



# The Assassin Analogy

**The truth about why technical staff don't like to sell... and how you can help them succeed at it.**

This report reveals why staff in technical and service roles are reluctant to initiate sales conversations, and offers practical insights and solutions to set your team up for success.

Included are six sales management action strategies you can use immediately to ignite enthusiasm and create more business.

Stuart Ayling  
Chief Sales Strategist, Marketing Nous

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Assassin Analogy.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Selling is Exploring.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Why Don't They Sell?.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Communication Style.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The SOX™ Question Strategy.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Leading the Sales Conversation.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Product &amp; Service Knowledge .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Team Knowledge.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Sales Process Knowledge .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Sales Management Actions.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>One Page Summary .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>About Stuart Ayling .....</b>	<b>20</b>

**Concepts in this report have been developed by Stuart Ayling of Marketing Nous from extensive work with business development teams across a diversity of technical products and services.**

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## Introduction

Let's be honest... many technical and service staff have business development responsibilities, but they don't actively sell because they feel like strangers in a foreign land.

Technically-oriented staff may find the language of sales, the strategy of selling, and the expectation for outcomes from sales discussions to be very different to their usual customer contact. They are often more familiar with task-focused discussions, and are confident within their technical comfort zone. The process of selling (also referred to as 'business development' in this report) is not always understood by them and is often feared.

It is important to recognise that technical staff are not usually 'career' salespeople. In most cases they have chosen a field of expertise, have performed well, and have been promoted to a position where they now need to bring in new work, not just 'do' the work.

Sure, some technical staff are naturally great at selling. They are comfortable approaching prospects and exploring unknown territory. But they are in the minority.

In this report we will be talking about the challenges faced by the vast majority of technicians, engineers, service personnel, product managers, business managers and technical consultants who are charged with the responsibility of bringing in new business, but are poorly equipped to achieve their sales objectives.

First we will directly address why technical staff are reluctant to sell. We will also look at a number of contributing factors such as their perceptions of selling, communication style and knowledge gaps. Also presented is the SOX™ Question Strategy, and how to use it to lead the sales conversation. Finally we'll look at specific sales management tactics suitable to improve sales results.

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## The Assassin Analogy

From my years of experience training technical personnel across various industries there's one distinctly common characteristic... nearly everyone hates the idea of having to sell. They come from a technical, service, or professionally trained background and 'sales' is not what they signed up for!

It is common for technical staff to regard the act of selling as being where you target the buyer and then relentlessly pursue them to buy something they don't really need, using whatever means necessary. Ethics are optional. Finally the customer is 'closed' (sounds like they have been terminated) and the salesperson moves on to the next target.

I call this way of thinking *The Assassin Analogy* – because sales people are likened to a mercenary, a gun for hire, and are seen to focus on targeting unsuspecting prospects then closing the sale and taking their money.

*The Assassin Analogy* is why many technical staff who should be selling, don't. It is why they want to avoid being labelled as a salesperson. And to avoid being seen to be a salesperson, and feeling like one, they simply avoid selling.

However, upon closer inspection we can see *The Assassin Analogy* is not an accurate view of what top performers in technical sales roles actually do. It doesn't reflect current best practices for professional selling. The analogy is based on old-fashioned and out-dated notions, and it scares technical staff away from trying to sell.

These days the most effective sales people take a keen interest in their customer's well-being. They make an effort to learn about their customer and look for opportunities to educate and add value. They act as a trusted resource but don't hesitate to recommend appropriate courses of action. They are confident in their knowledge and know how to progress sales opportunities without manipulating or pressuring customers.

Really, there is no need for technical and service staff to fear being tainted by *The Assassin Analogy*. They can easily learn the communication and process skills needed to successfully bring in new business without compromising their ethics or customer relationships.

# Selling is Exploring

Selling is no longer restricted to stereotypical sales roles. Many technical and service staff now find sales or business development goals are being added to their Position Description.

