

# NEW RESEARCH *from* FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY REVEALS A CRITICAL FLAW IN OUR SALES METHODOLOGIES

*An Interview with Leff Bonney,  
Florida State University Professor  
by Jason Jordan*

*Leff, you've conducted some fascinating new research to find the 'best' sales methodology. How did that research come about?*

One of the most important contributions that university-based sales centers make to the discipline of sales and sales management is the research conducted on sales-related topics. For example, at FSU we have an advisory board of around 40 companies that plays a critical role in guiding our research efforts. In 2012 there was a great deal of noise in the marketplace related to the effectiveness of different sales methodologies. Our board members asked us to explore the different methodologies, which started us down a path.

Obviously, consultative, transactional, and value selling strategies had been prevalent in the market for decades, but there were new methodologies emerging that suggested high-performing sales reps actually provoke their customers into new ways of thinking about their problems and solutions. Two years, four studies, and over 3,000 salespeople later, we had some pretty interesting insights to share.

*So what did you learn?*

Well, the big ah-ha was that high performing salespeople aren't consultative sellers, they're not value sellers, they're not relational sellers, and they're not provoking sellers. High performing salespeople are ALL of these. What our research showed was that high performing salespeople are incredibly agile; they have the ability to shift between different selling methodologies depending on the situation that they are facing.

Likewise, underperforming salespeople use no real methodology at all, which should come as no surprise. But what was interesting was that average salespeople—the middle 50%-60% of the sales organization—were adept at one selling approach and had a tendency to use it again and again, no matter what the situation. So, the conclusion of the research was that sales leaders were asking the wrong question: It's not, what selling methodology is right for their organization...It's what selling methodologies are right for common situations that the salespeople encounter?

*Well now that you say that, it seems to make intuitive sense. Is 'agility' something that can be taught?*

On the surface, 'agility' seems like a trait that reps either have or they don't. However, you can see it being trained in many other disciplines. For instance, sports teams are all about the need for agility. Quarterbacks are taught to come to the line of scrimmage, assess the situation, and make changes to the play their team is going to run based on what they see... And this can be taught. You would never see a football team run the same play 47 times during a game. At least, not a winning team.

The US military is another great example. Fighter pilots are taught dozens of maneuvers that can be performed while engaged in an aerial dogfight. They know that the key to success is their ability to tack back and forth between maneuvers based on what the enemy plane is doing...And it can be taught.

The military example is especially relevant for sales teams, because it illustrates both tactical (in the battlefield) and strategic (in the battle control center) adaptability that salespeople need to be successful in their selling efforts.

*If agility can be taught, what are the core skills that must be developed?*

Other sales researchers have explored the keys to sales agility or adaptability, as it is sometimes termed in the literature. They found that three key skills are the most critical to salesperson success. First, salespeople must have situational awareness, which is the ability of the salesperson to probe and recognize the type of situation they are confronting. The second skill is the ability to think through a series of strategies for each situation and to accurately select the right strategy for the given situation. This skill is known as selling fluency. The third and final skill is strategy execution. It's one thing to know the right strategy for the situation at hand, but it's another thing entirely to be able to execute.

Again, this process of identifying the situation, selecting the right response, and executing it flawlessly is an approach drilled into quarterbacks, fighter pilots, doctors, lawyers, and many other professions. For some reason, it's just evaded sales forces for more than 100 years.

*What are the implications of these findings for sales training going forward?*

Another great question. I believe that our research calls into question what companies have been doing all these years with a one-size-fits-all approach to sales. The overwhelming majority of sales training programs are designed for sellers to approach every sales opportunity the same way. But assuming the research is correct, this training is actually training what average salespeople do—not top performers.

Another implication is that the strategy of selling to 'personas' is also flawed. Persona-based selling dictates that there is a best way to sell to a particular type of buyer, say a Chief Information Officer. In reality, a CIO doesn't always purchase the same way – she might behave differently in different situations. If she is upgrading her accounting software, she's an educated buyer and might simply want to transact. If she's buying a social media platform for the first time, she might require more consultation. So our research draws the value of such personas into question as well.

Since the original research, we've seen some top sales organizations begin to embrace a more agile sales approach where salespeople are taught multiple sales strategies that can be used in different situations. In fact, we've even designed a new training program that puts 'selling agility' as the main objective; it's designed to help salespeople be fluent in different ways to sell.

*Is anyone already using this approach? Do you have any real-world proof that it works?*

They are, yes. We recently worked with a major industrial supply company that wanted to help their salespeople be more agile in their approach to selling. We identified the key situations that these salespeople face on a regular basis and the strategies that have the highest chances of success in each. Then we launched a training program that teaches reps how to adjust across situations and the results have been dramatic. In the first year, the company achieved an 8% growth rate against a 4% growth target.

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*Won't this more 'agile' approach to selling substantially complicate sales management and coaching?*

No, in fact quite the opposite is true. By building agility in sales approaches based on different situations, sales managers have a more prescriptive set of factors to coach. Part of coaching is diagnosing where reps are struggling in their approach to sales. The agility approach to selling strategy allows managers to think through whether a rep's inability to move a sale forward is due to misidentification of the selling opportunity or is due to the inability to execute the right sales strategy. In some ways, it creates a coaching checklist that managers can use to determine where reps are getting stuck in specific types of opportunities.

The only people whose world it might complicate is L&D professionals. If they want to do right for their sales teams, they can no longer buy off-the-shelf training programs or even deploy customized solutions that are straight-line sales processes. The burden is on them to identify the common situations that their salespeople face and then assemble a training program that builds the agility required to succeed in each.

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*How does technology such as CRM or Artificial Intelligence play into this discussion?*

I think that CRM and AI systems can be very important in helping companies identify the types of opportunities or situations they face regularly. These systems can alert management when it appears that new situations are emerging in the market as well. Finally, these systems can become dynamic coaches to salespeople by providing a set of suggested steps the salesperson should take based on the situation. As always, technology can be a great enabler of better selling—sales agility is no different. ▲

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