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CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTOR IN PERSONAL SELLING OF COMPUTER BASED PRODUCTS

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INTRODUCTION

Commercialization of new high-tech products is often the costliest stage of the entire product development process. Yet even when the process is well managed, the risk of failure remains high. New high-tech products usually have just one shot at the market. Get it wrong and the consequences are invariably fatal. And though the launch strategy is critical, this stage is largely neglected in the business press and academic literature on high-tech marketing, innovation and new product development. Furthermore, marketing of high technology products and innovations are never to be the same as marketing of the traditional products and services. Marketers have to deal with customers' fear, uncertainty, and doubt about how to use and attain the full benefits of using the product. Therefore it needs a different marketing consideration, which is able to deal with uncertainty, fear and doubt. One of the promotional methods that seem able to accommodate these needs is personal selling.

Personal selling allows more rooms for more question and answer session, room for demonstration and lengthy description on the products. Nevertheless, it has its own pitfalls, which is that cost and skills are among the decisive factors. In spite of this, the benefit of exercising personal selling is always counterbalancing the downside. Personal selling has proven to be a suitable method for marketing high technological product. The dramatic economic and social changes of the last decade have stirred companies in an even

broader range of industry to the realization that personal selling will provide them with a cutting edge (Johnston and Marshall, 2003). It is believed that personal selling messages have the potential to be more persuasive than mass promotional methods (such as advertising or publicity) due to the face-to-face communication with customers. There are so many factors contributing to the success of personal selling, nonetheless it depends on the nature of the product itself, target audience and the atmosphere of the industry. Computer industry seems very fragile and the life span of the products seems very short. Therefore marketers need to clear the shelf as soon as they can yet at the same time, customers 'satisfaction and loyalty must be guaranteed. Therefore it is important to identify the critical success factor in marketing computer based product via personal selling method. This paper attempts to explore the factor associated with success and to highlight the critical factors (personality, sales knowledge, motivation, communication and customer relationship) in personal selling of computer based products.

The Role of Personal Selling

Brooksbank (1995) suggests that personal selling is a critical component of marketing success. With increasingly fragmented markets, the role of personal selling becomes extremely important. The role of personal selling will continue to be of overwhelming importance in the case of those companies operating in markets characterized by high volume customized goods and services with relatively long and complex decision making processes. Both practitioners and academicians recognize that personal selling effectiveness has become vital to the success of an organisation. Researchers in sales have examined several demographic and psychological characteristics of salespeople in order to find the determinants of salesperson effectiveness and success (Predmore and Bonnice, 1994; Sengupta *et al.*, 2000). Therefore learning personal selling principles will improve anyone's chances for success in virtually any field. It's been said that "All professionals must be good sales people, and all good sales people

must be professional. (John, 1983).

Critical Success Factor

Critical success factors (CSFs) are tasks or attributes that should receive priority attention by management because they most strongly drive performance. CSFs have been defined as "any characteristic, condition, or variable that significantly drives business performance" (Keck *et al.*, 1995). Ketelhohn (1998) argues that due to competition, "key success factors are the minimum capabilities that a company must master to enter the competition". He stated that CSFs are industry and task specific, invoking the analogy that "what is key to success in a 100m race is different from what it takes to succeed in a marathon".

A Forum by a Boston based sales training company (surveyed three groups-customers, internal support staffs and sales people in order to find out their perspectives on eight basic characteristics of top performing sales people) found that each group named different characteristics as the most important factors. Customers rated knowledge, creativity, aggressiveness and interpersonal skills about equally. Internal support staff judged knowledge and professionalism as most important to high performance whereas sales people however, rated professionalism almost twice as high as any other characteristics and placed aggressiveness last. Probing deeper, forum researchers found that it was not product knowledge so much as knowledge of the customer's situation but it must be accompanied by the ability to orchestrate support resources for the customer that differentiated top performers from average sales people. (Thayer, 1986). Johnston and Marshall (2003) stated that the performance of salespeople is a function of both personal traits and organisational factors. Churchill *et al.*, (1985) found that the key individual-level determinants of salesperson performance are altitude, personal characteristics, skill level, role perceptions, and motivation. Other individual-level variables that affect salespersons' performance include adaptability (Peterson *et al.*, 1995), voice characteristics (Peterson *et al.*, 1995),

communication apprehension (Pitt *et al.*, 2000), and interpersonal listening skills (Castleberry *et al.*, 1999).

