



How to Sharpen Your Sales Strengths

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Before we start, let's get one thing out of the way.

There is no single right way to sell.

In fact, we believe there are as many ways to sell as there are salespeople.

Does that feel liberating? We hope so. If you enjoy sales, if you're good at it, and if you're finding some of the success you want, you possess a rare ability—and you should celebrate it. You're someone who can do this job. And if you're trying to follow a method or emulating a sales hero and it's not working, it might not be your fault. Who you are is who you should be. You'll be most successful at sales if you make the most of who you are.

And by that, we mean using your natural talents—the ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that come naturally to you.

Gallup conducted a 30-year research project into this very subject, and determined that there are 34 universal talent themes (you can find a full list of these strengths at the end of this manifesto). We've studied hundreds of thousands of salespeople, and have seen all 34 in action. If you take the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, you'll discover your five top talents—these are the ones that have the most impact on making you who you are. Based on Gallup's strengths research and our work with some of the best salespeople in the field, we believe that the best salespeople are the ones who focus on building those five talents into unique strengths. This means combining your talents with skills, knowledge and practice, and developing your own approach to sales. Rather than spending time imitating the latest guru or following “best practices,” the most successful sales professionals learn to sell *their* way.

Learning how to maximize your strengths and minimize the time you spend managing weaknesses takes practice, effort, and creativity. Here are seven strategies, along with first-person examples, to help you apply your efforts more effectively and overcome some challenges you might face.

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1. Create open communication and transparency

In most organizations, people hide their weaknesses. But we think it's better to admit them and recognize how they may be holding you back or hindering others. Talk with your manager about where you're having trouble and why. More importantly, don't ever be embarrassed about what makes you great.

“I like to win,” said Kelly Matthews, who is the account manager for an important account at Mars Snackfood. One of her top five themes is Competition. “I can spend time just going through the motions, or I can see what type of challenges are out there and go after [them]. I think that keeps the job fun. I think that's what makes life fun. You know, *winning*.” Kelly's Competition talents take a lead role in her approach to sales, but two of her other top themes, Focus and Achiever, are what drive her to remain consistently productive and intent on her goals. She's also clearly focusing on her strengths, not obsessing over her weaknesses.

2. Intentionally use your strengths

At a large financial services firm, we conducted a meeting with one of the sales teams to discuss an upcoming strengths coaching session. The group was having a good time and was incredibly enthused. The meeting was more like a party than a business discussion. Then the sales vice president, whose top theme was Command, said, “We’ve all discussed our strengths. What about weaknesses? What’s my biggest weakness?”

The room went silent. Everyone stared at the table. Finally, one account executive meekly looked up and said, “Well, when we have sales meetings, you kind of tend to, you know, do all the talking.” Another person, building on the comment from the first, muttered, “So sometimes we don’t get the chance to tell you things.” A third offered, “Which means you don’t always get all the information you need.” Then someone in the back whispered, “And we’re all afraid to interrupt you.”

This hit the V.P. hard, but he recognized the opportunity. After the meeting, he had his assistant type up his top five themes. He sent a copy to everyone on his team and called another meeting for a week later. He said, “These are my strengths. Tell me how to use them to make us better.”

So his team showed him how his top talent themes would be better served if he stopped taking over meetings. One of his top five themes is Competition. They told him that if he quit dominating discussions, they would sell—and thus win—more. Another one of his top five themes is Input. They told him that if he held his tongue a bit more in meetings, he’d learn more. Futuristic is also in his top five, and they told him that if he listened more, he’d get a clearer picture of what’s on the horizon.

He wrote down all these suggestions on a list with his top five themes. He keeps the list by his phone, and he doesn’t attend a meeting without thinking about some questions to ask before getting to his own agenda. Now every time he gathers his staff for a sales meeting, he’s reminded of what happens when he uses his strengths intentionally—and stops taking over meetings.

3. Find support systems

A support system helps you with what you don't do well or gives you reinforcement when you need it. Support systems can be technological, such as programming a spreadsheet with macros that do the math on sales reports or reminder e-mails that you send to yourself. You can also establish a support system by developing new habits. For example, those who don't lead with Woo might find it challenging to make initial contacts or small talk with strangers. If Woo isn't one of your top talents, make a list of five small-talk topics and read it before you walk into a stranger's office.

