



8 Habits of Highly Successful Sales Associates

Go from good to great by following the examples of successful sales associates.

What does “working smart” mean? Jerry Rossi, an author and coach for real estate sales associates, stumped 2,000 people around the country when he asked them to define that expression. No one could answer. So Rossi, of Raleigh, N.C., offered his own explanation:

“It simply is doing the basics better, and more often, than anyone else,” he says. “I talk to agents all the time, and most are failing. The difference between the [things the] money makers [do] and [the things] everyone else [does] is very, very small.”

Highly successful sales associates have specific habits that set them apart. Here are eight of the top skills that you can adopt:

They understand the difference between prospecting and lead generation.

Doing lead-generation activities is “a way of life,” says Rossi, author of “Dog Eat Dog & Vice Versa: 9 Secrets to Put the Bite into Your Marketing,” and a former real estate professional. “It’s everything you do—church, the grocery store. It’s who you are, how you walk, talk and act—how you portray your success. It’s almost too easy, and that’s what is so crazy about this thing called real estate.”

Call five people a day just to touch base. But start talking business at the get-go; then, lead into the small talk, Rossi says. When you hang up, the person will be left with a friendly feeling rather than the thought that you were hitting them up. Rossi suggests this type of discussion: “How’s your job going? Things are tough here. Real estate is going through a big change right now, but I’m still very successful and happy with friends like you. ... How’s that preschooler of yours doing? ... Has it been three years since we closed on your house? Have you done that stuff with the back yard you were thinking about?”

After the conversation, follow up with a handwritten thank you note, saying, “Gosh, it was nice talking to you today. I hope you remember me if you hear of anyone buying or selling,” Rossi says.

They understand a customer’s motivation and are willing to walk away.

“[Sales associates] need to be more realistic in working with buyers and sellers as to what their motivations and requirements are,” says Mike Ferry, owner of The Mike Ferry Organization, a real estate coaching business in Irvine, Calif.

Unearthing those intentions requires extensive questioning and no fear about asking pointed questions or confronting. “If they can’t answer the questions, you have to be able to walk away and not get involved,” Ferry says.

Some questions to consider: Will you price the property so that it will sell? Are you willing to price it so that it’s in the No. 1 position in the market—so that it’s the first place that agents will bring their buyers?

Ferry suggested that one sales associate give back some of her 75 listings. “They’re not going to sell,” Ferry says. “You take the average days that houses are in the market and look at the price, then ask why the house has been on the market as long as it has. It all comes down to the price they’re setting and [the sellers’] willingness to make the property move. If they’re not willing, give it back.”

They stick to a strategic business plan.

A lot of sales associates trap themselves for hours doing paperwork, playing on their computers, even “just looking at pretty houses,” without making any money, says Carla Cross, author of “Up and Running in 30 Days: A Proven Plan for Financial Success in Real Estate” and owner of Carla Cross Seminars Inc. in Issaquah, Wash. A business plan gives you concrete goals and activities to break that cycle.

Your plan should be charted for at least a year. “But it’s important to chunk it down to what you want to accomplish in a month, a week and that day. The problem with most business plans is that they don’t guide the agents as to what to do each day,” says Cross. Think backward and forward; in other words, think through the relationship between what you’ll do today vs. this week, month and year.

Prioritize each item in your checklist, like the commitment to lead generation. Then hold yourself accountable. “One exercise I advise is that over the period of a month, list the number of hours you spend in categories. Business-producing categories should be finding, showing and selling to people,” Cross says.

They spend more time working on their business than in their business.

“[Sales associates] have a tendency to be creatures of crisis. They run from squeaky wheel to squeaky wheel,” says Pat Zaby, owner of Seminars & Systems by Pat Zaby in Dallas. “Ninety percent are putting out fires.”

Keep in mind the Parado Principle, which says that 20 percent of your activities give 80 percent of results. “If you’ve been selling for more than a year and analyze your business, you can see which activities give you the best result. Focus on the activities you’re most successful at,” Zaby says.

