

## Tough Customers?

They're not if, through insight into their personalities and behaviors, you treat them in the manner they prefer.

By Kate Greene

Connecting with customers amid the background static of mountains of papers and megabytes of e-mails requires a personal approach. With insight from decades of behavioral research you can stand above the crowd. You can differentiate yourself from competitors by addressing your customer's personal needs.

Information flows at an unprecedented volume. Decision-makers are screening more letters, e-mails, phone calls and Web links than ever. Buyers listen to, and do business with, salespeople who strike a personal chord with messages in the medium and manner the buyer prefers. But how do you recognize and adapt to a buyer's individuality?

Personality research offers guidance with four styles of human behavior: dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness. Salespeople who understand them—and what a buyer is communicating with crossed arms, a need for personal attention, resistance to change or an adherence to rules—will more easily build and maintain successful sales relationships.

### **Stronger, Longer Relationships**

When Amy began her career at Chemco Products Inc., part of her training consisted of basic sales skills—opening the call, overcoming objections and closing the sale.

Connecting easily with most people, Amy seemed a natural. That's why it was a shock when she lost an account with a long-time customer.

Amy's boss, Jim, asked her what she thought happened with the Brown account. "Some people are just so hard to talk to," she replied. "Mr. Brown seems like he doesn't have time for me. The strangest thing is that he rarely looks me in the eye. I don't think he likes me."

When Jim asked Mr. Brown why he had switched to a different vendor, he replied, "Well, I just wasn't comfortable with Chemco's new product. There didn't seem to be enough research to support that yours is a superior and safe product. I want to be sure of the quality."

Jim was surprised. Chemco had made its name on the amount of published research, the development on each product and an assurance of superior safety levels. When Jim told Amy why she had lost Brown, she said, "I let Mr. Brown know about all the research data out there, but at his level I thought he didn't want to be weighed down with the details."

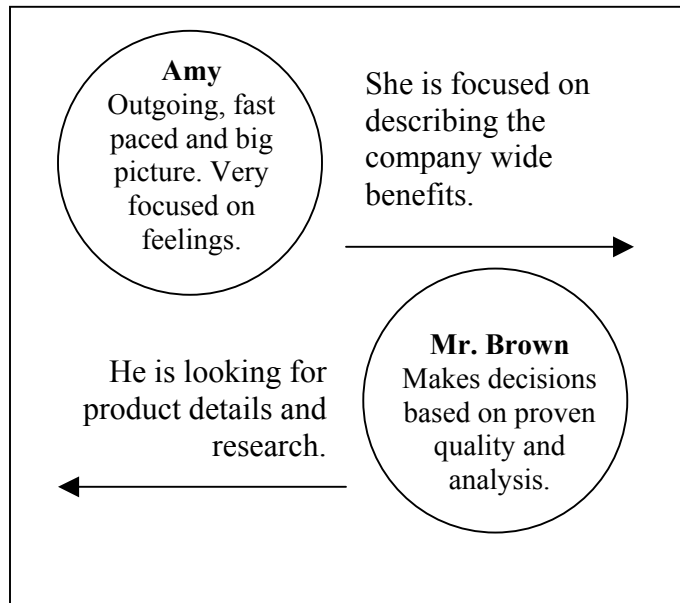
Amy's story illustrates how a salesperson can misinterpret a customer needs. Beyond the skills of opening, handling objections and closing sales skills, a more effective salesperson will look for and recognize the individual personal purchasing behavior.

Interpreting behavioral style builds stronger and longer relationships and is subtler than

an ABC formula to sales. While applicable in most sales situations, it is most useful in complex, multical situations that rely on building a relationship and trust.

If the golden rule is “treat others as you want to be treated,” the platinum rule is “treat others as they want to be treated.”

Amy may have been more effective if she had recognized that Mr. Brown was looking for a different presentation style than other clients. By picking up on a few behavioral clues, Amy would have adjusted her presentation to include more research and product safety details.



With regard to personality style, it is important to be open-minded when meeting with new customers. Like Mr. Brown, some buyers want extensive specifications and data when considering a product. Additionally, Mr. Brown’s personality style is indirect in asking for what he wanted, avoiding conflict at every opportunity. It’s likely he gave nonverbal clues—say, crossing his arms or scanning promotional materials for details.

You may know people whose personal style is direct, while others like to build rapport and get to know you before beginning business. Other customers focus on results, leaving

out “how and why” details. Yet other customers will open every meeting with a social chatter, checking in with every person before getting to business. These are all clues that, when interpreted correctly, will give an informed salesperson an edge in closing the sale.

Different prospects have different behavior styles. We all interact with dozens of people on a regular basis and recognize different personalities. Over time, we recognize patterns, saying “she’s a tough customer,” “he’s all over the board,” or “that guy looks at everything under a microscope.”

How can you determine customer needs, especially with people whose styles may include poor communication? What if there was a method to recognize and understand personality styles; a tool to anticipate questions, reduce interpersonal tension and improve relationships between customers and salespeople?