To maximise sales success within your company you should make it clear that selling is for everyone. It is a mistake to discuss sales results 'on the side', or behind closed doors, to avoid people feeling awkward about sales activities.

Selling should be a required skill for all members of your team, not just the more senior or experienced staff. Why? Consider this example. Your service technician is working with a current customer to deliver the project. During routine discussions with your customer the technician discovers there is a new project being planned within another division of the customer organisation. Fantastic! This is a sales opportunity for you. What happens next?

## Explore the Opportunity

To extract maximum benefit for your company the technician must know how to explore the opportunity in a conversational and non-invasive manner. That is selling in action. The technician must be comfortable in asking the right questions, in the right way, of the right person. The new lead is thereby

qualified by the technician (even if only at a preliminary level) and can be passed on to a more senior team member to follow up.

To extract maximum benefit for your company the technician must know how to explore the opportunity in a conversational and non-invasive manner. That is selling in action.

The alternative (which is the unfortunate reality for many organisations) is for the technician to ignore or overlook the opportunity because he doesn't know how to explore the customer's situation. He hasn't been trained in how to handle a sales discussion. And he doesn't want to feel awkward, appear to be greedy, or upset the customer. So he does nothing. Opportunity lost.

## Why Don't They Sell?

After working with hundreds of staff in training sessions I have found the reasons why technical staff don't sell are remarkably the same. These reasons are directly linked to what they think of selling.

During training sessions I ask participants what image comes to mind when they hear the words 'sales person'. The following comments are always on the list:

- Pushy
- Sleazy
- Insincere
- Smarmy
- Sell as much as you can
- Take the money
- No support
- High pressure
- Don't believe them
- Persistent
- Annoying
- Telemarketers
- Don't have time for them

Wow... no wonder these participants don't want to be in sales. Who would want to be seen by their customers as having those traits?

In contrast only a few positive comments are made such as: confident, knowledgeable, helpful. Notably, these comments usually come from only one or two individuals in the group. They are not widely endorsed.

### **Belief: Sales People are Not to be Trusted**

The general consensus among technical staff is that sales people are annoying, self-serving, only out for the money, and not to be trusted. (That's the Assassin Analogy at work.)

This should not be surprising. Given their process-oriented professional training it is expected these staff will be focused on helping customers, solving immediate problems, or completing their current assignment. They often have a 'service' or reactive mindset, not a proactive 'selling' mindset.

Of critical importance here is that most technical staff are not naturally comfortable with the idea of looking for new sales opportunities. That is clearly outside their comfort zone.

Unless they are trained and supported to adjust their perception of selling, and to move outside their current comfort zone, they will continue to avoid discussions on gaining new business.

## Communication Style

Not everyone is a 'natural' sales person. Not everyone is comfortable talking to, or asking questions of strangers (read: prospects). Not everyone has the confidence and resilience to go back and ask again and again.

However, that doesn't mean you can't learn to be effective at sales just because you are not naturally outgoing. There is much more to selling than being a good talker! In fact, the seller talking too much during sales conversations can be a major problem.

### **Analytical Communicators Reign**

To assist with understanding their own actions, in my training programs participants complete an assessment to identify their dominant communication style. What I have seen is that – of the four major communication styles – approximately 75% of all technical sellers have a predominantly 'Analytical' style of communication. What does this mean?

They are:

- Detail oriented.
- Uncomfortable with hazy big picture concepts.
- Slow to make decisions, preferring to wait for all the facts.
- Reserved in their communication with others.
- Focused on the task rather than on the people involved.

Whilst this may appear to be the antithesis of what a good sales person should be (chatty, quick decisions, creative) Analytical style communicators can be very effective in sales roles. Their focus and thoroughness work in their favour.

# The SOX™ Question Strategy

The key to success for anyone in sales is to be a good communicator. This requires the seller to realise their natural communication preferences and the implications of that for the way they communicate with others.

