

Optimism

I think of optimism in sales primarily as an *active* optimism: the ability to consistently expect a favorable outcome from one's actions. I contrast this with passive optimism in which someone might "expect a favorable outcome" without actually doing anything to make it happen. Someone could do this sitting on a sofa watching cartoons on TV, which seldom results in closing sales deals.

Active optimism is an essential component of a "positive attitude". A sackful of optimism is one of the most valuable assets a sales person can have. Optimism enables people to make a sales call when there's no very good reason to suppose it will lead anywhere. Optimism makes the sales person ask for a chance to bid when a competitor is already well-positioned to close the deal. Optimism can rescue an apparently hopeless situation by injecting renewed energy into the effort: "OK let's just go through these numbers one more time – there must be a way to make this work."

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Some people under-rate optimism, thinking that optimists are foolish or deluded. Statistically, the cynics have a point, but it's an empty point. In some sales jobs, people count themselves fortunate to close one deal in five. It seems to follow that four times out of five, the effort doesn't pay off, and optimism is misplaced. So if some smart analyst can tell me for sure in advance which deals will work out, then I can save my energy, right? The problem is, looking back over the many, many deals I have closed, I find it difficult to come up with a way of working out what I might have looked for at the outset to help me decide for sure which ones would come good, and which would not. In many cases, the only thing that made the difference between winning and losing was the presence of the energy generated by optimism. Once a deal has been won, it is of academic interest whether the optimism that got you there was based on reality or just on wishful thinking.

The important thing is to keep going, even when you get a 'no'. Optimism is the fuel that keeps you going. Zig Ziglar – a great optimist – told me he used to close about one out of every twenty-five deals. Every time he got a 'no' he said thank you and accepted it graciously. He reckoned that every 'no' brought him one step closer to the one in twenty-five that was going to be a 'yes'.

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