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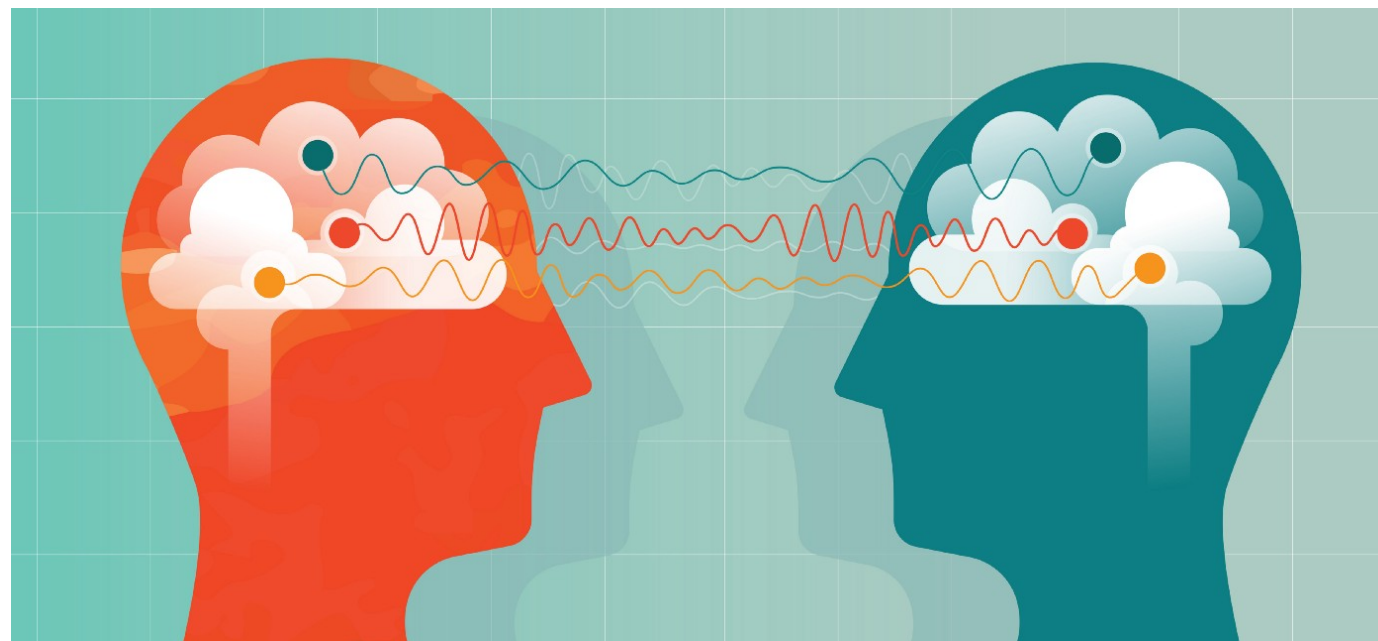
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The Key to Innovation Sales is Matching Reps with the Right Boss

Researchers find novel product sales require pairing the personalities of supervisor and sales rep.

Based on the research of Sebastian Hohenberg



To excel in the dog-eat-dog world of selling, sales reps don't always work alone. In innovation sales, for example — when the products are novel and unfamiliar — reps work intimately with another personality: their supervisor.

In two new studies, Sebastian Hohenberg, assistant professor of marketing at Texas McCombs, examined how personality differences between supervisors and their reps might affect performance in the realm of innovation sales.

They found that in a traditional sales setting, the match of supervisor to rep doesn't matter: Assessing the sales rep's personality alone provides clear insights into their potential to close deals.

But not so in innovation sales, where the reps are peddling new products: "Who you hire is actually not as important as whom you pair them with," Hohenberg says.

An Unlikely Sales 'Dream Team'

Hohenberg and his fellow researcher administered personality surveys to 387 sales rep-supervisor pairs — first at a global chemical supplier, then at companies in various industries — to determine which of three factors are most responsible for their achievement: an internal desire to learn and grow; external competition; or a dread of negative feedback, known as "failure avoidance."

Other studies have determined that any of these orientations can be associated with high achievement in a sales rep selling traditional products. But because of the risks inherent with innovation sales, researchers hypothesized that failure avoidance was the trait least likely to signal achievement in this sales space. "The first impression is certainly that failure avoidance is something negative," Hohenberg says.

They were wrong.

When Hohenberg and his colleague weighed the teams' personality factors against the reps' sales performance, they learned that teams with both sales rep

and supervisor oriented toward failure avoidance were most successful, making the sale about 30 percent more often than the average combination.

Those employing a more diligent approach are more likely to sidestep the pitfalls of innovation sales. These pairs often put in the long hours studying the products' features and carefully devising pitches, Hohenberg found.

The failure-averse rep matched with a competition-driven supervisor, meanwhile, produced less than half the sales of a failure-averse colleague paired with a likeminded boss.

“Failure avoidance is a strong driver of higher performance, but it is also a dimension that doesn't work so easily in collaborative situations where other people do not share that orientation,” Hohenberg says.

When Fit Doesn't Matter

Researchers had rightly predicted innovative product sales would demand more compatibility between supervisor and rep than in traditional sales.

But they had not predicted just how right they were.

“We were expecting supervisor-rep compatibility to have a lower effect in the traditional sales context, but we found it had absolutely no significant effect at all. That was stunning.” — Sebastian Hohenberg

It's an important finding, as more businesses adopt personality tests to make hiring or placement decisions.

“In traditional sales, you can shortcut the process and look strictly at the sales rep’s orientation. That’s all that matters,” Hohenberg says.

Sales on Steroids

What makes innovation sales different? Hohenberg, who has studied the subject in several papers since 2016, points to the products’ complexity. “There is uncertainty about their functionality and reliability,” he says. “Some sales reps even fear jeopardizing good client relationships with new products.”

Add to these difficulties the higher level of interest from top management. “Innovations are the lifeblood for many companies, and top management therefore monitors them more carefully as compared to already established products,” Hohenberg says. Under this extra scrutiny, supervisors and sales reps often have to work together to develop new pitches or selling techniques to bring these new solutions to the market, he adds.

In traditional sales, a rep may report sales numbers at a monthly meeting. But in innovation sales, the supervisor is often in the room when the sale goes down — or doesn’t.

“It’s a more intense selling situation,” Hohenberg says.

That fire can either forge an unbreakable bond, or burn a team to ashes, depending on the compatibility of supervisor and sales rep, researchers found.

Insights for Incentives

For well-matched teams, it’s a good idea to reward outcomes, using variable compensation, for example; but that’s actually a terrible idea for poorly matched teams, Hohenberg says. “When you have a stressful relationship, and you add

some more pressure to it with an incentive, this dyad actually argues more and gets less results,” he says.

These less compatible teams did better with an incentive that costs the company nothing: appreciative communication.

These studies suggest maybe the most important factor in any sales partnership is an open mind: “There are multiple ways to achieve success in innovation selling,” Hohenberg says.

“Just realizing that maybe your partner has a different approach actually helps the team to work together more effectively.” — Sebastian Hohenberg

Spotting the Improbable Hotshots

While administering a reliable personality profile — whether among existing employees or candidates for hire — is an increasingly valuable practice for firms, Hohenberg discourages firms from precluding a potential hire based solely on goal orientation testing.

“There are no bad dimensions in an individual rep,” he says. “Even the one that may sound negative is actually a very valuable facet for innovation sales in the right context.”

“Enhancing Innovation Commercialization Through Supervisor–Sales Rep Fit” was published April 2019 in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science.

Story by Judie Kinonen



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