Support systems can also be other people. Many of us would never remember a birthday if our spouses didn't remind us. "Over my 15 years, I created what I call my support network: my fellow reps, mentors, managers, corporate people whom I can call and kind of get talked off the ledge every once in a while," said Ron Barczak from Stryker. "People I can call and say OK, I need to vent for 10 minutes about something. Can I just vent to you? Because I cannot vent to my customers."

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4. Build complementary partnerships

You build a complementary partnership by teaming up with someone who is strong in an area where you are weak. One of the best ways to create such a partnership is by offering your talents in exchange for someone else's. This works like a support system, but the difference is that you offer something up as well. For instance, Communication isn't one of Carter's top talents, and he tends to move so quickly through the sales call that he misses opportunities to explain details or ask for feedback. But Ideation is one of his top five themes. Carter should look for someone with strong Communication talents to be his rehearsal audience. That person can help him think about what he needs to say, what questions he needs to ask, and when he needs to pause and listen. In return, Carter can offer to come up with ideas for solutions for his partner's clients.

Complementary partnering might help with a weakness that is extremely common in many sales forces: dealing with paperwork. Because so few sales reps enjoy paperwork, they may have trouble finding a partner for this on the sales team. Many account executives hire paperwork assistants on their own dime. This is a good tactic for freeing up more time and energy for activities that can drive sales rather than spending an enormous amount of time doing something badly.

If you can't find a partner, ask your boss for help. "I had a manager who would always say to me when things would get overwhelming, 'I'll cover the paperwork. I'll cover the organizational stuff.

Go see your customers.' He knew that's where I would get my energy from," said John Wells from Interface, whose top themes include Woo. "We all have to do things that we aren't the strongest in, but those are the things that zap your energy. A great manager's going to figure out, even around some seemingly rigid rules, how to do that for that person. And then that person's going to go over the mountain for his manager." So don't overlook the possibility that your boss can be a complementary partner too.

5. Get the right education

Sales reps need training—the *right kind* of training. And that training doesn't rely on a rigid formula, program, or plan. The right training or development program is issue-based and specific. If you need better product knowledge, then this is a training issue. It's also a good idea to consider why the initial training program might not have done the trick. The right training accommodates individual strengths and learning styles. Those with Input might not mind reading a 400-page product manual, whereas strong Activators can be impatient to see the product in the field.

Jenny Craig has a training program that's designed to meet the needs of people who learn in different ways. "Our training program is all kinds of things," said TC Crafts from Jenny Craig. "It's information and dialogue and different scenarios that you can practice and believe in."

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It's also important to note that *training* and *development* are not synonymous. Training is the opportunity to enhance your level of skills and/or knowledge. Marcy, a sales manager for a company that sells windows directly to consumers, went through a training program that concentrated on specifications. This program helped Marcy learn about the company's products, but it didn't help her learn how to use her talents to sell more effectively. This is where development comes in. Once she learned how to apply her talents to her role, she quickly hit her stride. If you can spot the difference between training deficiencies and development deficiencies, you're more likely to apply the correct solution to the problem.

6. Manage unpleasant tasks by focusing on the outcomes

In sales, there are some things you just have to do: sales reports, expense sheets, meeting logs. And if you're like most reps, you hate doing them. So agree with your manager on the activities that are not negotiable—the stuff you must do to keep your job. Negotiate a standard, a bare minimum, and get it done. More importantly, focus on the outcomes of those activities, not the steps.

For instance, a newspaper advertising rep we know despised figuring up her commissions every month. To do it, she had to pore over the paper, cut out all the ads she sold, measure them, figure the price, then look up whatever discount she'd given the buyer and subtract it to find the price. Once that was done, she had to do some complicated math to figure out her sales for the month, then more math to determine her cut. She couldn't find a complementary partner anywhere—all the ad reps hated figuring their commissions too.