In the 1920s, researcher William Marston published *Emotions of Normal People*<ital> on behavioral styles. While more than 80 years old, Marston’s conclusions are as useful and applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they were then. His research shows that an individual’s perception of the world is more important than reality. Therefore, buyers do not distinguish and purchase competing products and services based on objective analysis of features and benefits—they do it because of the *perceived*<ital> values. As a result, different customers respond to different information and experiences. An individual’s personality style and behavioral traits determine the value associated with specific features and benefits.

When you apply behavioral research to selling situations, you enhance a salesperson's ability to recognize and satisfy customer preferences in conducting business. Adapting to individual preferences fulfills the "platinum rule." Every sales interaction is an opportunity to develop a long-term relationship with a customer, resulting in repeat business, multiple sales and increased profits.

Many methods measure behavioral tendencies, but the most streamlined application is based on the Marston Model. This quadrant model divides human behavior into dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness.

#### Determining Style

Task Oriented?  
Work Pace?  
Focused on feelings and people?  
Formal approach?  
Detail Oriented?

#### **Dominance**

This style is characterized by an outgoing orientation with a strong competitive drive, a direct approach and a focus on results. High-Dominance personalities see themselves in control of their environment and seek clear, concise information to make decisions. They do not appreciate too much detailed information, and they often focus on outcomes rather than the steps or people leading to the result. They do not fear argument or conflict. They appreciate choices, challenges and the opportunity to be in control.

Clues: Hands on hips, good eye contact, fast pace and task focus are telltale signs of this person's approach to work. They tend to speak loudly, ask direct questions and exhibit impatience. They seek challenges, varied activities and opportunities.

Approach: When communicating via e-mail, letters or in person, a salesperson should be direct and concise, focusing on results. Stick to the topic at hand, outlining benefits that will get results, solve problems and enhance their status.

### **Influence**

An optimistic and enthusiastic outlook indicates strong influencing traits. High-Influence behaviors rely on communication to persuade others. Intent on pleasing others, they enjoy social situations and meetings. How they are viewed by peers is on their mind. Feeling and thoughts are important, as is personal recognition.

The Clues: Look for an outgoing personality that consistently tries to bridge communication. They tend to shy away from details. They enjoy being around others and avoid personal conflict for fear of losing approval.

The Approach: Because this type of customer appreciates personal attention, relying on only e-mail or Web sites to sell your product is a mistake. Take the time to build a relationship through personal contact. Give them the opportunity to talk about their ideas. Expert testimonials are valued.

## **Steadiness**

Loyalty and persistence are hallmarks of this style. High-Steadiness individuals are excellent listeners and highly sensitive. They resist change and cautiously make decisions. Because they favor the status quo, they are hesitant in adopting new products or services without evidence of what will result.

The Clues: Look for more questions, priority on process and consideration of other's feelings. They tend to be reserved in group settings, but more outgoing in one-on-one settings. They seek out security and tend to be specialists.

The Approach: To put such clients at ease, describe specific steps that address any possible objections. Flowchart software may be a useful tool to illustrate a critical implementation path. Present new ideas in a non-threatening way, clearly defining goals and giving sincere personal assurances or guarantees.

## **Conscientiousness**

Due to high standards, attention to detail and low tolerance for breaking rules, high-Conscientiousness behavior is what many describe as perfectionistic. As such, these people are precise problem solvers and tend to be overly critical and often find change difficult. They appreciate a controlled work environment and tend to avoid emotionally charged situations.

The Clues: Typical of this style is a closed posture and formality, and possibly a difficulty maintaining eye contact. Furthermore, high-Conscientiousness people enjoy demonstrating their knowledge and experience and have a low tolerance for mistakes. Security and the status quo are highly valued. A decision may be delayed until enough information has been gathered and examined.

The Approach: To satisfy the purchaser's demand for details, share information with a company Web site or with CD-Rom technology. Provide assurances and supporting data for any assertions, and be prepared with precise details.

Although people do not demonstrate behaviors in one dimension only, they often have one tendency that is more dominant. When you recognize this and tailor your approach, you can experience amazing results. At Human Resource Partners, we rely on a partner, Inscape Publishing, which produces an exceptional instrument for understanding and applying behavioral profiles in work situations. Over the last three decades, their personality instruments have demonstrated high-reliability coefficients of .85 to .92. (Average acceptable reliability is .7) Using these instruments in sales training, participants gain an understanding of their own work style as well as their customers'.

When using a personality approach to sales, knowing your own style is important. You know how far you have to stretch meet the needs of others. Selling to similar people is easy. Selling to customers who have opposite needs is much more challenging, though not impossible with practice.

Building a solid relationship that meets customers' personal needs is a subtle but successful technique that goes beyond telling customers how your product will meet their practical needs. With behavioral profile information as an ally, you can focus on your customers, and they can focus on your product. Together you can reach not only common ground but also the ultimate goal—closing the sale.

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Greene's expert focus is using behavioral tendency research to affect performance. Whether applied to Consultative Sales training or enhancing work team performance, adult learners benefit from higher levels of self-awareness and learned strategies for improving their professional communication and management skills. She has delivered her seminar "Work-Style Management Discovery and Strategies" on-site for clients and in open enrollment workshops.

Greene has a bachelor's degree in Human Resources from Michigan State University. Professional courses and certifications include Blanchard Training, Cornell University,

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