Many of the variables that influence performance such as sales aptitude, mental ability, and personal traits are individual characteristics of salespeople, and are out of the control of management. However, management directly controls how salespeople are trained and developed. Management control and training are important potential contributors to a salesperson's long-term performance. Thayer (1986), claims that at Eastman Kodak, four "no trainable qualities" are sought in recruiting potential high performing sales person. It includes self confidence (not modesty), job commitment (unafraid to get hands dirty in doing the job), persistence (always finds another reason for going back when a customer says no) and initiative (in solving problems, gathering information and asking direct questions.

Hewlett-Packard believes that two qualities characterize top sales person, including the know how to get special things done smoothly for the customer inside or outside of normal policies and systems. They also always know where they stand with customers, in terms of their performance, stage in the selling process, positioning and knowledge of the customer's situation. Another study found by Sharon (1989), stated sales people have to have experiences and have learned fear of failure and know how to deal with pressure. Second is that sales people must possess a high energy level and ability to work with other people towards common goals.

Along with these two important criteria, a sales person is not necessarily to be stereotyped as a fast talking, joke telling bundle of personality. Instead, one has to be ambitious, enthusiastic, well organised and a highly persuasive individual, preferably with some solid experience. In the opinion of sales managers, high performing sales persons are those who maintain two way advocacies, representing the interests of their companies and their customers with equal skill

Past researches have found dozens of success factors, however for this study; the researcher had clustered them into five essential categories (as illustrated in Figure 1). These factors were expanded into 19 items and computers sales-related forces were investigated

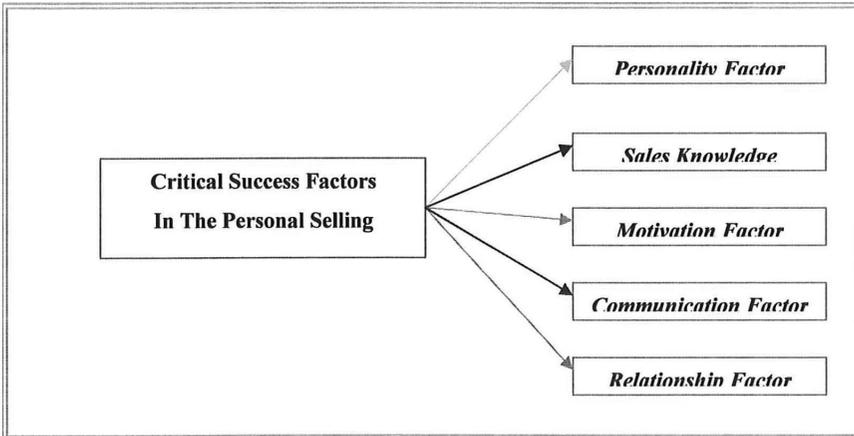into these factors to find out the significantly critical success factors in selling computer based products.

Figure 1: Critical Success Factors In the Personal Selling Process of Computer Products

METHODOLOGY

The study was specifically looking into the critical success factors in the personal selling process of computer products (hardware and software) from the point of view of computer distributors in the area of Johor Bahru only. Respondents consist of groups of sales manager, assistant sales manager, sales executive, and outstation sales representative and outdoor sales coordinator, 189 of them all together. The samples were drawn randomly (convenience technique) from the list of computer products distributors and dealers in Johor Bahru area. 189 self-administered questionnaires (consist of demographic close ended and 19 items likert questions) were sent (via mail – accompanied by self-addressed & stamped envelope, drop-off and face-to-face interview). These items were then analysed by using

mean ranking and factor analyses techniques. Mean is ranked by three categories. Score 1 to 2.33 is categorized as low, 2.34 to 3.67 are moderate and 3.68 to 5.00 are high.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

85 questionnaires were returned (45 % response rate), from 45 male respondents (52.90 %) and 40 female respondents (47.10 %). Respondents consists of 57.6 % Chinese and 42.4 % Malay. It seems that computer industry is not the career choice of Indian population in Johor Bahru. There was almost balanced mixture between young sales force with the seniors (indicated by almost an equal percentage: 50.6 % age below 25 and 49.4 % age of 25 – 35). 52.9 % of the respondents have worked for long time in the industry (2 – 8 years) and experience sound.

