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### Abstract

Markets are becoming increasingly dynamic and technology is being continuously seen as the main driving force behind effectiveness of businesses. Technology is no more the key differentiating factor especially in sales or selling. As a result, the view on responsibility of a salesperson, is undergoing a paradigm shift. In this paper, we would discuss the relevance of mindfulness in sales and would try to answer the question as to "how mindfulness can enhance the performance of salespeople and may lead to better sales leadership and management". We intend to create a paradigm for developing better sales managers and more productive salespeople based on contemporary mindfulness based traits as well as practices. Salespeople possessing mindfulness as a trait would be termed as "Mindful salesperson" and the process of selling where mindfulness based practices are an integral part, would be broadly termed as "Mindful selling". Thus on the basis of the notions of the east and west we create attention, awareness openness and acceptance as the corner stones of the Mindfulness Based Sales Management framework.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Mindful Salesperson, Mindfulness Based Sales Management framework.

## Introduction

Selling is a crucial aspect of business which is mostly overlooked in current research on strategy and sustainability. The reasons could be that it seems to be the most naïve and obvious activity leading to the purpose of any business: "to earn profits". But to consider sales or selling as naïve is costing heavily on many businesses. Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman said once that "The only social responsibility of any business is to earn profits" (1970). There has been a huge outcry by the critics since then, but if we think deeply, what Friedman was probably concerned about was the amount of intellectual attention the non-profit

aspects of businesses are getting. Most of the time, when organizations talk of sustainability or relationship management in business, they are devoting more time on the aspects of business relationships than customer profitability. Sales or selling also suffers from a similar attention deficit in many organizations, even though it is an important function for achieving profitability.

Markets are becoming increasingly dynamic and hyper-competitive characterised by faster technology obsolescence, shorter product cycles, more complex buying cycles, ever-increasing role of stakeholders, more informed consumers, etc. Technology is being continuously seen as the main



driving force behind effectiveness of businesses. Of course, technology has eased and eliminated many redundant or tedious elements in the business process and enhanced the transparency between the business and stakeholders, but technology is no more the key differentiating factor especially in sales or selling. It has become more of a necessity than a sufficient condition for success of any business. The recent views of marketing experts on taking a holistic view of marketing has shifted the focus of business from "transactions" to "relationships" and from "individuals" to "teams". Selling and Marketing has been many times considered to be synonymous. Marketing is an entire gamut of work right from idea generation but selling is an art of making the marketer thought process reach its final destination, i.e. to be sold to the customers. So maintaining an exceptional sales force is a major challenge for the businesses in today's world. The challenges seem greater because demand for sales talent has been described as 'skyrocketing' (Galea, 2006). The sales role is becoming increasingly complex. Changes in the sales position have been described as an organizational "shift from selling products to selling solutions and as managing complex internal and external silo-spanning deals" (Nachnani and Ashok, 2007). Thus, the responsibility of the sales people is viewing a paradigm shift. It should not include just filling the sales funnel with leads so as to close at the end.

In recent years, many leading corporations such as Aetna, General Mills, Goldman Sachs, etc have created dedicated training programs for mindfulness. Mindfulness is moment-to-moment, non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). Mindfulness involves the ability to notice and observe one's own thoughts and so can be seen as a meta-cognitive skill involving cognition about cognition (Ruedy and Schweitzer, 2010). Mindfulness is not an easy concept to define but can be understood as the process of drawing

novel distinctions. It does not matter whether what is noticed is important or trivial, as long as it is new to the viewer (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Studies have been consistently establishing the effectiveness of such mindfulness based practices in not just managing stress and anxiety which is common in today's hyper-competitive marketplace and demanding workplaces; but also in improving resilience and leading to better decision-making. However, there are some differences in the way mindfulness is understood in the East and the way it is being interpreted in the West.

