the degree of preference we have for thinking in each of the four quadrants. This approach is a more realistic view of how people actually function than just looking at behaviours.

Once sales professionals understand their own thinking preferences and how thinking impacts their approach to work, they will begin to realise why it sometimes seems as if they're continually hitting a brick wall in 'getting through' to certain people, whether they're external buyers or internal partners from other departments.

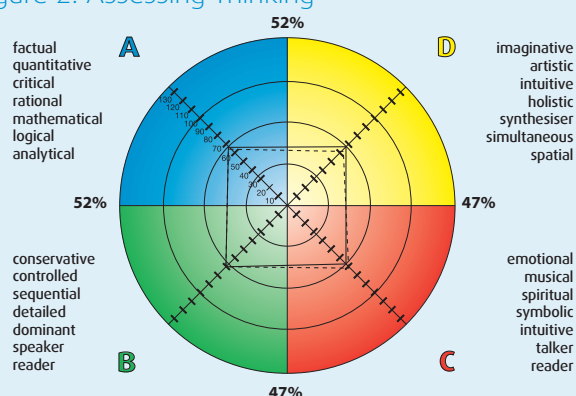
For sales professionals, this means they can apply a method that allows them to provide less information to potential clients and get better results.

Some describe it as feeling as though they're speaking a completely different language, and in a sense, they are. However, unlike the effort involved in learning a foreign language, learning to speak the 'languages' of different thinking preferences is an infinitely quicker and easier task.

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There are several ways to determine a person's thinking preferences. While the most accurate is the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®) assessment (described in Figure 2 in the following section), when working with a customer, that is often not an option. Sometimes, as in the case of physicians, an occupation or industry may generally fall into one or more specific quadrants of the Herrmann Whole Brain® Model (see Figure 1). Based on the data collected by Herrmann International over the past 30 years, physicians typically have stronger preferences for A (logical) and D (strategic/big picture) quadrant thinking.

Figure 2: Assessing Thinking



The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument® (HBDI®), which is the thinking styles assessment at the core of the Whole Brain® approach, reveals an individual's thinking preferences in the form of an HBDI® Profile. The thinking preferences of job descriptions, marketing materials, processes, teams, cultures and entire organisations can also be depicted in an HBDI® Profile.

When it's not as clear cut, though, the sales professional can learn how to spot the clues—the way the person communicates, the information they request, the words they use—that reveal their thinking style preferences. They can then learn specific techniques for communicating, presenting, and persuading based on those preferences.

While the idea of matching selling styles with buying styles is not new to sales training, it typically focuses only at the surface level: behaviour. Getting behind the behaviour to the thinking that actually drives evaluation and purchasing decisions is the key to effective selling and is pivotal in getting agreement.

The same techniques can be used to collaborate more effectively, gain faster agreement and buy-in from internal partners as well. As deals become more complex and the competitive environment becomes tighter, the ability to quickly get everyone on the same page internally will be an increasingly important factor in making the sale and keeping deals profitable.

It's not what they think, it's how they think

"It's one thing to provide all reps with one brand of sales training or methodology, but it's another to ensure the individuals are learning what they most need to absorb, and not receiving education they don't merit."

—Sales Training 2011: *Uncovering How the Best-in-Class Sustain, Reinforce and Leverage Best Selling Practices,*
Aberdeen Group

As Aberdeen Group points out, the companies that **consistently** outperform the rest in terms of top-line revenue, sales quota attainment, average deal size or contract value, and average lead conversion rate **know their sellers.**

Do you know how your sales professionals think?

It's a critical question for the organisation and the individual, because it includes the entire sales cycle, from prospecting, communicating, and presenting information, to the ways in which they learn and solve problems.

One of the hallmarks of the Whole Brain® approach, and one of the reasons a grounding in thinking is so successful in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of sales training efforts, is it helps people see the strengths of their thinking preferences, and how they can use their natural thinking 'comfort zones' more productively to achieve their goals.

Here are just two examples:

Example 1: A sales professional who has a strong preference for B-quadrant, process-driven thinking, for example, may struggle with clients who are looking for increased contract flexibility or non-traditional product solutions. Once the person understands it's a 'matter of preference', it becomes easier to avoid a knee-jerk response. With the help of coaching from the sales manager and other development activities, they can learn instead how to leverage the methods they're comfortable with, such as step-by-step problem solving and precise planning, to not only tackle the issue but even get excited about the challenge.

Example 2: A sales professional with a strong preference for D-quadrant thinking, on the other hand, may be much more comfortable dealing with outside-the-norm requests. They can often visualise ways to find creative solutions in spite of challenges and adapt to changing situations to 'make things work'. However, at the same time, they may suffer from a lack of detail orientation that can lead to over-promising or unrealistic expectations. They can learn to use their creativity to put in place visual or other systems that make the planning, management, and follow-up processes more fun so they're less likely to overlook key steps or roadblocks. A sales manager may consider providing coaching on how to best use the tools

provided, and select tools that are best suited and that will work best for that individual's style of thinking.