Additionally successful sellers understand how and when to make adjustments in their information handling processes so they can better communicate with a variety of customers, especially those who might have a different style of communication, and role, to themselves (e.g. an engineer selling to a CEO).

From experience I have found the best approach to encourage this adaptability in communication style is to provide a 'system' that technical sellers can use to manage their sales conversations.

Analytical communicators are naturally drawn to using systems in their work and readily relate to a system for selling. Importantly, it gives them a tangible process to manage, not airy-fairy sales talk.

## **Avoiding the 'Pinball Effect'**

One of the biggest dangers in sales conversations, especially for inexperienced salespeople, is what I call the Pinball Effect.

This is where the seller asks lots of questions on various topics, trying to find out what they need to know from the prospect. Even though the questions may be good ones to ask, if they are asked in a random fashion the seller can easily get lost in bouncing around (ping... ping... ping) from one topic to another. The Pinball Effect.

Consequently they don't make a meaningful impact on the customer, and they can miss asking important questions. Also, they may not get the customer to fully explain the scope of any problems they are experiencing, or find the deeper benefits of any new opportunities the customer may be considering.

Even though the questions may be good ones to ask, if they are asked in a random fashion the seller can easily get lost in bouncing around (ping... ping... ping) from one topic to another. The Pinball Effect.

Additionally the Pinball Effect can create confusion for the prospect, as they cannot clearly see where all the questions are leading, or what the next step should be. This ad-hoc approach to asking questions may also lead inexperienced salespeople to inadvertently raise concerns (without resolving them) that could damage their chances of gaining a commitment from the prospect.

### **The SOX™ Strategy**

Through studying and transforming traditional sales methodologies over the last five years a simple yet powerful 3-stage questioning strategy has been developed under the acronym SOX™.

**SOX™ questions identify and confirm the true high value benefits each individual customer is looking for.**

**S** = Situation questions

**O** = Opportunity questions

**X** = aXtion questions

Ask 'Situation' questions to discover the facts behind the prospects current situation. Examples: What is driving their decision now? What do they know about your services/products? What have they done before?

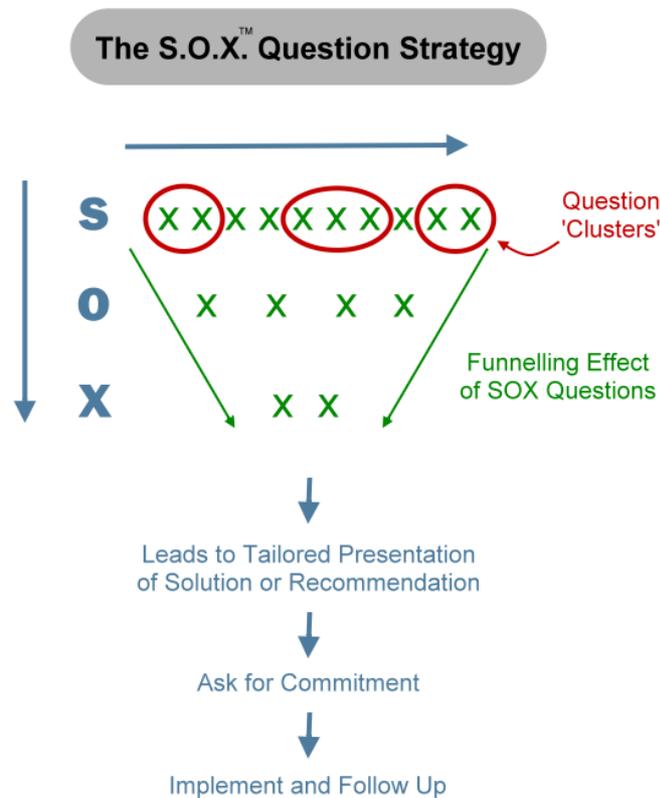
Ask 'Opportunity' questions to identify the scope of their needs. Examples: Is their problem big enough for them to want you to fix it? Will they spend the money? What is in it for them? What will happen if they do nothing? Do they understand the implications?