Factors Associated with Success

There were five essential assertion categories to solicit respondents' perception of factors associated with success in the personal selling process of computer products. Each category consists of several items (as listen in Table 1). The categories were personality (5 items), sales knowledge (3 items), motivation (3 items), communication (4 items) and relationship (3 items).

Category	Success Factors	Mean	Ranking	Agree*	Std. Dev
Relationship	Customer Satisfaction	4.73	High	96.4 %	.793
Relationship	After Sales Services	4.62	High	91.7 %	.873

Relationship	Customer Loyalty	4.56	High	91.8 %	.879
Knowledge	Know Your Product	4.55	High	93.0 %	.864
Comm	Nonverbal	4.40	High	82.3 %	.978
Comm	Listening	4.38	High	96.4 %	.816
Knowledge	Know Your Customers	4.36	High	88.2 %,	.986
Motivation	The Basic Compensation Plan	4.35	High	91.8 %	.869
Personality	Self Control in Emotions	4.28	High	91.7 %	.854
Personality	Patience in Closing Sale	4.19	High	87.1 %	.748
Personality	Caring For Customer	4.08	High	91.7 %	.775
Comm	Speaking	3.98	High	85.9 %	.786
Motivation	Special Financial Incentives	3.93	High	81.1 %	.923
Motivation	Non-financial Awards	3.80	High	73.0 %	1.089
Personality	Joy In Work	3.76	High	69.4 %	.934
Knowledge	Know Your Reseller	3.74	High	71.8 %	.774
Personality	Morally Ethical	3.49	Moderate	51.7 %	.971
Comm	Writing	3.49	Moderate	56.5 %	.684
Knowledge	Know Your Company	3.35	Moderate	42.3 %	.909

19 Factors: 84 % in High Ranking Cluster, 16 % in Moderate Ranking Cluster
* Agree refers to combination score of strongly agree and agree.

Table 1: Mean For Critical Success Factor

16 out of 19 factors are success factors and scored high mean ranking in the personal selling process of computer products. These factors are shown in Table 1, led by Customer Satisfaction, followed closely by after sales service, customer loyalty, knowledge about products. Mean score below 4.5 but above or at least mean 4 are skills in non-verbal communication, listening skill and knowing who your customer is, having basic compensation plan, able to control emotions, patience in closing sale and care for customers. These factors are categorized as highly critical.

Factors that score high mean ranking but below score 4 and still can be considered as factors that are associated with success were speaking, special financial incentives, non-financial rewards, joy in work and know your reseller. Factors that scored moderate were morally ethical, writing skills and knowledge about the company. These factors are not necessarily important to the sales people in running their personal business.

Critical Success Factor in Personal Selling of Computer Based Products

The respondents agree that personality factor, sales knowledge factors, motivation factors, communication factor and relationship factors are essential in order to succeed in the personal selling process of computer products. Nevertheless relationship stands out to be at paramount and critically important in the achievement of selling activities of computer based products. The rationale is that, computer based products are highly technical therefore customers definitely have doubt, fear and uncertainty towards the products they want to purchase. Therefore they have to rely on the sales people to explain in great detail about the products. In this process, trust is important because without it, customers may not be confident towards their purchase items. Trust can be established through relationship, whereby the main components are after sales service and satisfaction and loyalty. Loyalty will be established once the customer achieves satisfaction on the products and service which may be due to confident

and certainty that are developed during the sales process. This finding goes parallel with what is found previously by Charles (1984). Super achieving sales people see their customers as partners and themselves as team players rather than superstars or adversaries.

