
Career Shot: Sales and Sales Management

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In every business, the sales function is the "engine" that fuels the production of revenue. It also represents the boundary between a company and its potential and existing customers. Success in sales hinges on a salesperson's ability to establish -- and maintain -- strong relationships with customers.

To cultivate these relationships, salespeople need to:

- be personable and outgoing
- understand customers' needs thoroughly
- build a strong link between those needs and the organization's products or services
- look for opportunities to customize a product or service to fit a particular customer's needs
- help potential customers analyze their businesses and figure out how a particular product or service could boost the customer's productivity or revenues

At its core, sales is a relationship-centered profession. Individuals who find satisfaction and challenge in this work enjoy meeting and influencing people. They like the social aspects of sales. They also enjoy the process of accomplishing a mutual goal with others by negotiating deals that benefit both their company and the customer.

Salespeople travel to customers' locations (and keep in touch by phone) to introduce them to their products and services and to take orders. If a salesperson's employer makes more than one product or line of product intended for different kinds of customers over a wide geographical area, a salesperson will typically represent one product line, in one territory, to one group of customers.

Some sales work involves maintaining relationships with existing customers, and some involves developing new relationships (also known as "cold calling").

In addition to visiting potential new customers, salespeople attend professional conferences and trade shows. There, they host cocktail parties and dinners, display their companies' products at exhibition booths, and answer questions about their companies' offerings.

Many salespeople are employed by the company that makes the products they sell. However, some work as **manufacturers' reps** (representatives). These individuals act as agents for one or more companies but are not on the payroll of those companies. In effect, manufacturers' reps are entrepreneurs who work for themselves. Their customers are the manufacturers themselves, who pay them a negotiated commission for their sales.

Typically, a manufacturers' rep begins his or her career by working inside a company first, developing contacts with customers who buy their kinds of products. Eventually, they go out on their own. However, not all companies and industries sell through independent reps.

Finally some successful salespeople have an interest in managing others. After spending some years "earning their stripes," they move into **sales management** (first a small territory or line, then larger areas and/or more important products). They usually make less money, at least at first, but they gain more control over their travel schedule.

Sales professionals also enjoy the autonomy and authority of "owning" the deals they work on. Early in their careers, they have a high degree of independence. In fact, in most organizations, what counts is whether people "make their numbers," not how they spend their time or how they conduct business.

Thus many sales professionals see their job as their own "business within a business" -- a perspective that most other professionals don't have until later in their careers.