Ask 'aXtion' questions to gain approval to move into the presentation phase. Examples: Can we set a time for me to present my recommendations to you next week? When is the best time to meet with the purchasing manager?

**SOX™ questions identify and confirm the true high value benefits each individual customer is looking for.**

Note: During the SOX™ questioning phase we are not doing what is traditionally seen to be 'selling'. We are having a structured conversation. We are learning, clarifying, and understanding.

Essentially we are finding out what we need to know to enable us to present a strong value proposition and present our recommended solution (products or services) in a compelling manner, tailored for what this particular customer needs and wants.



The SOX<sup>TM</sup> strategy is specifically designed for use by technical and service personnel. It provides a clear-cut structure for sellers to work with. It enables them to progress customers in a seamless manner from initial introduction, to exploring their requirements, to a customised presentation targeting each customer's specific buying triggers.

**The SOX<sup>TM</sup> strategy creates optimal conditions for a positive outcome.**

The result of using this structure for sales conversations is three-fold:

- The seller has a clear path to follow, and can easily recognise how far they have progressed along their sales path.
- The seller can proactively create opportunities to demonstrate expertise and accelerate the building of trust during the conversation.
- The customer can recognise how the seller will help them and is able to appreciate the value being offered.

## A 'Best Practice' Sales Conversation Guide

The SOX™ strategy is not intended to create a word-for-word script. That would be unnatural and unrealistic.

Rather, the questions that are developed using SOX™ will form the basis of a 'best practice' conversational structure that follows a path to identifying what each prospect is looking for. A flexible yet effective structure for success.

This gives the seller great power to focus on those areas that are critically important for the prospect at hand – rather than presenting generalised information that may hit-or-miss the prospects real buying motives.

Instead of being seen as a typical sales person (pushing products with no sense of care for the prospect), by using the SOX™ question strategy the seller will achieve a deep understanding of what the customer needs, will easily build trust and credibility in the eyes of the prospect, and importantly, the seller will feel good about the whole process.

## Leading the Sales Conversation

The best sales people for technical services and products are those that can listen more than they talk. But contrary to popular sales teachings, being a good listener isn't everything.

### Leading the Sales Conversation

To be truly effective in a business development role, technical sellers must be able to read and lead the sales conversation. Listening is an important part of the mix. However, the ability to ask a series of planned questions designed to probe the customers situation is a critical success factor.

If you don't ask the right questions, you won't get the information you need. You can't afford to be shy and not ask questions. You can't afford to be impatient and jump in prematurely when an awkward silence occurs. You must give customers space to answer. You have to carefully navigate the sales conversation to reach your objective.

## Asking Questions is How You Lead The Sales Conversation

Too many technical sellers think they can just ‘wing it’ and make up their questions as they go along. Possibly, if the seller has many years experience they may have learned what to say through trial and error. To others it might appear as though they are winging it – but they are not. They have developed a routine that works for them.

Most sellers will benefit from thorough preparation, both for the questions to ask, and for the possible responses and objections they are likely to hear from their prospect.

**You must lead the sales conversation. You can't afford to be shy and not ask questions.**

## Product & Service Knowledge

When I ask technical sellers to identify their most difficult aspects of selling, a common response is ‘Not knowing enough about my service/product’.

I find it astounding that so many sellers are conducting sales conversations without fully understanding their own products or services.

### Knowledge Gaps Undermine Seller Confidence

A knowledge gap in this critical area will fundamentally undermine the confidence of the seller. They will avoid sales encounters because they feel awkward and visualise being in an embarrassing or unprofessional situation where they won't know the answer, or won't know what to do next.

