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# The Buyer's Emotional Side

## New research reveals a buying bias based on emotion.

BY ROBERT MCGARVEY

There's an old sales adage: People are moved by emotion but they buy based on logic. In fact this adage is so old it dates back to that ancient Greek sales superstar Aristotle. Well, as in all things, new information has come to light. In fact, according to reams of research by highly respected professors at some of the nation's top universities- Harvard, Cal Tech, Baylor, Emory and more - buying is a lot more emotional than anyone thought, even big-ticket b-2-b buying.

In a new book, *Questions That Sell* (AMACOM, 2006) by Paul Cherry, who is a senior vice president at Performance Based Results, much selling misses the boat because it doesn't have a clue as to how buyers really make purchasing decisions. Cherry's argument, backed by the wave of paradigm-shattering research that has poured out of leading laboratories, is simple. Buyers go by feelings, not logic.

But he goes further. According to Cherry, sales executives aren't leveraging this insight and they may even be fleeing from it.

He adds, "A lot of salespeople can be like a gerbil on the wheel, where they get set into motion and they keep going and going but not stopping and saying, 'Wait a minute. How do I get deeper?'" In other words, the rut you're in may be your downfall.

"Deep down as sales professionals, we're hesitant to get deeper with our customers for a variety of reasons," Cherry continues. "We're uncomfortable or we don't know how to do it or we don't think it's professional." But a lot of the research that's coming up through major universities talks about the importance of creating passion with our customers. That is how we develop connections



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that separate us from our competition and lets us motivate our customers to take action.”

The research is indeed becoming clear. Scientists call this new body of laboratory results neuroeconomics and it is an intersection of contemporary cognitive science (how the brain functions), psychology, economics, biology and more. As far back as seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes (“I think therefore I am”), deep thinkers have grappled with understanding how the mind works. New technologies - such as magnetic resonance imaging scanners are letting researchers literally see what the mind is doing when it reaches decisions. “Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience models and technologies allow us to study in vivo brain activity as individuals solve problems,” says Kevin McCabe, a professor at George Mason University in Virginia and a member of Nobel Laureate Vernon Smith’s team of researchers on neuroeconomics. Smith won half the Nobel Prize in 2002 for his groundbreaking research. In that instant, neuroeconomics basked in the respectability that winning the world’s highest intellectual honor brings.

As researchers have tuned into brain waves, big surprises have emerged. The inescapable take-away from the research: “Emotional guidance plays a sizable role in our decision making,” says Dan Houser, another George Mason University professor who works with Vernon Smith.

Keep this thought in mind while you focus on how reps are trained to sell. Usually, training revolves around drilling in features and benefits, competitive analysis (“our ROI comes faster and is 12 percent higher”), and

memorizing a long list of facts. This is all good; it means the reps will not be at a loss for words when they are in front of a prospect. But is it how purchases get decided? Increasingly, the evidence suggests this factual scaffolding is beside the point of how purchases get made. “To sell, you have to learn how to connect with buyers emotionally,” says Cherry. Few buyers will be primed to sign on the line when a rep shoots fact upon fact at them. Facts are fine - no one says they play no role at all. Sometimes they justify the decisions that are arrived at emotionally. But sales will get made when the rep masters the tougher objective of tapping into the customer’s emotions.

Here is where a sales manager’s job gets harder. Christophe Morin is CEO of SalesBrain, a Novato, CA training organization. He is also coauthor of *Neuromarketing: Is There a Buy Button in the Brain? Selling to the Old Brain for Instant Success*. “It is easy,” he explains, “to teach features and benefits. It is harder to teach how to create emotional connections.”

Cherry offers an example of a selling conversation that misses the entire emotional point. It starts this way:

**SALES REP:** “You’re looking for a new vendor. Why?”

**PROSPECT:** “Our vendor has had trouble meeting deadlines.”

**REP:** “I understand. Let me show you three independent surveys. They rank us first in on-time performance, and 20 points higher than our nearest competitor.”



Does that seem right to you? **Cherry concedes that, yes, this approach is directly out of the standard sales play-book.** But it belly flops on the emotional level. “It doesn’t get to the emotional component.”

What might such a component look like? **Cherry suggests that the rep try saying: “Missed deadlines? Wow. That must be frustrating...”** And at that, the prospect just may say, “You don’t know the half of it. I’m dealing with my boss yelling about the missed deadlines, my wife is mad because I have to stay late and miss Johnny’s football game while I sort out our options, and everybody is looking at me as though I’m clueless because they blame me, not our vendor.”

Talk about opening an emotional vein and letting it bleed. Doing just that, say many experts, is how to jump start the selling process.

How can a sales manager tap into the lessons neuroeconomics provides? **Cherry ticks off pointed suggestions for lessons to imprint on reps:**

***Don’t swallow the buyer’s stated reason for buying or not buying.*** Often they just don’t really know what they want. Tune in instead to the emotional cues they give off, advises Cherry, who points to body language, tone of voice, and any emotive words they use. These cues won’t give you a direct path into the buyer’s decision. But practice reading them and they become a road map into the buyer’s mind and the forces that are helping to shape the decision.

***Recognize that there is an emotional component to every sale.*** Never think, “we had to win; the numbers were on our

side.” That may be so but you won because the emotions favored you, too. Encourage the customer to express emotions and learn to listen for them.

***Use empathy.*** Can you put yourself in your customer’s shoes? Says Cherry: “It’s the most powerful selling tool. Get on the same page, emotionally, as your customer.”

***Respect emotions.*** Never argue with a customer’s or prospect’s feelings. “Buyers take a great risk when they let down their guard,” says Cherry. “Don’t judge or argue.”

***Take emotional risks.*** Maybe this is where the pedal hits the metal. If your customer is letting his or her feelings show, what about you? Do you know how? Do you have the nerve to do so? The best, most charismatic sellers may be the ones who are most able to show their true emotions.

Is going this route somehow manipulative? That question pops up in every discussion of neuroeconomics. Researchers are clear: First, nobody yet is so slick at comprehending the inner brain functions that it would be easy to emotionally manipulate every prospect into a sale. Second, we buy emotionally, so recognizing that fact gives us more information that we can use. The bottom line: using the latest neuroeconomics is using solid knowledge and that is being a smart, sensitive sales executive. ■

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