Then she had a brainstorm. Instead of showing the math every month in one big spreadsheet, she asked her sales manager if she could submit her commissions on an ad-by-ad basis over the course of the month, then enter the results on a small spreadsheet. Her sales manager agreed, but on one condition: If her math was off, she'd have to go back to the original method. "I started noting the price of everything I sold as I sold it, right in my BlackBerry," she said. "It was a hard habit to get into, because I don't like record keeping. I'd prefer to sell and move on." Though she didn't like keeping track that way, it did resolve half the trouble of figuring commissions at the end of the month. Her manager double checked the figures and found them to be more accurate than the sloppy math she'd cranked out under duress all those years. "Then, instead of putting [my commissions] off until the last minute and staying at the office until midnight the day my commission report was due, I started thinking of the ads in terms of stuff I wanted to buy. A 2x2 ad is a tank of gas," she said. "A 2x5 equals a pair of shoes. A full-page color ad is a house payment. I went through the paper looking

for my potential purchases, measured ad by ad. I made a game out of it, and that made it more real and relevant.”

Remember, all the things you don’t like doing are only a small part of the job. That ad rep spent only five hours a month out of 200 figuring out her commission the old way. One of our clients said, “I loathe filling out reports, but it’s only 5% of my day. When it hits 30%, I’ll quit.”

That’s true for you too. First, try to negotiate the things you hate doing down to a tolerable level. If you can’t, here’s the perfect opportunity for you to seek out support systems and complementary partnerships, even if it may mean pooling your resources and hiring for them.

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are only a small part of the job.

7. Adjust or change roles

As a successful sales veteran, Geoff Nyheim from Microsoft Online Services—whose top five themes are Maximizer, Relator, Strategic, Achiever, and Input—realized over time that he’s probably a better farmer than a hunter. “I have enough skins from successful hunts on my wall to add credibility. I’ve made my [sales] number 22 out of 24 years, and that didn’t happen just because I was nice to people. But basically, I’m better at farming.” So he has shifted to doing more of what he does best: creating and maintaining long-term relationships. He’d be much less successful at churn-and-burn selling, and he knows it.

Some situations, however, require more drastic changes. For instance, if you use only two of your top five themes at work, you might do better in another role. In the meantime, use your other strengths any way you can. Maximize your softball team. Focus on your piano playing. Solve the problem of your library’s budget shortfall. Work is much more engaging, exciting, and rewarding when you use all your talents, but if you don’t have that option right now, make sure you use them somewhere. You’ll be amazed at how fulfilling it can be—and a little of that fulfillment will spill over into your job.

Once you make the most of your strengths and stop trying to make up for your weaknesses, you’ll start to think about your job in a whole new way. You will gain perspective about your unique approach to sales. You may even see where you’ve made some wrong turns. Most importantly, you’ll start realizing how you can sell with your strengths. **You’ll see how using the talents you have—and understanding who you really are—will make you a better salesperson.** 📖

The 34 Clifton StrengthsFinder Talent Themes

Achiever | People who are especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.

Activator | People who are especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.

Adaptability | People who are especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to “go with the flow.” They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.

Analytical | People who are especially talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.

Arranger | People who are especially talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.

Belief | People who are especially talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life.

Command | People who are especially talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.

Communication | People who are especially talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.

Competition | People who are especially talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.

Connectedness | People who are especially talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.

Consistency | People who are especially talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.

Context | People who are especially talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.

Deliberative | People who are especially talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.

Developer | People who are especially talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

Discipline | People who are especially talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.

Empathy | People who are especially talented in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.

Focus | People who are especially talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.

Futuristic | People who are especially talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They inspire others with their visions of the future.

Harmony | People who are especially talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.

Ideation | People who are especially talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.

Includer | People who are especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them.

Individualization | People who are especially talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.

Input | People who are especially talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

Intellection | People who are especially talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.

Learner | People who are especially talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.

Maximizer | People who are especially talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.

Positivity | People who are especially talented in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.

Relator | People who are especially talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Responsibility | People who are especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.

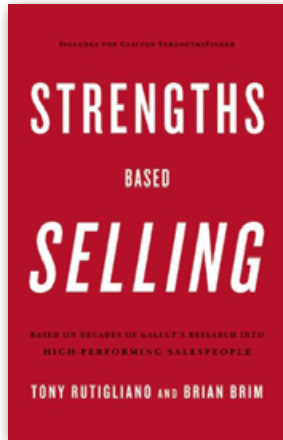
Restorative | People who are especially talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.

Self-Assurance | People who are especially talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Significance | People who are especially talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized.

Strategic | People who are especially talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.

Woo | People who are especially talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.



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