Clearly the solution to this problem is to provide adequate education for all staff that have business development responsibilities. This should be done with due regard to the degree of detail they would be expected to know, and their role within your organisation. You want to empower them, not over-burden them with details.

## Know the Real Benefits

Importantly, this education should not only cover the features of products and services being offered, but also include specifics of how customers benefit from using your services or products. (Awareness of competitors is also required.)

Sellers must know the real benefits, not just the obvious features. They need to know:

- How it will solve customers problems
- How much it will save the customer in time, resources or money
- How much it will enhance the customers outcomes
- How will it contribute to the customers success

## Using Success Stories and Industry Data

Ideally all sales staff will know a few suitable customer 'success stories' and some specific data they can drop into their sales conversations (without appearing 'salesy') to demonstrate their expertise and emphasise the impact of the benefits being offered.

It is recommended these success stories and appropriate data should be identified and developed centrally and made available to staff. This way everyone is communicating the same key points and value messages.

Remember, we are aiming to achieve a structured conversation to explore the opportunity with the prospect. It is a measured strategy to probe, discover, and build trust – it is not a sales pitch.

## Team Knowledge

A common situation for technical and services staff is they are working closely with personnel from other technical disciplines within their organisation.

Example: A technical specialist is the lead worker on a project (e.g. an hydraulic engineer). Then a new opportunity arises within the customer firm that may involve another area of discipline from within the company (e.g. waste processing evaluation). Does the hydraulic engineer know enough about their

team members capabilities to establish what to do next, which decision maker to seek, or which team member to call in to the next meeting?

Often the answer is no; because each person is only aware of the activities within their own area, unit, or department.

### **Capability, Availability, Responsibility**

The implication of this for a sales scenario is that all team members need to have a thorough understanding of the capabilities, availability, and responsibilities of other members of their team.

Example: I've spoken with consultants in firms who hesitate to pursue potential sales opportunities because they either don't know who within their company should be involved (responsibility), or they aren't sure if the skills are available in their team (capability). So, rather than risk looking like they don't know, they simply avoid the sales discussion.

In many companies the sales responsibility is in fact a part-time role for technical personnel. Their primary role is to deliver their technical area of expertise, whether that is in financial services, water treatment, aerial surveying, maintenance services, environmental science or IT integration.

This creates an often-overlooked challenge for management to ensure all staff are equally conversant with the capabilities of their team members and how to handle opportunities outside their own direct area of knowledge.

## **Sales Process Knowledge**

A good performer in a poor system will produce lacklustre results.

Not only that, your best sales performers will be looking for a system that supports them in their business development efforts. If you can't provide an effective sales process for them to follow, they may decide to look outside the company for a better system that helps them achieve their goals.

Top performers will want to know:

- What they need to achieve at each step of the sales conversation
- What will happen next
- Who should be involved
- What information is required at each step
- How and when to gain commitment from the customer
- Who will be following up or delivering the project, service, or products

By defining and documenting your sales process you can capture this information and create a 'standardised' approach for managing all sales discussions. Everyone will benefit.

### **A Documented Sales Process Streamlines Progress**

This standardisation will not remove the personal touch, nor will it confine your team to using scripts or rigid rules.

Documenting your sales process will enable your team to focus on:

- The critical questions they must ask
- Obtaining the correct information to progress the discussion
- Getting the right people involved on the customers side (and also from your company)
- Maintaining steady forward progress
- Achieving a smooth and professional transition from managing the sales discussion to gaining commitment, and through to implementation

By defining and documenting your sales process you can capture this information and create a 'standardised' approach for managing all sales discussions.

After working with a multitude of technical and service-based companies I have developed a procedure for identifying and developing an effective sales process.

Importantly, your sales process can be integrated into your sales training activities. It will assist everyone on the team to be more confident in their business development roles and ultimately will help win more business.

## Sales Management Actions

It has been said that managing technical staff can be like 'herding cats' (they scatter in all directions). Everyone prides themselves on their level of technical expertise and their personal work. They resist any move they perceive might restrict their individuality or they think will compromise their personal customer relationships.

