

Selling with noble purpose by Lisa Earle McLeod

How to drive revenue and do work that makes you proud

Book Summary

The Nobility of Sales

For many salespeople, the secret to superior results is to sell as much to your customers as they are willing to buy. Ironically, top sales producers often outperform everyone else by focusing elsewhere; they pay less attention to just selling and more to benefiting their customers through the products or services they offer. To illustrate, a prominent pharmaceutical company's leading salesperson achieves top sales results because she feels motivated to protect the lives and health of the patients who use the medications her firm manufactures. This idealistic salesperson is a perfect representative of the "noble salesperson." "I'm not just pitching a product," she says. "I'm saving people's lives." For this sales leader, her job is a calling.

Many superstar salespeople see helping people as their profession. The key to their success is their desire to support their corporate customers in enhancing their operations and to assist individual customers in improving their lives. These top sales producers, who work at firms of all types and across all industries, find their primary motivation in making a substantial, lasting contribution to their clients' well-being. This drive – the "noble sales purpose" (NSP) – lights up the "true believer" in the heart of every salesperson, spurring these professionals to outperform those who are motivated, instead, by filling quotas and earning higher commissions. A true believer is "a starry-eyed optimist who still believes [his or her group] can make a difference."

"A noble purpose engages people's passion in a way that spreadsheets don't."

Many sales professionals believe that the top performers are those with an "always be closing" mind-set – that is, those who are intent on making as much money as possible. Yet the salespeople who go beyond just pumping for commissions earn more as they fulfill their drive to make a positive difference. In a study of 50,000 brands, companies that work to improve the lives of their customers notably outperformed their competitors. These purpose-driven firms outperformed the market average by a 15:1 ratio. They ignited the passions of their true believer salespeople to go out and sell their offerings to help people live better or to enable business-to-business clients' firms to work more effectively or increase sales.

"It might sound like heresy, but purpose is the secret to driving more revenue."

Summary Outcomes:

- Why salespeople who operate with a "noble sales purpose" (NSP) outperform salespeople who don't operate with it,
- What benefits accrue when you base your work on an NSP and
- How to develop and implement an NSP within your organization.

Take-Aways:

- Most sales leaders succeed because “a noble sales purpose” (NSP) motivates them to sell more and to make even more commissions and bonuses.
- Their NSP is to improve their customers’ lives.
- Making a positive contribution brings meaning to their work.
- Having a purpose is a basic human motivation and, thus, is very effective.
- Companies that operate with NSPs are more profitable, and salespeople with NSPs outperform other sales reps.
- Most sales managers focus on quotas, not on doing good for customers.
- Most salespeople follow up on prospects and worry only about their number of sales, not the positive impact they can have on their customers.
- This approach doesn’t motivate people over the long run or sustain long-range success.
- Salespeople with NSPs make their customers happy, because they share a sense of purpose with them.
- A noble sales purpose can motivate all your employees, not just your salespeople.

A Serious Disconnect

Today, most companies train their sales professionals to pay close attention to what customers want and need. At most organizations, that’s the prevailing philosophy at the top. However, by the time this idea works its way down to beleaguered, pressured sales managers, they just want to meet their numbers. They seldom ask their sales staffers about customers’ real needs. They just want to know when their deals will close. Thus, of course, most salespeople focus exclusively on their sales statistics. They don’t prioritize improving their customers’ lives, because their managers don’t seem to care about that facet of their work at all.

This strict sell-it-or-else orientation has serious ramifications: Salespeople begin to view their prospects strictly as faceless targets. They do not try to learn about their clients or to match their goods and services to their customers’ goals. They live in the short term and don’t feel comfortable even trying to find out what their clients’ heartfelt objectives might be. Buyers immediately understand that such salespeople view them as commodities, so that’s how they view the salesperson as well – and the negative, downward spiral self-perpetuates with customer churn, sales turnover and a decline in sales-force morale. Customers become difficult sticklers for detail. Salespeople in the same firm begin to see each other as competitors, not colleagues.

“The 1980s ‘ABC – Always Be Closing’ cheesy old-school, sales-training model is not only ineffective, it’s obnoxious.”

Companies try to repair these problems with expensive training programs, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, staff retreats and sessions with costly consultants, but these quick fixes don’t solve anything. They deal with symptoms, not causes. The dilemma is obvious: Focusing exclusively on quotas and revenue just doesn’t inspire salespeople.



"An NSP is not a tactic. It's a strategic shift in the way you approach your business."

Instead, the members of your sales force need an NSP, a clear statement of how they can "make a difference in the lives" of their customers. Companies with NSPs perform better than those without. An NSP helps salespeople deal with uncertainty and imbues them with a new, positive mind-set, so they can approach clients with two heartfelt goals: selling to them and making their lives better. This win-win combination increases both sales and customer satisfaction.

The Motivation of a Powerful Purpose

When sales representatives have a meaningful purpose, they see their customers not as obstacles but as people who need what they can contribute. Because they think of their buyers as individuals before they think of them as targeted, potential product recipients, they can operate with an attitude of warmth and affection, not of fear.

"Noble purpose is the overarching differentiator that drives top performers."

All human beings instinctively crave a higher purpose to give meaning and substance to their lives. Having a motivation based on altruism helps people connect and encourages them to strive, often against the odds, to achieve the maximum results. Individuals who operate with a noble purpose can accomplish far more than they or their managers might expect. Indeed, an NSP motivates people much more effectively than a reward-based, carrot-and-stick approach. Fear demotivates salespeople and makes them ineffective, while a clearly enunciated NSP motivates them far more than the idea of selling just to increase corporate profits.