The second critical categories are joint by communication and knowledge. Nevertheless several items in these categories fall under moderate ranking and less critical (knowledge on company and writing skills). The respondents realized that personal selling actually require two-ways of communication instead of formal letter writing. This finding is parallel with Johnston and Marshall (2003) who believes that personal selling messages have the potential to be more persuasive than advertising or publicity due to the face-to-face communication with customers. It is essential for sales people to understand the product from A to Z, comprehensively and able to suggest. Communicating what they know about the product is the next critical factors in this category. In order to communicate effectively, they have to have strong ability in listening and reading the non-verbal message. Sales people that possess high sensitivity levels can understand customers better. This finding agrees to the past research i.e ....other individual-level variables that affect salespersons' performance include adaptability (Peterson *et al.*, 1995), voice characteristics (Peterson *et al.*, 1995), communication apprehension (Pitt *et al.*, 2000), and interpersonal listening skills (Castleberry *et al.*, 1999). After Personality, therefore the next four critical factors in personal selling of computer based products are knowledge about products, ability to listen effectively and sensitivity to non-verbal messages and followed by knowledge about customers.

The third group of critical success factors in selling computer based products mostly rests on the person himself   Personality and basic motivation stand to be important in dealing with computer based products. Basic compensation plan is no doubt, important to all sales people, in fact it serves as the hygiene factor to individuals.. Personality items, i.e. self control in emotions, patience in closing sales and caring for customers are significant. These factors scored high mean ranking and possess high level of acquisence from the

respondents. This finding conforms to what were found by Johnston and Marshall (2003) and Churchill *et al.* (1985). According to them, the performance of salespeople is a function of both personal traits and organisational factors. In this study, basic compensation is part of organisational matters, thus it supports the previous findings. The remaining personality items are similar to personal traits, which Churchill *et al.* (1985) stated that the key individual-level determinants of salesperson performance are altitude, personal characteristics, skill level, role perceptions, and motivation.

CONCLUSION

In searching of critical success factors in personal selling of computer based products, it is found that there are 16 factors that can be associated with success. Nevertheless, 11 factors are categorized as the critical success factors. All these 11 items represent five categories of critical success factors, i.e. relationship, knowledge, communication, personality and motivation. All items in relationship scored the highest ranking and this finding is not diverging from the previous findings in the similar studies. Items in knowledge, personality and communication do play important roles in ensuring success in selling the computer based products. However, motivational factors other than basic compensation are less critical.

There are a set of factors that (mixes of categories) score high ranking but less than mean 4. They are important factors but if we look for top ten critical success factors in personal selling of computer based product in the Malaysian business environment, they may not be listed as the highly ranked factors. Nevertheless the importance of speaking ability, special financial incentives, non-financial rewards, joy in work and knowledge on reseller can not be denied. They could be categorized as the secondary factors. In personal selling process of computer products, sales people can maximize the customer money value in order to enhance customer satisfaction. Many sales people

mistakenly assume that people base their buying decision solely on price. This is not always correct. A higher product price relative to competing goods often can be offset by such factors as better service and friendliness of the sales people. Sales people can implement benefit selling. Sales people can apply the technique referred as the FAB selling technique (Feature, Advantage and Benefit). Sales people typically understand thoroughly on the product's physical and performance characteristic.

	Category	Critical Success Factors
1	Relationship	Customer Satisfaction
2	Relationship	After Sales Services
3	Relationship	Customer Loyalty
4	Knowledge	Know Your Product
5	Communication	Nonverbal
6	Communication	Listening
7	Knowledge	Know Your Customers
8	Motivation	The Basic Compensation Plan
9	Personality	Self Control in Emotions
10	Personality	Patience in Closing Sale
11	Personality	Caring For Customer

Table 2: The Top 11 Critical Success Factors in Personal Selling of Computer Based Products

	Category	Success Factors
1	Communication	Speaking
2	Motivation	Special Financial Incentives
3	Motivation	Non-financial Awards
4	Personality	Joy In Work
5	Knowledge	Know Your Reseller

Table 3: Factors associated with success factors

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