

SECRET SAUCE SALES

Trust Changes What People Tell You

THE COMMERCIAL QUESTION

What makes a customer willing to answer consequential questions honestly rather than simply give a seller a safe answer?

THE ANSWER

Rapport is not earning the right to ask difficult questions. It is creating enough trust for someone to feel safe answering them honestly.

What the evidence says

Buyer-seller research has long treated trust as economically important, not decorative. Doney and Cannon's study of more than 200 purchasing managers showed that buyers form trust in both the supplier firm and the salesperson through identifiable processes, and that trust influences anticipated future interaction. More recent matched buyer-seller research shows that the content of mutual disclosure affects empathy, trust and sales performance, with relationship empathy especially important in newer relationships.

The listening literature strengthens the mechanism. Research combining roughly two decades of salesperson-listening studies found that listening contributes to both relational and quantitative sales outcomes and helps salespeople adapt to customers. Experimental psychology goes further: high-quality listening - attentive, empathic and non-judgmental - reduces speakers' social anxiety and encourages deeper examination of their own views. A recent review concludes that high-quality listening can increase psychological safety and open-minded self-reflection.

Psychological-safety research was developed primarily in teams, not sales conversations, so it should not be lazily transplanted. But its central idea is relevant: people reveal concerns, questions and mistakes when interpersonal risk feels safer. Combined with direct buyer-seller evidence on trust, disclosure and listening, it gives a credible basis for treating rapport as a condition for candour rather than a collection of social tricks.

EVIDENCE BASE

Strong adjacent evidence plus direct buyer-seller research. Psychological safety is an established construct, but applying the full team-level literature to a one-to-one sales conversation is an informed extension rather than a direct finding.

What this challenges

- Rapport theatre. Remembering hobbies or manufacturing superficial similarity is not the same as creating trust.
- Question-list discovery. The technical quality of a question matters less if the customer does not feel safe giving the real answer.
- Interrogation disguised as curiosity. A seller can ask excellent questions and still signal judgement, impatience or an agenda.
- Listening as politeness. The evidence suggests listening can affect adaptation, reflection and outcomes; it is part of the commercial work.

What early-stage companies should do

Create conditions in which honesty is low-risk. Listen without racing to the solution. Show that an inconvenient answer is genuinely acceptable. Respond to uncertainty with curiosity rather than correction.

Earn depth progressively. The objective is not permission to ask a difficult question; anyone can ask one. It is enough trust that the customer feels safe answering it honestly.

Pay attention to what becomes discussable: internal disagreement, uncertainty, failed attempts, personal stakes, competing priorities and assumptions the customer is not yet sure about. Those are often where the commercially important truth lives.

The Secret Sauce

SECRET SAUCE INGREDIENT

Rapport is not earning the right to ask difficult questions. It is creating enough trust for someone to feel safe answering them honestly.

The greater the trust, the more consequential the truth the conversation may be able to hold.

Academic sources

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