



Your best salespeople may hear “no” a dozen times before someone says “yes”—and yet thrive. By understanding what keeps them going, you can uncover better ways to lead and motivate them.

LEVERAGING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SALESPERSON

A Conversation with Psychologist and Anthropologist **G. Clotaire Rapaille**

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SALES that fascinates us. We have to admire the salesperson's endless resilience in the face of constant rejection, his certainty that things will work out in the end. At the same time, we're repelled by the job because of what it does to the people in it. Everyone is familiar with the play *Death of a Salesman*, which portrays a well-meaning man broken by the hollowness of his work. Dramas such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* present an even

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bleaker picture, in which success seems to require moral capitulation.

Just what type of person goes into sales, and how do salespeople cope with the job? For insight into these questions, senior editor Diane Coutu approached the psychologist, anthropologist, and marketing guru G. Clotaire Rapaille, who is well placed to comment. Rapaille holds a master's degree in political science, one in psychology, and a doctorate in medical anthropology from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. He worked as a psychoanalyst for ten years

of sales. Salespeople, he believes, are essentially the same whatever culture you are in, although there are obviously some local variations. They are "Happy Losers," he says – people who actually relish rejection and look for jobs that provide them with opportunities to be rejected. That, of course, has implications for the ways you should motivate and manage them.

What exactly do you do for a living?

I study archetypes, the underlying patterns in psychology that enable us to

you will. Companies consult me in an attempt to decipher the collective unconscious of their customers, employees, and stakeholders. My background is well suited for this. When I was a psychoanalyst, I worked with autistic children. I constantly had to decode what they were telling me because they had trouble putting their thoughts and feelings into words.

What have archetypes got to do with sales?

They are the essence of sales. The art of selling is complicated in every nation, but it is always influenced by collective experience.

I remember working many years ago with a business unit at AT&T before the company split up. The unit produced cables, and one of its clients was Nippon Telegraph and Telephone in Japan. NTT ordered some cables and gave AT&T a list of specifications. Before AT&T shipped the order, it made sure that all of the specifications were met. But when the cables arrived, the Japanese took one look and rejected them. Their explanation was that the cables were ugly. The Americans were dumbfounded. They had met all the specifications, and beauty had not been one of them. The Americans were particularly confused because the cables would be buried underground and no one would ever see them. But for the Japanese, aesthetics is an archetype of quality and, ultimately, of soul. Just look at their calligraphy, the exquisite ceremony that they put into pouring a pot of tea, the care they put into presenting food. To NTT, the ugliness of the cables was an indication of how little soul AT&T had put into its work.

When I first moved to Japan on a scholarship from UNESCO, I went to see a sensei, a master, who was going to teach me to paint. I dressed in special clothes and meticulously prepared my ink, brush, and paper. The sensei asked me whether I was ready, and I said I was. "Then close your eyes and wait for the perfect picture," he said. "You may have to wait five or six years, but once you have the perfect picture inside,

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in France, using both the Freudian and Jungian approaches.

Rapaille researches the impact of culture on business and markets; he has written several books that explore the cultural significance of everyday products such as shampoo, coffee, cars, and toilet paper. Most recently, he has published *The Culture Code*. His work has attracted the interest of some of the world's largest companies. Rapaille lists the likes of Citibank, DuPont, Exxon Mobil, General Electric, IBM, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever among his consulting relationships. He helps organizations understand how to operate in a global environment, where different cultural norms are increasingly coming into conflict with one another. As Rapaille points out, the Western businessperson will better understand a Japanese partner if he knows that the Japanese have more than ten words for "quality," each with a distinct meaning.

What follows is culled from the transcript of HBR's interview with Rapaille at his home in Tuxedo Park, New York. During the course of a wide-ranging conversation, Rapaille explained his theories about culture and the psychol-

understand the human condition. Carl Jung was the first psychiatrist to investigate them. Although I use them somewhat differently, I share Jung's belief that archetypes can be analyzed.

How do archetypes affect us, and what do they reveal?

An archetype preconditions how we respond to our biology – birth, death, sex, and so forth. There are variations from culture to culture, as well. Cultural archetypes appear in religions, dreams, and the arts. They drive our myths and epics as well as basic rituals such as cleaning and eating habits.

Not surprisingly, many cultural archetypes cut across different societies. The Hero is a common one, as are the Seductress and the Witch. Typically, archetypes are so deeply embedded in a culture that people are unaware of them. Just as we can speak a language without understanding its grammar, so too we can function in a culture without a conscious awareness of its prevailing archetypes.

Each culture has a pool of shared archetypes that guide the behaviors of its members – a collective unconscious, if

you'll do it right." Imagine American customers waiting five or six years for the perfect picture. It's never going to happen. Americans simply don't think this way. The people at Nike captured the American archetype of quality perfectly with the slogan "Just Do It"—and look at its success.