In this paper, we would discuss the relevance of mindfulness in sales and would try to answer the question as to "how mindfulness can enhance the performance of salespeople and may lead to better sales leadership and management". We would first revisit the concept of sales funnel and then would explain the relevance of mindfulness in each of the stages of the sales funnel. In other words, we will create a "Mindful based Sales Management" (MBSM) model which will depict the process to integrate mindfulness based practices into sales management processes. We intend to create a paradigm for developing better sales managers and more productive salespeople based on contemporary mindfulness based traits as well as practices. However, it should be noted, that in our pursuit of integrating the two concepts viz., mindfulness and sales, we will view mindfulness both as a desirable trait in sales people that needs to be nurtured, and as a process that needs to be promoted across the various stages of sales. Sales people possessing mindfulness as a trait would be termed as "Mindful salesperson" and the process of selling where mindfulness based practices are an integral part, would be broadly termed as "Mindful selling". We would also be sharing some cases and stories based on our experience in sales training and consulting that will nearly replicate the situation faced by salespeople on the field, and how through mindfulness they have depicted more



resilience and have been able to handle difficult situations and customers more effectively. However, utmost care has been taken to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects concerned in each of these stories and cases.

#### Sales Funnel Revisited

The concept of sales funnel was invented by E St Elmo Lewis in 1898 and was the first formal theory of marketing. It is the lifeline of any business that helps a business to grow and be profitable as it represents the future revenues of the company. The sales funnel represents the miles stones that a sales person has towards closing a sales deal. Having identified a target segment the funnel charts the various steps in the buying journey and then populates the step with the proportion of that segment at each stage in the process. Sales funnel helps a sales person to decide the locus of his efforts. It enables them to finalise the brand objectives. Through the funnel the sales person can also understand the tactical tools needed for investment and it helps them to estimate the returns.

The sales funnel is very important aspect of a sales person life as it defines the directives for a sales person. Though was regarded to be the lifeline of the business, in today's world we fail to understand the concept in a more rational way and just in the rat race of filling the funnel. This should not be the objective as a more comprehensive look into the funnel will help a sales person to filter down all the prospective hot leads into new customers. The zeal and attitude of the sales person decides the right sales behaviour. But setting a benchmark for the right sales behaviour is hard task to be accomplished. The question still lies unanswered that what is the main objective of the sales person convert more of the hot leads into prospective customers or is it that the sales people should be more mindful in taking the customer through the journey of the sales funnel. So rightly said that

sales funnel just sets the milestones for a company to help the sales person understand how to complete the journey. The journey can be smoother with the right attitude of the sales person in converting the hot leads into prospective customers. So every company should give a thorough look into their sales funnel and thus try to nurture the funnel in a more effective and efficient way.

The sales funnel differs with respect to the product and the target segment. A typical sales funnel can be represented as given in the Figure 1. This is also known as the top down view of the sales funnel. This view seems to be more applicable in most of the industries considering the current competition.

Opportunities

Proposal/Quotes

New Customers

Figure 1: A sales funnel

# Mindfulness based Sales Management (MBSM)

Mindfulness has over the years evolved as a worldwide movement of conscious development of the mind-body structure of any individual. The reason for the rapid spread of this movement has been due to the increased research of psychologists in the West on the practices that existed.



In the Eastern traditions of contemplative practices for nurturing the ability of mind to remain alert and attentive. The result is the emergence of a contemporary view of mindfulness based on certain common elements that exist in both the East and West traditions. However, it is important to understand the differences in the notion of mindfulness as it exists in the psychology in the West and as it actually exists in the Eastern traditions.

In the West, mindfulness is viewed more as a psychological state of awareness and attention. It normally means to pay more attention to external events and to the content of mind, these contents including things such as past associations, concepts, reifications, and semblances of sensed objects (De Charms, 1998). However, not much importance is given to internal processes and internal thoughts and emotions. In the East, mindfulness based practices have deeper spiritual significance and they are believed to play a significant role in an individuals' quest for selfrealization. The word mindfulness can be traced in Pali language from the word sati which translates as smrti in Sanskrit both of which translate to memory in English. In the Eastern perspective, mindfulness means having the ability to hang on to current objects; remember them; and not lose sight of them through distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away, or rejection (Weick & Putnam, 2006). The Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination or Pratityasamutpada is the basis of mindfulness (Singh, 2014). Most of the contemplative practices in East is for purging the mind of impure thoughts (chitta-shuddhi) and to overcome the five afflictions of the mind (panchaklesha) viz., Ignorance (Avidya), Asmita (Ego), Raga (Attachment), Dvesha (Aversion) and Abhinivesh (fear of death or clinging to life). In Buddhism, mindfulness is seen as both a desirable virtue that an individual must nurture through the practice of meditation so as to reach the state of