The Whole Brain® Approach also emphasises that while we have different degrees of preference for each of the four quadrants, we are not limited by those preferences, but in fact have access to all types of thinking. In addition to learning how to use our preferences more intentionally to make challenging tasks easier and more enjoyable, we can learn how and when to 'flex' to different styles to get better results.

This positive underpinning is another key separating point between a focus on thinking and a focus on behaviour. The idea isn't to change someone's thinking; instead, it's to encourage people to embrace and use the full spectrum of thinking that's available, and to use it in smart ways.

From distressed to de-stressed

Selling is a stressful job, never more so than today. Sales professionals can't avoid stress entirely, but by learning how stress impacts their thinking, they can better manage their own reactions (as well as their stressed-out clients' reactions) to stay engaged, resilient, and productive.

It's a critical point because if the sales professional doesn't effectively manage their stress, it can make it that much harder to remain nimble and agile. With flexibility so important to winning business today, anything that interferes with salespeople's ability to think on their feet will have a direct, negative impact on their results. The result is that they become even more stressed, unproductive, and bogged down. It's a vicious cycle.

With Whole Brain® Thinking sales professionals can use their thinking preferences—and flex when necessary—to better plan and manage their time and their minds, ultimately reducing stress. Knowing how their thinking shifts under stress and how that impacts their behaviour is the first step. Certain situations will frustrate them, but they have the mental resources to make their thinking work for them instead of against them.

The idea isn't to change someone's thinking, instead it's to encourage people to embrace and use the full spectrum of thinking that's available, and to use it in smart ways.

Putting it into practice: smarter sales thinking

Selling with the customer in mind

Now more than ever, prospecting, nurturing, and closing profitable deals require individualised, highly personalised approaches, but time and attention are at a premium. By getting inside the customer's head, the sales professional can learn to:

- ◆ focus on what the customer cares about, and only what the customer cares about
- ◆ present information in a way the customer wants to receive it so they respond more favourably to it
- ◆ plan prospecting activities, meetings, and follow-up in a more efficient and targeted way
- ◆ identify and focus attention on the most likely buyers
- ◆ use time wisely to stand out from the competition and 'noise' to shorten the buying cycle
- ◆ upsell and cross-sell more effectively by appealing to different decision makers and stakeholders
- ◆ build high-value relationships that lead to long-term customer loyalty and retention
- ◆ 'walk around' the thinking quadrants to develop better solutions to prospective customers' business issues—and increase deal size in the process
- ◆ improve cross-functional communication, collaboration, and alignment
- ◆ build agile, adaptable mindsets for responding to changing customer and business requirements.

Assessing and applying thinking

Some examples of how organisations are applying Whole Brain® Thinking and the HBDI® internally to sales development include:

- ◆ mapping the mental demands of the sales job against the Whole Brain® model to find alignment and uncover gaps

- ◆ identifying the kinds of thinking required at each stage of the sales process, and mapping the sales professional's preferences against them for insights
- ◆ maximising development opportunities by tailoring individual learning plans based on the preference data (the sales professional's profile, the job profile, and the process profile), with specific strategies for reinforcement and follow-up
- ◆ holding sales professionals accountable for their development by helping them plot their learning journey based on their unique profile data—and no 'cop-outs' allowed since we know thinking can be flexed
- ◆ accelerating knowledge acquisition and competency development by incorporating Whole Brain® Thinking principles into sales training curricula
- ◆ adapting and optimising coaching strategies by taking into account the thinking preferences of the manager/coach and the sales professional. One company reduced training time from 24 months to 7 months using this approach
- ◆ using Whole Brain® Thinking techniques to gather and share competitive intelligence in a more focused and accurate way
- ◆ creating Whole Brain® planning tools and worksheets for reinforcement and ongoing, daily application
- ◆ providing tools to plan and manage mental resources more productively, particularly in stressful times.

Mind your investment

Turning around the dismal statistics on sales training success rates doesn't require throwing out everything we're doing. It also doesn't require slowing down the process of getting sales professionals prepared, proficient, and closing deals. In fact, it's just the opposite.

By incorporating Whole Brain® Thinking into sales training approaches, organisations are able to:

- ◆ ramp people up more quickly
- ◆ grow top-line revenue and market share
- ◆ reduce the sales cycle time
- ◆ win and keep more business
- ◆ sell deeper and wider into existing accounts.

Sales training spending is on the rise, but we have to start with thinking to get the best return on that investment.

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Herrmann International Asia works with leading companies and academic institutions to improve employee and team performance.

About Herrmann International Asia

Herrmann International Asia works with leading companies and academic institutions to improve employee and team performance.

Herrmann's work focuses on practical ways to leverage differences in individual thinking styles. Building on research originally begun at General Electric, the company has developed applications that range from developing strategy at the executive level to increasing sales force productivity.

More than two million people worldwide have completed the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), the assessment tool at the heart of the company's approach. Herrmann International Asia is headquartered in Sydney, Australia with offices in:

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