It sounds as though archetypes are cultural rather than biological.

They're both — like language, to which archetypes are closely related. Language is innate; it is hardwired. To be human is to speak. But think about the fact that there is no word for "intimacy" in Japanese. This is cultural, not biological, and it has centuries of history behind it. Japan is a very small and dense country; people are forced to live close together. Because privacy is very rare, so is intimacy, and the language reflects this fact.

When you learn any language, you learn more than words—you learn a way of looking at the world. In this sense, language is not only a means of communication but also a way of defining realities. It's not insignificant, I think, that the Japanese also have many ways to say "I," depending on whether the speaker is talking to a spouse, a child, or a boss. In a hierarchical culture where space is so limited, the language reflects the need for everyone to know his or her place. Everyone in the Japanese culture understands this. The Eskimos have at least 20 ways to say "snow," which is not surprising, given the environment in which they live. In some cultures, a dolphin is a fish. In others, it's a mammal. If it's a fish, our main concern may be how to cook it. If it's a mammal, our concern may be how to teach it communication and language skills. Language organizes the world into different categories. But the process is so shaped by both nature and nurture that we're not even aware of the influence it has on how we look at the world.

Is there a universal archetype of the salesperson?

All archetypes differ according to culture, but some aspects of the archetype



are universal. Consider, for example, the Warrior. This archetype may manifest itself in Japan as a samurai and in the United States as a cowboy, but in both cultures, the Warrior is a fighter who takes on society and wins.

Similarly, although manifestations of the Salesperson archetype vary from culture to culture, there is an "universal archetype," if you will. Salespeople are Happy Losers. Whether they know it or not, they are like addicted gamblers; they are after the thrill. On some level,

addicted gamblers know that they are going to lose most of the time, but they are excited by the outside chance of winning. Salespeople share that temperament. They are pros at losing. They are rejected at least 90% of the time, I'd say. Why would anyone choose that job? For the chase. I assure you, salespeople are never going to be an endangered species. There will always be people who enjoy and want this job, just as there will always be addicted gamblers.

Are there any exceptions?

No. Whatever your culture, you cannot be a salesperson without losing most of the time, so the successful ones have to be those who are happy when they lose. They don't develop low self-esteem or lose hope or get destroyed by the losses. Look at Donald Trump. At the high point of his career, he was on the covers of dozens of magazines. Then he came tumbling down, but he dusted himself off and came right back. He is the prime example of a good salesman, though in his case he is his own product. Trump is a Happy Loser.

How does a manager handle these Happy Losers?

It's all connected to the excitement of losing so much of the time. Managers can't "sell" salespeople on the idea that they will always win. First of all, their salespeople wouldn't believe them. Second, the job would become less appealing.

The way to manage your sales reps is to show them that you understand how hard it is to lose. You want them to be happy – otherwise, they'd be Unhappy Losers, and that's the last thing you need. Obviously, money is not an unimportant factor in managing a sales force.

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In the right industry, salespeople can make a million dollars in a single year. But my research shows that money is not what really drives them to get back in there and keep trying. It's the value they place on the struggle. Good salesmanship is a lot like foxhunting. Who cares about the fox? Sometimes there are 100 people on 100 horses following 200 dogs. Hunters keep running all day. They fall from their horses and break their legs. At the end of the day, they do not even catch the fox, but it was a great hunt.

To motivate your sales reps, therefore, you have to find better and more ways for them to struggle. Give them bigger projects where they can have even bigger losses. Hold huge company meetings where you give a salesperson the gold medal of rejection: Jonathan sold 500,000 computers last month, but he was rejected 5 million times! It may sound ludicrous, but this is the way to get fire in the belly of your sales force – particularly in America, where beating the odds is highly prized.

Can you give an example of how cultural interpretations of the archetype affect sales?

Just look at the differences between American and French attitudes toward selling. In America, salesmanship is a game and a pleasure; it's respected. In France, being a salesman is low class; it's crass. You've got to remember that the very concept of work is beneath the French. What is one of the most popular books in France? *Bonjour paresse* [Hello Laziness], by Corinne Maier. It's about how to pretend to be working while in fact you are doing nothing. Only the French could invent something like that. In America, you're nobody if you do not work. In France,

Nicaraguans would know everything about French business practices. I had lunch one day with people representing the two sides. At a certain point, the French rep said, "If you want engines, you'll have to go see Rolls-Royce." I remember the astonishment of the Nicaraguan: "You mean, you're selling me airplanes, but there are no engines?" The Frenchman was blasé: "The whole world knows we don't make engines. Where have you been?" Of course, the sale didn't go through.