nirvana or the cessation of causes to his / her suffering (dukkha). In most of ancient Indian mystical tradition, mindfulness is equivalent to concentration attained through rigorous contemplative practices the most important being based on the treatise of Yoga Sutra given by the great sage Patanjali. It is not about any cessation of causes or overcoming dukkha but rather attaining a state of eternal consciousness bliss (sat-chitananda) amidst suffering and turbulence in the external environment. In other words, it is more about sustained attention and concentration (dhyan), remaining constantly aware to the everevolving reality by being a witness (pratyakshdarshi), and accepting any evolution of reality nonjudgmentally by being having openness to any new information or evolving trend that we witness.

On the basis of the East and West notions, we arrive at the following four cornerstones of mindfulness that will be the basis of our *Mindfulness Based Sales Management* framework that we propose in this paper:

1. Attention – In this current era of informational overload, to remain attentive to the various activities involved in the business processes including sales and to receive attention from the clients during the interaction phase of sales, is increasingly becoming difficult and more challenging. Being present at the moment with all your attention and being able to sustain that attention is not only a pre-requisite of mindfulness but also is a pre-requisite for mindful-based sales practices. It also involves the ability to self-regulate attention by not only sustained attention but also the ability to switch attention from one object to another (eg. Bishop et al, 2004). A mindful salesperson should have the ability to sustain attention to the relationship with key clients and also the ability to sustain the attention of the key-client to the existing relationship through appropriate



client relationship management strategies. Also, the sales managers should monitor the activities of the salespeople (working in their teams) with respect to developing and maintaining profitable relationship with the key clients and should mentor them from timeto-time about handling the difficult clients by remaining attentive about the subtle cues given by them during any sales interaction and switching the attention of the difficult client from the negative past experiences to a more positive current experience. This can happen through complete attention to the concerns raised by the customers and following up on those concerns from time-to-time which will create a context for development of trust of the client on the relationship.

- 2. Awareness By awareness we mean the ability to remain self-aware as a sales manager, and the ability to remain aware of the evolution of a client relationship by being completely non-judgmental amidst the emerging contexts. The ability to remain self-aware as a leader translates into authenticity and trustworthiness of the leader / manager in any relationship context (manager-subordinate; relationship with key clients; etc).
- 3. Openness Markets are dynamic and hyper-competitive these days and information is the key to competitive advantage. Sales persons should remain informed of all those latest developments in the market that will shape their competitive position in the market (on a macro level) and their current status of relationship with a client (on a micro-level). They should be alert of any new data received through the existing information or analytic systems about their clients (eg. recency, frequency or monetary value of the transactions) which will certainly help them manage the customer relationships better as

each of the stages in the sales funnel.

4. Acceptance – Acceptance is defined as being experientially open to the reality of the present moment (Roemer & Orsillo, 2002; Bishop et al., 2004). Sometimes customers move out of the sales funnel because the context of sales ceases to exist. Let us consider a case. Suppose a person is looking for a new rented apartment to live before his/her current rent agreement in the current residence expires and in the process, contacts a real estate broker, then, (s)he is a hot lead for the broker in his / her sales funnel. Now, let us assume that the broker shows a few houses to the client and is in the proposal stage. They are almost final about one alternative. The customer has shown keen interest in renting this alternative. The broker is almost sure now that the deal will be finalised. But after a few days, the broker follows up the client as to when (s)he wants him / her to make the agreement as the landlord has also agreed to rent it to this client. The client reveals that (s)he has agreed to renew the current rent agreement and continue in the existing apartment as he had been able to clinch a better deal with the existing landlord and also it saves him / her from the inconveniences in the process of shifting an apartment. Clearly, in this case, the client has decided to stop the search and so has moved out of the funnel. In such situations. the salesperson (in this case broker) should gracefully accept it and not grudge or grumble over the situation. Many a times, sales people try to push or persuade the client to much with the consequence the client may tend to ignore the future prospecting or follow-up attempts of the salesperson. Acceptance in such situations nonjudgmentally is the key to a lasting customer relationship. If the broker, in the above case doesn't over-persuade and rather offers to help in case of any future requirement of the client or client's references, he keeps the possibility for future prospecting alive.