**They want to be seen as an expert resource for customers, not as a sales person.**

However, it is possible to provide sales training and an effective sales system to help them achieve and exceed their business development goals.

**(1) Be honest about their perception of selling.**

Get it out on the table. Ask them how they feel. Discuss it. Analyse it. Explain how their sales activities will actually help customers – and that they won't be perceived as the stereotypical annoying sales person.

Selling technical services or complex products is not a transactional process that ends with 'closing the sale'. There is usually an ongoing relationship with the customer. Emphasise to staff they will not be acting like mercenaries preying on their targets for a one-off 'kill'.

*The Assassin Analogy* and the associated sales avoidance mentality must be eliminated from your organisation.

**(2) Be clear about the role of selling within your organisation.**

Who is leading your sales activities? Is selling a regular point of conversation in your organisation? Are business development targets taken seriously? If you expect your technical team to focus on achieving their sales goals, set the right example at every opportunity. Create an expectation of success.

You don't need the rah-rah, hype-them-up style of sales motivation. You do need a strong and consistent focus on business development activities and professional development.

### **(3) Focus on communication skills.**

Conduct communication style assessments and discuss the impact on each individual's business development activities. Give them tools and techniques they can use to become more adaptable when in sales discussions.

Practice listening. This sounds very simple, yet most people don't listen very well. As Steven Covey writes in his best selling '7 Habits of Highly Effective People', "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply". Using effective listening skills accelerates the building of trust and provides a deeper understanding of what the customer really wants.

### **(4) Create a structured selling system.**

Avoid having completely different approaches within the team. There must be some common ground – some common strategy. For example, team members (from within the same functional area) will need to ask similar questions of customers. Tap into the combined expertise of your team and create a system that works for everyone. Consider your various sales scenarios and if necessary create a sales process for each distinctly different service or customer category. Develop a 'best practice' strategy to guide sales conversations.

### **(5) Train your team...**

#### **...in your products and services**

Make sure everyone has sufficient knowledge to use in sales discussions. This requirement goes beyond what they need to know just to do their job. Remember, they don't need to be the expert in everything, but they do need to make a solid impression in front of the customer, and know who to go to for further assistance if required.

#### **...in each other**

Create opportunities for your team to share their experiences and capabilities. Share stories of previous customer projects and how they were handled. Distribute resume summaries for each member of the team. Have them do joint sales calls using a 'team selling' approach.

### **...in conversational selling skills**

Training should be practical and based on actual sales situations. Use a proven question-based approach such as the SOX strategy. Emphasise specific techniques that will quickly build trust, and focus on using a conversational style of selling (also referred to as consultative selling). This will give your team skills they can immediately use to win more business.

### **(6) Involve all personnel.**

Many staff will try and exclude themselves from selling. Junior staff might say they don't get the opportunity. Senior staff may insist they already know what to do, or already get enough new business. In most cases they are concerned about having to sell, and are reluctant to commit to business development activities. However, there is always room for learning and improvement.

One technical professional with 20 years experience approached me after training and said, "Until now I have thought about how I approached a prospect, but was really flying by the seat of my pants. Now with this knowledge and structure I know I will be able to plan and achieve a higher success rate."

## One Page Summary

**The source of sales reluctance is often *The Assassin Analogy*** – where technical staff feel that selling is insincere and based on selecting their targets and then going in for the ‘sales’ kill. Whilst this analogy portrays the perception of sales, it is inaccurate and does not reflect current best practices for selling.

**Focus must be placed on identifying and exploring sales opportunities**, helping customers achieve their goals. To do this we must use effective communication skills - including asking specific questions during sales conversations, creating momentum, and listening with intent to understand.

**Sales conversations can be ruined by the Pinball Effect**, which is created when questions are asked in an ad-hoc manner leaving the customer wondering if the seller really understands their situation, and being uncertain of what will happen next.