This type of behavior is why outsiders often think that French people are rude. But they're not rude – they just operate according to different cultural archetypes. In France, money is vulgar because the culture tells you that you should give things to people. You don't sell, and you don't buy. There are several expressions in French that suggest that the ultimate value is not in money. For example, *L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur* [Money does not make happiness]. You don't sell what you have for celebrity or money. You just let it exist for its own sake. This is so French, and it's great. But it does mean that there is little room for sales or negotiation.

Are there archetype differences across industries?

Very much so. With beauty products, for example, it often helps to understand the archetype of the Great Mother, the nurturer of children. So P&G sells one of its most successful hair care lines, Pantene, by promoting nutrition. Women have to feed their hair, nurture it. Pantene, in other words, appeals to the maternal instinct in women. But to sell perfume, you have to appeal to the Seductress. You have to understand women's desire to be attractive, their need to be wanted, their fear of aging. Salespeople who appreciate this archetype can get women to pay \$3,000 for three bottles of perfume that you can make for \$3. Salespeople who don't understand the archetype will be lucky to sell a bottle of Chanel No. 5 for more than 30 cents.

In pharmaceutical companies, the key archetype is different again. Sales reps

have to persuade doctors to prescribe certain drugs. The Internet has made this task more complicated because patients these days often know more than the doctor. Physicians hate this, and it's by playing on that feeling that good salespeople can win the hearts and souls of doctors. Obviously, they must give doctors more information so that the physicians can display their greater intelligence to their patients, but the real challenge is to understand the doctors' pain. Medical doctors today feel that they cannot be doctors anymore. It's not only the Internet; it's the government, too. Medicine has become one great bureaucracy, and doctors hate that as well. So the good sales rep treats the doctor as the Wise Old Man who saves lives, not the bureaucrat he has in fact become.

How do you decode archetypes?

For the past 25 years, I have studied cultural forces worldwide for major corporations whose main purpose is to sell products or services. In doing so, I have developed a process that allows us to see cultural archetypes for selling shampoo in Japan, toilet paper in the United States, money in Canada, or cheese in France.

I use the same process when it comes to understanding salespeople for companies such as MetLife and Daimler-Chrysler. I get together a cross section of consumers from various cultures and backgrounds for a very nontraditional experience. It begins with a series of freewheeling three-hour interactions. First, I ask the consumers what they think of salespeople. This first hour is just a purge; it's a washout session. I hear all the intellectual responses, all the clichés: "You can't trust salesmen. All they want to do is cheat you." That's the rational part of the brain, and it doesn't interest me much. Next comes the emotional part of the experiment, when I ask people to tell me short stories about salespeople. This allows them to connect with their feelings and sets the mood for the third hour, which is the most productive. I dim the lights, put on hypnotic music, and ask

people to jot down memories of salespeople that are evoked by the music. Writers often do this sort of thing as an exercise. They scribble down their thoughts for a half hour in the morning, right after they've woken up, in an effort to connect with the world of their fantasies and dreams. In these

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workshops, anonymity is respected, and there is no pressure. Some people fall asleep, but most record their mental imprints of salespeople.

What is a mental imprint, and how is it related to an archetype?

The mental imprint is the result of a learning process that takes place early in life and establishes an unconscious behavior pattern. For example, my first imprint of cheese was my mother buying some Camembert, poking it and smelling it to find one with a good "heart." Still, today, for me, a good cheese is not one that is pasteurized but rather a cheese that is warm and alive and has a ripe smell. On a more scientific level, experiments show that if a wooden box with wheels is shown to a newly hatched duckling at a critical time, the duckling will form an attachment to that object, taking it for its biological mother.

Beyond a certain time period, it is difficult to imprint. First experiences are very powerful. Each one creates a mental highway in the nervous system, and afterward, we use this pathway or chain of neurons in the brain. The more we learn about trauma, for example, the more we see this pattern. People can't forget a terrible experience; there is a compulsion to repeat it. The same is true for early experiences generally. On

some level, what we learn in our early days stays with us forever.

In my work, I try to get people to go back to their first experience of a salesperson because the imprints point to the archetype. Think of an archetype as the sun, which you cannot look at directly because it is too strong. The

mental imprints are like a pair of sunglasses that you put on to let you look at the sun without damaging your vision. It's mental imprints that led me to the archetype of salespeople as Happy Losers.

How can you verify whether your archetypes are right?

It's not just an impressive clientele that substantiates my work, and it's not biologically based research. When I get a laugh, I know I'm onto something. I'll often comment about salespeople as Happy Losers, and everyone chuckles spontaneously, reacting with gut feeling. Or when I'm speaking about America, for example, I'll point out that it is a country that is intensely mobile and yet one that invests highly in the concept of "home." What is one of the most popular American films of all time? *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy tells us over and over, "There's no place like home." And who doesn't know the line "E.T. phone home"? I point out that America is also the only country in the world where people buy mobile homes that never move. And people laugh. When this happens again and again, this pattern of repetition becomes, in its own right, verification. 

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