## Why Mindfulness in Sales?

Achieving sales targets on a continuous basis and also living with the obsession of ever-increasing demands for sales performance in a dynamic, hyper-competitive market is a challenge faced by every sales person and sales manager. Most often this challenge leads to not only stress but also confusion, feelings of burn-out, lack of attention, etc. Many a times salespeople tend to procrastinate or adopt defence mechanisms strategies such as aggressiveness, rationalization, projecting the blame on others for the delay or failure in achieving targets. The employee turnover in sales based organizations remain high and making sales work on a continuous basis remains a challenge. Sales is a function which is relatively easier to organize or design but most difficult to implement. The difficulty in implementation, we argue is due to lack of mindfulness. If we look at any successful salesperson, they always achieve deadlines, are calm and poised in the face of adversity (and so are better able to close sales with even difficult customers), are more patient and have better ability to manage stress. They are also more focused and aware of the important aspects of the sales process and understand the "tricks of the trade". Moreover, they can achieve sales performance on a continuous basis. On the contrary, most salespeople show inconsistency in their sales performances being successful sometimes but most of the time struggling. They are mostly uncertain about their performance because they somehow struggle with implementing the process efficiently. Moreover, they also do not focus on the micro-elements in the sales process (like careful listening, showing empathy and patience to complex customer demands, being attentive to the subtle customer cues, etc.)

Psychological researches on subjects undergoing mindfulness based practices and exhibiting the trait of mindfulness have consistently shown that it leads to better decisions, more resilience in adverse situations, greater empathy, more openness to changing circumstances and better ability to cope with stress by stress reduction. These are essential qualities of any good sales manager or sales person facing a dynamic competitive marketplace or the challenges of efficiency and effectiveness in a matured industry. And so, we conclude mindfulness should be nurtured in the new-age sales managers as a necessity trait and not a sufficient trait.

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the possible implications of implementing mindfulness in any sales process.

## Developing better sales people

In a recent article of Harvard Business Review, Schootstra et al. (2017) argue that mindfulness meditation works to enhance better creativity and innovation as has been observed by executives in leading corporations like Google, Goldman Sachs and Medtronics, where they have dedicated mindfulness programs for their employees. Mindfulness may also offer an opportunity to express strengths and work with the contextual nuances that emerge as shown in the studies of Niemec et al. (2012). Every sales meeting forms a unique context for showcasing one's core strengths vis-à-vis the competitors. Exhibiting your core strengths and competencies in a creative and innovative way during any such sales meeting is the key to increasing the probability of converting sales (i.e. enhancing the sales conversion ratio). And so, we can say that mindfulness practices help in developing better sales people and we need more mindful salespeople.

## Better Funnel Management

A sales funnel is a way to depict the sales process flow stage by stage. The wide top of the funnel



ensure that a business owner starts by creating awareness of their company before anything else. The focus is to make customers aware or know that your business sells specific types of products and services. The way how this awareness is being created is changing nowadays.

Consumers are demanding authenticity at unprecedented levels. They demand it in the products they consume (Lewis and Bridger, 2011) and the marketing communications they receive (Dolliver, 2000). Raised in a sea of advertising hype and clutter, this marketing-saturated age group has skillfully learned to discern the real from the fake (Salzman et al., 2003). Thus, Sales people can simply not claim to be trustworthy. They need to prove the claim while making a sales deal. Thus, in understanding the entire sales process and the sales funnel we need to stress in creating a mindful situation for the sales person. It is the mindfulness of the sales person at every step of the sales process that will help the sales person to flow smoothly through the sales funnel.

As the leads are placed into the wider part on the top and percolates down through the various stages of a sales new customers and revenues are generated. The distance between the top and the bottom of the sales funnel is the length of time it takes to close a sale from beginning to end. The sales cycle time varies from three months to eighteen months depending upon the situation of the market. As the situation of the market directly affect the disposable incomes of the consumers, thereby making them more conscious for consumption the sales cycle time doubles or triples under such situations. But this cycle time can be efficiently handled by the sales people and can be reduced if they are mindful. The mindfulness of the sales person will help the company not to create too many leads but with fewer leads the company can attain better and profitable relationship. Thus, building profitable relationships with customers is a major concern for companies all around the world due to the intense competition.