They use their marketing dollars wisely by leveraging every contact.

Once or twice in the week following an open house, e-mail or write to every attendee. Then call and ask for a time to get together and focus on the market.

“Don’t fall victim to believing that by having an open house, you will be saved by the all-cash buyer who drives up and surrenders,” says Dave Beson, owner of Dave Beson Seminars in Minneapolis.

You can save on your advertising budget by advertising an open house tour in one ad. Arrange three or more homes on a tour with a start time of noon, and another home every 45 minutes. Hand out the list of homes at the open houses to those who see the signs and wander in.

“You may become known as the Sunday tour expert,” Beson says. “Get e-mail addresses or contact info for the live ones, and use an e-mail drip campaign to stay in touch until they are ready to buy.”

They maintain a database on past customers and their sphere of influence.

“Write notes in the database every time you talk to people,” says Zaby. “There’s no way you can remember everything you’ve talked about. When you go to the doctor, they have everything written down about you,” he says.

Build up your list of people through small contacts—mothers at your child’s daycare center, members of your church—and “before you know it, you have 100 to 200 people!” Zaby says.

Using this database, continually offer your services through monthly mailings. “The point is top-of-mind awareness. In TV advertising, they play the same commercial again and again. Once you saturate, you can back off of advertising and still maintain your message,” he says. You can get mailers to look better, cheap, by turning them over to a third party like ExpressCopy.com, he adds. To get out mailers regularly, pick 12 cards a year in advance, then create a recurring event on your calendar so that you send one out, for example, on the first Monday of each month.

“Pick out the postcard, download the database, export your names to a common separated value file and send them off to a third party. And it makes you feel so good!” Zaby says.

Their websites have features that clients want.

“One way consumers judge the competency of the agent is the quality of their website and their tools. We want to know if they have the tools they need to get the job done,” says Thomas Harpointner, CEO of AIS Media of Atlanta.

The online marketing and e-business solution provider works extensively with real estate professionals. The company conducted a nationwide survey of real estate customers to discover how sales associates could improve their websites.

Consumers complain that many real estate websites lack the most basic features, like advanced search capabilities. They’re limited to ZIP code or county searches and lack integrated maps, Harpointner says. For example, he and his wife have been searching for a new home, using three different sites.

A lot of sites also don’t give the viewer a sense of the property. Some offer only thumbnail photos, or low-resolution photos, he says. They also lack valuable comparable information, such as data about school districts and the differences between county tax rates.

One must-have Web tool is an opt-in e-mail newsletter. “Many sites offer the agents no way of staying in contact—they drive traffic to the site but don’t capture consumer information,” he says. “A website is not just a brochure, but a business tool.”

Another key feature: the application that drives the site should send notifications to potential buyers when a change has occurred to a listing. Harpointner’s wife received one such notice that a house she’d viewed had dropped in price. “If the system didn’t automatically send it out, how else would she know?” he says.

They network with other sales associates and brokers who are experts in their niche.

Successful sales associates in the luxury arena view their competition as a resource, says Laurie Moore-Moore of The Institute for Luxury Home Marketing in Dallas. They tour each other’s listings and provide written feedback. They share wants and needs, and they provide vendor referrals to each other.

“Yes, you compete for prospects, but you’ll also find that there are lots of benefits which come from networking,” Moore-Moore says.

To establish your own group, first identify who’s listing and selling in your niche. Analyze the MLS to see who has the same types of properties and create a list. Then send brochures and notes about your listings and invite them to broker open houses or to preview your listings. In turn, attend their broker opens and introduce yourself.

“When you cobroke with someone on the list, send a ‘nice to work with a pro’ note,” Moore says. “This will pay off in lots of ways. You’ll show and sell each other’s listings. You’ll discover there are certain agents with whom you enjoy working and who are eager to show and sell your listings, too. Over time, you may even want to refer expired listings which you are about to lose to a competitor, who is willing to reciprocate.”

If your business is struggling, give some of these habits a try. “These are things that agents need to do all the time, but especially in the Florida market,” says Cross.

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