



Sales is not about selling. It's about helping clients succeed.

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HARRY MILLS

### The problem

Buyers actively resist or ignore sellers who seem intent on promoting their solution.

### What to do about it

Shift your focus from selling products and services to helping your clients succeed.

### Why it matters

Buyers purchase far less from sellers who appear to promote their own interests over their clients.

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Buyers don't like being given unwanted advice. Social scientists who study the psychology of resistance have found humans have a powerful immune system that protects itself from attempts to influence our behaviour. When a seller promotes or pushes in self-serving ways, we resist.

### Persuasive intent

When buyers detect *persuasive intent* on the part of the salesperson:

1. They scrutinize the sales messages much more carefully.
2. They “marshal counter arguments” that challenge and discredit what the salesperson is offering.
3. They actively resist or reject the salesperson's influence.

Ironically, the best sellers quickly build trust by acting as helpers rather than sellers. Sales for them is not about selling at all, it's about helping clients succeed.

If you help clients to make smart decisions that are in their own best interest, sales follow.

### Givers and takers

Wharton Business School professor Adam Grant has done ground-breaking research that challenges the stereotype that successful salespeople are self-serving, pushy and manipulative. His surprising findings are featured in his acclaimed book *Give and Take*<sup>1</sup>.

Grant has developed a survey that measure whether people are *givers*, *matchers* and *takers*.

Givers instinctively prefer to give more than they get. Givers are other focussed, they pay lots of attention to what other people need from them. They are *helpers*. They are “generous with their time, energy, knowledge, skills and connections.”

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Grant, *Give and Take: A revolutionary approach to success*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013, pp.126-154.

Takers on the other hand help others strategically when the benefits clearly outweigh the costs. They “put their own interests ahead of other’s needs. Takers believe the world is a competitive, dog-eat-dog world. To prove their competence, they self-promote and make sure they get plenty of credit for their efforts.

Matchers “strive to preserve and equalize the balance of giving and getting. Matchers operate on the principle of fairness. If you are a matcher you believe in tit-for-tat, and your relationships are governed by even exchanges of favours.”

### **Selling eye care: What distinguishes star sellers?**

Grant was hired by an optometry company called *Eye Care Associates* with the task of identifying what distinguishes star sellers from the pack. Every employee filled out his survey about whether they were givers, takers or matchers.

Grant found the average giver earned 30 percent more in annual revenues than takers.

Even though matchers and takers made up over 70 percent of the sellers, half of the top sellers were givers. If all the opticians (sellers) were givers, revenue would have risen from \$11.5m to \$15.1million.

Grant interviewed the top seller, Kildare Escto. Kildare had the highest giver score in the company. He was also the top selling optician in the entire company. He brought more than double the average sale revenue.

Kildare didn’t see himself as a seller. “I don’t look at it as selling,” he says. “I see myself as an optician. We’re in the medical field first, retail second, sales maybe third. My mindset is not to sell. My job is to help. My main purpose is to educate and inform patients on what is important. My true concern in the long run is that the patient can see.”

Perhaps you’re thinking you’d expect givers (helpers) to succeed in the healthcare industry. What about other industries where customers are more sceptical, like insurance?

## Selling Insurance

In a study of over one thousand insurance salespeople, managers scored the rating behaviours of their salesforce. “The higher the giver score, the greater that salesperson’s revenue, policies sold, applications, sales quotas met, and commissions earned.”

## Selling pharmaceutical products

In a pharmaceutical industry study, commission salespeople who were given a new product and no existing client base, the givers (helpers) outsold the others.

## Selling women's products

The same pattern showed up in a study of 600 salespeople who sold women’s products. When the researchers tracked the sales revenue, the givers initially had no advantage. But as the givers got to know their customers better they surged ahead in revenues.

## How to help your clients succeed

There are three proven ways for you shift your focus from selling to helping clients succeed.

1. As an organisation you can build a ‘client first’ culture. This driving value should shape every decision you make.
2. You can build a portfolio of tools and publications that provide clients with value-adding insights on what it takes to become successful. McKinsey, one of the world’s most prestigious and profitable consulting firms invests large sums publishing articles, reports, videos and other content that demonstrates insights into their latest thinking.
3. You can train your sales people not to mention products or solutions until they have used Aha! insights to help their clients:
  - Discover an unseen opportunity
  - Picture the value of an innovative solution.

When a client has discovered where they need help they’ll seek help and advice. That’s when you tailor your offerings.

**Harry Mills** is CEO of The Aha! Advantage and the author of 11 books on sales, marketing, persuasion and influence. This article is an adaption of a chapter from Harry's book *The Aha! Advantage: The New Science of Sales Success*.

For more information on The Aha! Advantage's research, please contact:

[harry.mills@ahaadvantage.com](mailto:harry.mills@ahaadvantage.com)

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