Thus, it can be seen that the diameter of both the tops of the sales funnel will vary depending upon the situation of the market. Market fluctuations will greatly affect the hot leads of the Sales Person. Also turning these hot leads into new customers solely depends on the mindfulness of the sales person. It has been greatly seen that in the present competitive markets with so many market players facing cut throat competition the importance of the sales funnel is greatly rising. The sales person they are in the race to bring hot leads and convert them into sales but no one is paying attention to the fact that how can you make a sales person mindful in selecting the leads so that the funnel is able to maintain its sustainability. This is the main reason that the funnel narrows down from the top. As the world of sustainability also explains that too many customers is not what the objective of the companies is but few with good relationship is what the goal of every sales person. Thus after getting the hot leads if a sales person thinks mindfully then only that person will be able to culminate the various opportunities that should be considered for every customer. These opportunities may vary with respect to the product and also with respect to the customer in concern. In this journey every sales person should be thoughtful enough to convert the leads into opportunities as then only the right proposal can be made for the respective consumer. But generally in the race of closing the leads the sales people miss to tap the right opportunity and thus the proposal drafted does not attract the customer to close the deal

## Better Conflict Management

As the nature of buyer seller relationship is changing away from single transaction to a long term relationship. Such long-term relationships



develop mutually beneficial outcomes and are characterized by mutual trust, open communication, common goals, commitment to mutual gain, and organizational support (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994). Salespeople, acting as relationship managers, play a key role in the development and management of these partnering relationships (Beverland, 2001). Thus conflict management is an important skill to be developed by salesperson (Biong and Selnes, 1996). Though development of relationships between the buyers and sellers is a mutually beneficial situation, but interactions can also lead to conflict. This conflict should be carefully handled by the seller. Customers who deal with a particular sales person becomes very sensitive to the sales person and if not handled well by the sales person can be fatal in terms of the relationship developed. Numerous typologies of conflict management have been developed (Rahim and Bonoma 1979). But in the present scenario of stressful marketing, mindfulness of a sales person can be the best way to tackle such conflict situations. So while placing leads on the top of the sales funnel in order for it to sweep down smoothly and reach the bottom, the relationship building between the sales person and the customer is a very important criterion.

## Better Resilience and Stress Management

An edtech startup from India that develops and sells affordable educational products to primary and secondary schools was in the process of converting one of its major lead into a customer. The prospective customer wanted to run a pilot in two schools in the state of Gujarat. The timeline for the delivery of the pilot solution was an extremely difficult task to achieve. The organization being a start-up was still evolving its sales management process and the struggle to meet the timeline was evident. However, the top management of the company had promised to meet the timeline for the pilot delivery. The success of

this pilot was expected to generate lot of referral sales for the start-up. The referral sales are one of the most profitable way for a start-up to sell its products. The sales manager was under a lot of situational stress as he was cognizant of the existing capabilities and the operational challenges in delivering the pilot. The sales manager chose to engage the top management and the prospective customer on how they can deliver quality pilots if they agree to increase the timeline by another two weeks rather than stitching out a pilot which might have failed. The new timeline was aspirational but achievable, and was finally agreed by the customer. The pilot was successfully delivered and the prospective customer got converted into a satisfied customer. The sales person in this case was mindful of the decisions he was making and the consequences of his actions. The role of trust and commitment to deliver a solution is extremely important during the sales funnel. The customers are evaluating the sales organization in every interaction with the sales personnel. However, it is easier to observe few instances of taking decisions and acting mindfully than on a consistent basis. The advocates of sales processes and guidelines would argue that processes and guidelines makes the behaviour repeatable, consistent, and predictable. The authors don't undermine this argument but at the same time they don't think the sales processes as the ultimate panacea to the mindful decisions and actions on a consistent basis. There are a huge set of physical and behavioural challenges among the sales persons. A sales person role is both physically and psychologically demanding than the other roles in an organization. As per Singh (1998), the sales job stress factors like role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload has a reducing effect on the job performance and satisfaction of sales employee. An empirical research on psychological and behavioural outcome of the industrial salespeople also establishes the influence of role ambiguity on salesperson psychological (job satisfaction,



tension, and commitment) and performance and turnover (Rhoads et al., 1994). The salesperson play the role of boundary spanners and their job is plagued by both internal and external conflicts thus making their job highly stressful (Stamper & Johlke, 2003; Lysonski & Johnson,1983; Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The organizations need to look at improving the physical and mental health of the sales employees for better stress management, decision making and effectiveness of the sales processes.