"The greatest stock of the next generation will be companies with a tremendous sense of purpose led by passionate executives who are guided by that purpose – and not solely by profits." (Todd Wenning, The Motley Fool)

"Six P's" for Purposeful Selling Instead of making profit your firm's only purpose, use the six-P model as a corporate framework: Picture a wheel with purpose at the hub and five spokes that represent profit, process, products, promotion and people. This puts your purpose right at the center of your sales setup. To make your NSP central to your operations, position it by asking the right questions, such as "How is our sales force helping our customers be more successful?" and "How will this customer be different as a result of doing business with us?"

Basing your sales operations on your NSP gives salespeople a sense of shared purpose, so the competition among internal departments softens and silo walls come down. The NSP can make employees more enthusiastic about company projects, because they serve a purpose and ultimately help customers. Basing your sales on your NSP de-emphasizes profits but, ironically, makes higher profits more likely. It reinforces effective individual action as it builds enthusiasm about sales training, motivates mid-level salespeople and focuses top producers' efforts.

"We expect salespeople to focus on the customer's needs and goals when they're in front of customers. But the majority of our internal conversations are about our own revenue quotas."

Additionally, salespeople who are trying to fulfill an NSP will find that it supports their search for superior information about their clients' operating environment, goals, problems, and measures of success and failure. Such high-quality customer intelligence results in more sales. Firms with CRM software should make sure it's easy for salespeople to add NSP-related data.

"When the internal conversation is all about money, the external conversation becomes all about money."



Case Histories: Companies That Put Their NSPs to Work

Graham-White Manufacturing is the world's leading vendor of the high-tech, air-drying technology that railroads need to operate. It specializes in the "drying of compressed air" that keeps a train's air brakes from freezing in cold weather. The company's former tagline was "We provide reliable transportation solutions." While succinct, this doesn't communicate the positive impact that the firm's advanced technologies have on its customers. However, the company's new slogan clarifies that: "We help make transportation safer, faster and more reliable." Sales reps try to discover what "safer, faster and more reliable" means to each customer. Sales vice president Stewart Bruce explains, "Moving to an NSP shifted us from a product focus to a customer focus. It moved the conversation from cost to value" and helped the company land million-dollar contracts. Graham-White salespeople bring their NSP to life on sales calls by telling true stories about how their advanced drying technology has kept trains running during heavy freezes.

For a second example of an NSP-focused organization, go to court in Orange County, California, where the statement of noble purpose – one woman's sudden insight during a brainstorming session with 60 employees – is, "We unclog the wheels of justice." The employees of the Orange County Court System work on behalf of multiple local constituents, including the court's "plaintiffs, the defendants, the jurors and the lawyers." Members of the system's workforce know they are dealing with people in the middle of stressful situations and their goal is to make the system work as well as it can for all of them. The simplicity of this NSP matters, because the right NSP "is not full of bravado or bluster; it's not something you hope to do. It's something you can do, right now." In this case, staffers handled funding cuts by concentrating on their purpose and asking, "How can we continue to unclog the wheels of justice with a lot less budget?"

"The questions you ask your salespeople become the questions they ask their customers."

Making Your NSP Work for You

When you create your company's NSP, make it short, sweet and easy to grasp. A great NSP is something you could easily explain to children. It is a concept that will make you proud. Don't rush the development of your NSP statement and don't immediately discard NSP ideas that seem imperfect. Think about the contributions you make to your customers and ask yourself: How do you assist customers to become more profitable? How are you different from the competition? What is it about your company that makes it special?

"Customers can tell the difference between the salespeople who care about them and those who just care about their bonus."

Creating an NSP and placing it at the center of your sales operations will pay big dividends. To make sure the NSP works, plan to coach your sales representatives so they will fully understand your firm's NSP, its importance and its link to their activities. Break your coaching sessions into two separate parts: revenue and NSP. Put revenue first as that is what salespeople worry about most. During this section of your coaching session, discuss traditional sales issues, like sales prospects, sales cycles, expected closing dates, and so on.

Start the NSP section of your coaching with this question: "How will this customer be different as a result of doing business with us?" Urge salespeople to think hard about the positive impact your company will have on the client. Some additional questions to consider: "How is our solution better than what the customer is doing right now?" and "How will our solution make things more efficient, cost-effective, safer, easier, more flexible or more fun?" Make sure salespeople answer these questions – not you. This way, they will come to fully understand how your company's NSP can benefit your customers and themselves.

"Focusing too intently on short-term profit is the most common cause for organizations losing their sense of purpose."



A well-considered NSP will help motivate your salespeople and assist them in closing more business than ever. Share all individual sales success stories with the other salespeople in your organization. This way, all your sales professionals can learn from their peers. Make sure your people don't end up trying to use your NSP as a sales-call script. That is not its function.

"Our deepest desire is to make a difference in the world – and our darkest fear is that we won't."

If you develop and communicate your NSP properly, you will inspire your sales force. Encourage its members to live the NSP as a "pivotal behavior" in all of their actions, especially those actions that directly, positively affect customers. Make your NSP a core element of your sales meetings. Reshape your incentive programs to reward not only the top sales revenue leaders but also those who achieve the best results for customers.

Structure your job interviews to discover which applicants will be most enthusiastic about the NSP aspects of your sales operation. Include NSP references in your proposals to describe how you will improve your prospective clients' businesses, for instance. Make your NSP an active part of all sales training and sales coaching activities. You can even use your NSP during negotiations, where it can help you minimize price issues.

"When you restore dignity and nobility to work, your job is no longer just a scramble for money; it's a chance to make a difference."

To derive the maximum benefit from your NSP, don't restrict it only to your sales operation. Your NSP is a great tool that can breathe life into your entire organization. Every employee in your company wants some special purpose to inspire them. Each employee wants to be part of an organization that represents something bigger than just work. Employees want to know that what they do matters. And that's exactly what your NSP is: a source of inspiration.