**The SOX™ question strategy provides a proven format for identifying and confirming high value benefits** whilst building trust and creating a positive forward flow in the sales conversation. This will maximise the conversion of sales opportunities.

**For optimal results technical sellers need to have thorough knowledge** of their services and/or products; an understanding of the capability and responsibilities of their team; and confidence in using conversational selling skills throughout the sales process.

**All staff should be involved** in business development skills training. Improving communication skills and business development ability are critical traits for the success of the organisation – and very beneficial for individual team members.

### **Sales management action points:**

1. Identify and be honest about your teams perception of selling
2. Be clear about the role of selling within your organisation
3. Focus on communication skills
4. Create a structured selling system
5. Train your team
6. Involve all personnel, junior and senior

## About Stuart Ayling



**Stuart Ayling specializes in effective sales and business development training for service-based firms and companies selling technical or complex products. Stuart founded Marketing Nous in 1999 and works with companies across Australia, South-East Asia and the Middle East to conduct inhouse sales training programs.**

Stuart holds a Bachelors Degree in Marketing, post-graduate qualifications in International Business, and is active in a number of Learning and Development industry groups. Prior to establishing his own firm he held various senior sales and marketing management positions.

**Mark Mahoney, Managing Director, iMS Group:**

“What impressed me straight away with Stuart was his ability to get the right information out of us as managers as to what we really wanted to achieve as a business. Stuart then tailored his course detail to suit life experiences from a day-to-day point of view. We have already seen a new client on board as a result of our revised learning's from the workshop.”

**Trevor Cuthbert, Operations Manager, CPAP Australia:**

“I was very impressed with the presentation, content and direction taken. More importantly, our people have absorbed the many points covered, discussions are now positive and outcome oriented - yes, they are using the stuff, and it works! The cost of your seminar was a great investment for us.”

**Justin Zakaras, National Sales and Marketing Manager, Danley Construction Products:**

“Stuart's training methods have enabled our sales team to challenge their current practices and to see new innovative ways of improving their selling skills in a fun and interactive environment. Our sales results have increased since incorporating Stuart's sessions into our sales conferences and this has been during a downturn in the market.”

**Scott Denning, Northern Region Manager, OAMPS Insurance Brokers:**

“Stuart took the time to understand both our business as well as our client expectations. His efforts resulted in a valuable educational sales session at our Regional Sales Conference.”

**Maria Morton, General Manager, Teach International:**

“Once again Stuart produced a motivating full-day session with easy-to-use techniques that we practiced through role plays and peer sessions. Training was conducted the first week of January, and, by the next week, sales of this product had doubled from 10% of all new sales to 20%.”

**Steve Bamford, General Manager, Beaulieu Pacific**

"As our sales people are from a technical design background I wanted training to enhance the selling aspect of their role by providing them with sales techniques that would compliment their more technical personalities. The outcome from the training is that our sales people now have structured practical selling tools to assist them in the selling process and these tools work! This has already resulted in a significant increase in their confidence when dealing with customers."

**Bruce Watson, Chief Executive Officer, AUSCOAL Super**

"AUSCOAL Super was looking for refinement and improvement for our Australia wide based financial advisers, planners and managers who constantly present face to face seminars and workshops. The professionalism of our organisation has lifted through both presentation content design and presenting skills thanks to the great support and assistance from Stuart Ayling."

**Eric Wai, Managing Director, Sentry Medical**

"We wanted training that would help us to increase confidence, focus on asking the right questions, overcoming blocks, basic sales training and a refresher for some staff. I'm very satisfied with the results and believe everybody got some thing out of it. The team is more confident, knows what questions to ask, and has learnt that repeat visits will get results. There have already been some great achievements resulting from the sales course especially in our NSW territory."

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**Contact Stuart Ayling to explore your sales training options.**

**Learn more at:**

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