

The Neuroscience of Sales

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Interview with SalesSpace founder Rachel Bourke and Kristen Hansen.

*Kristen is the Director of Enhansen Performance and draws on her current studies in a 'Master of the Neuroscience of Leadership' as well as qualifications with numerous emotional intelligence instruments and 20 years experience as a Sales Manager for various Australian companies. Kristen helps business owners and managers achieve their goals around business growth, personal effectiveness and leadership.

The neuroscience of sales is particularly intriguing. I sat down with Kirsten Hansen, one of Australia's leading trainers in this emerging field, to explain just what it's all about.

I'm sure that after reading this article you'll be left feeling excited and inspired, and perhaps wondering how you ever made a successful sale beforehand...

Rachel: Kristen, thankyou so much for joining us today. I'm incredibly excited to have you with us.

Kristen: Thankyou Rachel, I'm very excited to be here too.

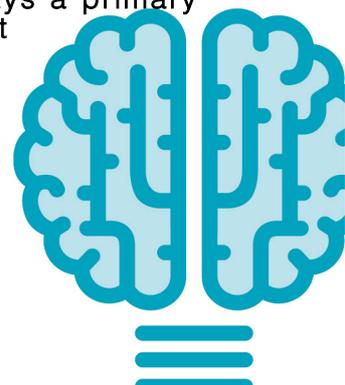
Rachel: Kristen, with over 20 years experience as a Sales Manager and as the director of Enhansen Performance – a sales and leadership coaching and training company that utilises emotional intelligence and neuroscience to enhance performance - what are you able to tell us about the brain's role in affecting personal performance and decision making, resulting in sales?

Kristen: Well Rachel, let me start by saying that without an understanding of how the brain works we are unable to develop effective strategies that allow us to improve performance or change behaviours and habits.

Obviously sales is not an easy profession, so what's important to recognise about the brain in terms of how it affects performance is that essentially we've got two parts - a thinking brain and an emotional brain which form what we call the prefrontal cortex.

The emotional centre of our brain is known as the limbic system – a collection of structures responsible for things such as emotion, behaviour and motivation. The most important structure within this system is the Amygdala, which plays a primary role in the processing of memory and emotional reactions. We know that

there is a very, very sensitive relationship between this structure and the limbic system when we feel emotionally charged by something.





Say if we are nervous or anxious, these two structures affect our ability to think. It has actually been discovered that there is an inverse relationship between these two brain structures. So, if for example we are feeling nervous about approaching a client, what happens is the blood is literally taken away from our thinking brain in our prefrontal cortex, channelled through our Amygdala and down to our heart and lungs. This is why we experience physical symptoms such as a rapid heartbeat and sweaty palms. In that moment we essentially lose our ability to think clearly.

I'm sure everyone in sales has experienced this at some point – you're in the middle of a call or a meeting with a potential client, they ask us a question (and if we're feeling nervous) we literally lose our ability to think.

This is why neuroscience is so important – it enables us to be self-aware. By being able to identify what emotional state we're in we are able to manage ourselves in situations like this far more effectively.

Rachel: That's phenomenal information. I absolutely love it and it's very much in line with the way I teach sales. I teach that it's very important to know and to have rehearsed and visualised how you are going to run through your sales process in order to remain as calm as possible.

Kristen: That's absolutely correct. The more confident you can feel in a sales situation the better because essentially what that means is that we are again able to be more self-aware – we are literally able to ask ourselves “How am I feeling? How is this impacting my performance or behaviour?”

We can't regulate our emotions if we're not aware of them in the first place.

And so I guess the next question many people then have is how do we regulate our emotions? Breathing techniques are particularly helpful. There's a lot of scientific evidence on that now.

Being able to label a particular emotion is also helpful. For example, “I'm feeling a bit anxious” or “I'm quite undervalued now, I'm feeling threatened generally” and being able to re-appraise the situation. Being able to use some of these regulatory techniques enables you to be in a situation where you feel cognitively calm and therefore in control which makes a huge difference when we're trying to communicate with somebody.

By being able to regulate our emotions, we're actually more able to control which neurochemicals are being released and this can really change our overall dynamic and how we come across to others.

There's a lot of research now as well about emotional contagion and if we're feeling threatened and we're speaking to a client you can guarantee they're going to feel threatened too. And in a threatened state, people don't buy.

Rachel: Absolutely, I always say one of the most important equations is sales is weirdness equals weirdness. So you've really got to be able to control the situation completely so that you are being transparent and calm, which is attractive to the other person.

Kristen: Yes, definitely, I think attractiveness is probably another key thing. People are never going to make a purchase decision if they don't actually like us. And people often determine subconsciously whether or not they like us well before we even start talking about them. Our body language, laughing, all those things strongly influence whether or not someone finds us attractive.

Rachel: Yeah, okay I love it and talking about attracting others, that leads me to my next question. What can neuroscience tell us about building trust and empathy with others so that they are attracted to us and therefore want to do business with us?

Kristen: Okay, excellent. So building trust and empathy, we mentioned obviously, people will buy from somebody they trust and empathy plays a key role in building rapport with somebody so understanding a little bit about what's going on in the brain with empathy can be helpful.

There's a recent discovery of what's called mirror neurons, which seem to be responsible for our ability to show empathy and essentially they're really useful in being able to determine somebody else's intentions. This information is particularly useful when it comes to sales. When we know someone's intention is simply to sell us something, we naturally push back. If however, we can tell that somebody's intention is to help us, then we're going to feel more comfortable with that person.

My intention when I meet somebody is not to make a sale. My intention is to get to know them and to find out if I or someone else can help them in a real way. And these mirror neurons allow people to identify that.