The Organizations should aim at including mindfulness as part of the sales process and guidelines to improve the decision-making ability and behaviour of sales persons. The company needs to think of ways to integrate mindfulness component with existing sales systems and processes. As per the authors knowledge, no research on the integration of mindfulness into the sales process has been published yet. The authors look at exploring the integration of mindfulness into the sales funnel.

#### Better Decisions

Sales management is all about making better decisions whether at a corporate level, business level or at an operational level. Studies have shown that mindfulness broadens a person's capability for environment scanning through attention, perception and cognition; generates interpretations that are more context relevant and produces decisions that are more discriminating (eg. Langer, 1989; Weick & Sutcliff, 2006). Earlier studies by Eisenhardt (1989) also suggest that executive teams that make faster decisions in high velocity environment should have the ability to use extensive real-time information. Clearly, mindfulness leads to better and faster decisions in highly dynamic environmental contexts. However, one of the challenges of making effective faster decisions is the possibility of bias especially cognitive and emotional bias. Studies have shown that mindfulness reduces negative cognitive bias (Kiken and Schook 2011) and also, reduces emotional bias through greater emotional regulation (Brown et al. 2007).

#### Conclusion

Mindfulness in organizations is a growing area of interest to drive sustainability, organizational growth and wellbeing of the employees and partners. There is proven research on the positive impact of mindfulness on managers in improving their performances. However, mindfulness into sales process is still in a nascent stage. The sales employees have a direct interaction with the customers. The customer also looks at salespeople from the service provider perspective and not merely from sales transaction view. Hence, the customers during their interaction with the sales people also evaluate the brand or the organization which is called as the decisive moment or the moments of truth (Bitran & Hoech, 1990). The sales employee is an important driver for influencing consumer decision making and building profitable customer relationships. The customers in sales based organization interacts with the sales personnel from the top to the bottom end of the sales funnel. The sales person is required to be adept in listening to the customer requirements at every stage of the sales funnel. The time during the conversion of the customers from the stage of being a lead to a hot or warm lead is critical. The customer is most likely evaluating multiple alternatives which can meet their requirement at the initial stage. While the use of a structured sales guideline helps the sales person to understand the customer requirement but this does not necessarily lead to the creation of empathy towards the customer. This lack of empathy could lead to product or service solutions that may not the right solutions for the customers. Being Mindful brings compassion and wisdom and the sales



employees will be more empathetic towards understanding the customers. A sales person with right wisdom and compassion for the customers will be able to think best for both the customer and the organization. As the customer is converted from the stage of a lead to an opportunity, the expectation of the customer increases. The customer at this stage narrows down their search and look for the best solution to their problems. Mindfulness is proved to improve the cognitive skills of a person (Chiesa et al, 2011; Zeidan et al, 2010).

A mindful sales employee will be more aware and knowledgeable about the customer problems and the solutions that could be promised to the customer. The stage of conversion from an opportunity to a successful sale requires a lot of coordinated effort by the sales employee with the organization resources and the stakeholders from the customer. The sales employee acts as the bridge between the different departments in an organization with the customer. The sales personnel are required to be mindful about the communication with the customer and his organization departments. The lack of clarity or gaps between the promises made and promises delivered will lead to the risk of dissatisfaction and in extreme cases losing of the customer. Even though the sales team is not directly involved in delivery of product or the solutions to the customer, but the customers perceive the sales team in an organization as the first and an important touchpoint. Hence, the sales department should be mindful during the delivery of the products or solutions to the customers. The tools in customer relationship management have made it possible for multiple stakeholders in an organization to track the sales funnel from the stage of lead generation to the final sales delivery. However, the regular tracking and monitoring of the delivery is often a practical behavioural challenge for the sales department. The mindfulness aims to resolve many

such psychological and behavioural challenges for the sales personnel which will improve the efficacy of the sales funnel in an organization.

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