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Salespeople Who Engage Customers

How the best reps build special and unique relationships

by Benson Smith and Tony Rutigliano

Excerpted from [*Discover Your Sales Strengths*](#) (Warner Books, 2003)

How do great sales reps create customer engagement? Gallup's researchers have identified four emotional dimensions that comprise customer engagement. These dimensions begin with Confidence and move on in order to Integrity, Pride, and Passion. Together, these are the building blocks of customer engagement. Without question, high levels of customer engagement represent a tough benchmark to meet. In the various industries we studied, the number of "fully engaged" customers has ranged from the single digits (around 6% to 8%) to as high as 35% to 40%. Contrast that with the 80% of customers reportedly "satisfied" in these same industries.

In order to assess the level of customer engagement, our researchers first undertook a comprehensive research and development effort in which they tested a series of statements that had been used at various times to indicate the emotional "attachment" felt by a customer. The following eight statements turned out to be the best indicators of the important emotional connection between the customer and a company. Take a moment and imagine that you are one of your company's customers. Fill in your company's name in the blank and read each statement.

1. [_____] is a name I can always trust.
2. [_____] always delivers on what it promises.
3. [_____] always treats me fairly.
4. If a problem arises, I can always count on [_____] to reach a fair and satisfactory resolution.
5. I feel proud to be a [_____] customer.
6. [_____] always treats me with respect.
7. [_____] is the perfect company for people like me.
8. I can't imagine a world without [_____].

How many of your customers would strongly agree to all eight statements? You can see why high levels of customer engagement represent a very tough standard to meet, and why

it's much easier to "satisfy" customers than it is to "fully engage" them.

Customers respond to these statements based on their experiences -- experiences with the product (service) and experiences with people. In some businesses, such as the airline industry, customers may deal with many different people every time they purchase a ticket or fly on a plane. Every time there is contact, engagement can be affected for better or worse. In businesses in which customers deal principally with a single salesperson, however, those salespeople have enormous impact on customer engagement. So, in many industries, customers are really saying, "My *salesperson* is someone I can always trust," or "My *salesperson* always delivers on what he or she promises."

Building customer engagement is not a "sometimes" thing. Notice that the word "always" appears in five of the eight statements. That's intentional. Our research has shown that trust has to be there *all* the time or there is no trust. The same is true of respect, confidence, fair treatment, and the other practices implied by these important statements.

Consistency is clearly important in building customer engagement. Every time we have an interaction with a customer, we are either building engagement or eroding it.

Is this simply a matter of *liking* the salesperson?

Don't customers really buy, as the old saying goes, from people they like? The answer to that question is a straightforward *yes* and *no*! Having your customers like you is a big advantage, but lots of customers are not looking to become best friends with salespeople. Customer engagement relates to the company and its products and services, and not only to the salesperson. Even if your customers "love" you, they still have to feel strongly engaged in what you're providing if you want some assurance that they will continue to buy.

Sometimes salespeople make the mistake of trying to be too "friendly" with their customers. Chuck told us, "Customers are different from friends. A friendship is a give-and-take relationship. There is no saying that goes 'Your friend is always right,' but every customer is all too familiar with the expression 'The customer is always right.'"

We don't mean to say that you can't be friends with your customers -- you certainly can be. You might even be best friends with them, but customer engagement is different from friendship. Customers can be friendly, but they have a whole different set of expectations compared to people who are your friends just for the sake of friendship. Gallup's research into this area brings some clarity as to how these very special and unique relationships with customers are built.

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