Rachel: How does the brain make decisions?

Kristen: Well I guess, in a nutshell ... it's a big question. I think what we need to recognise is that we're not as cognitively in control as we previously thought.

Our non-conscious processing and our emotional system are far more powerful and operate at a far greater speed than our cognitive capacity. The prefrontal cortex is extremely limited in its processing capacity.

The brain's over-arching principle is to minimise danger and to maximise reward. In any situation, the brain scans the environment in about a fifth of a second and determines whether something is a threat or a reward way faster than we can cognitively understand.

Our brain requires us to focus on safety first because we're designed to survive, so if there's anything in the environment that we interpret as a threat our capacity to make decisions is impacted in that moment. So I guess what I'm trying to explain is that our emotions make decisions about how we feel about things, before our prefrontal cortex (responsible for moderating social behaviour, decision making etc) has an opportunity to respond.

Our cognitive capacity then has the ability to either calm down or exacerbate emotions by providing feedback to our emotional system by saying either 'It's okay, don't worry about it, everything is in control' or "Oh my gosh, I don't know what to do now!"

What this means in the decision making process is that if we sense someone to be a threat – that is, if we determine that their intention is only to sell us something – we're likely to 'push back'.

We have to remember that emotions are contagious. We've got to be very mindful of how our own emotions are impacting with our buyer's decisions about us. From an emotional intelligence perspective, if you can improve your self awareness and your awareness of others and your ability to regulate your emotions you are in a far greater position to actually impact somebody else's emotions in any situation.

So again, when it comes to decision-making it's really important to recognise that the brain is constantly weighing up information that is very deep and very emotional and not necessarily verbal. Instead it's about our body language, our intention to offer a tailored solution and our ability to build cognitive empathy by asking questions, acknowledging their concerns, finding similarities etc.

The limbic system is then calm and they are able to use their calm thinking brain to engage in decision making.

Rachel: When you've got a calm thinking brain what sorts of brain chemicals are being released in that situation?

Kristen: Well I guess serotonin is a calming sort of neurochemical. You can also feel excited or interested and if somebody peaks our interest or something sounds novel then we get a little bit of a dopamine hit. These are 'feel good' neurochemicals that make us want more.

In contrast to that, when we feel nervous or tense or mistrusting or fearful or angry or anxious we're usually experiencing a rise in our level of the hormone cortisol.

Adrenaline is another stress hormone that's released when we're nervous – like when we're about to speak on stage. These hormones are good for us in small doses – without them we are unable to perform at our peak. What we need to be aware of however is when these neurochemicals begin to impact us in a negative way and what we can do to manage that.

Rachel: I think this information is so essential - to understand how neurochemicals effect not only us but the people we engage with as well. Kristen, can you explain then what motivates us to do business with one person over another? You've probably answered that quite extensively already but are there any other comments you'd like to add?

Kristen: The only other thing I'd like to draw attention to is the SCARF model – a framework determined by a man named Dr David Rock who for many years has been exploring the field of neuroscience. This model captures the five common factors that can activate a reward or threat response in social situations. These are Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

Status is about relative importance to others. So for example, if a salesman arrives at our door wanting to sell us a new home phone network or something, we don't want to be made to feel small if we ask a dumb question. We want to maintain our status. At the same time however, we need the salesman to be of reasonable status in order to be able to trust him. Which leads us to the next domain – certainty. It's

essential that when we're dealing with someone, we know that what we buy or what he or she says, we are going to get. Otherwise if we feel that something is unlikely to transpire, we'll get very nervous and find ourselves in a threatened state very quickly. It's why we often ask questions like "How will I know?" and "What happens if it breaks down after one month?" etc.

The third one is autonomy and autonomy is really our brains' requirement to have a choice and therefore the ability to impact our own future. Without choice we often feel reluctant to make a purchase - when somebody is trying to sell us a 12-week coaching block or nothing, or a product at \$89 per month or nothing, for example. As a coach or sales professional I think it's important to provide options in what we're offering so people can make a decision that is right for them in terms of a solution.

Relatedness refers to what I've already mentioned - people want to feel that we are more friends than foes.

The final one is fairness, which is pretty self-explanatory. People won't buy from us if they don't believe it's a fair exchange.

Rachel: Kristen that's great information. Now my final question to you today, because this has been absolutely brilliant, is what would be some effective sales tips that you could give us?

Kristen: Well I think the most effective strategy when it comes to sales like I mentioned is being able to focus your intention on building empathy for others, understanding their needs and making them feel safe rather than trying to make a sale. I have generated massive amounts of business, either directly or indirectly, by referring my clients to other people who I feel could better cater to their needs.

Secondly, being able to understand and utilise modern neuroscience is particularly empowering. By being aware of how quickly and easily certain responses are triggered and how they are likely to affect communication, we are able to regulate our emotions and place ourselves in a toward, optimistic state more efficiently.

In other words, by understanding neuroscience we are able to develop our emotional intelligence and therefore improve performance.

Acknowledge people genuinely! Whatever you can think to say - "Wow, that's really interesting" or "That's really great" or "Well done for achieving that so far. What's next?" - because everybody feels good when they're acknowledged. And overall, where you can, give people status, give them some certainty; provide autonomy and choice where you can. Be as fair as you can in your exchanges and try to really relate to people and really see them as genuine, interesting human beings. This way we are able to build rapport and provide a service or solution to somebody far more easily. So they would be the key tips I guess.

Rachel: Thanks so much Kristen. We'll wrap it up there - it's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

Kristen: I look forward to catching up with you again soon.

End of Interview!