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Call Reluctance: The Dark Side of Professional Selling?

Stephen M. Walsh

Rookies have it. Pros have it. Sales managers often pass it along. If you have call reluctance, you're not just wasting time, you're losing money. And you could be killing your sales career.

. . . Call reluctance strikes . . . people in every selling field. It's as common as the common cold but a lot more deadly. It can kill a sales career (Blackwood, 1994, p. 51).

In the day-to-day lives of most salespeople a certain consistent sales volume is necessary. These sales should be the result of a continuous sequence of reasonably successful sales calls. The

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underlying pattern may vary depending upon the kinds of products that are being sold and the industry in which one operates but the long-standing consensus is that a relationship exists between the number of new contacts a salesperson actually makes and that individual's level of long term success (DuBois, 1976; Weitz, Castleberry, & Tanner, 2001). Once contacts are made, the subsequent conversion ratio may require sales almost every time for convenience-type products that consumers should be willing to accept easily or involve frequent rejection of products with negative connotations that consumers may be more reluctant to purchase, such as life insurance or burial plots; however, the importance of determinedly working at making one call after another regardless of one's personal or idiosyncratic experiences is beyond dispute. The only way that salespeople can be successful in the long run is by continuing to open doors to fresh sales opportunities in the short run.

Those whose careers involve sales training and sales management attest to the fact that many apparently qualified

and capable salespeople continue to fail because they are incapable of consistently engaging in the level of prospecting and follow-up calling necessary to be successful (Fox, 1992). From time to time roughly 40 percent of all career salespeople experience episodes of call reluctance that are serious enough to threaten their careers (Grimes, 1991; Dudley & Goodson, 1999).

Definition of Call Reluctance

The phenomenon of call reluctance, for the purpose of this article, is the experience of an elevated level of apprehension sometimes seemingly overwhelming, that may inhibit the number of calls a person will make, and perhaps, rendering the individual incapable of working at all. As Kadansky (2001) points out, call reluctance can reduce a salesperson's knowledge, skills, abilities, and talents to a level at which he or she is almost useless. The job of a salesperson is to always be an effective and persuasive conduit of information about the products and services that his or her firm has to offer.

Obviously, these products should have the means of creating favorable outcomes of one sort or another for prospective customers. If the salesperson's efforts break down due to call reluctance, then the opportunity to satisfy the customer and develop the hoped-for long-term relationship will be lost.

Salespeople face the same day-in, day-out problems that everyone else does: lack of time, too much work, family problems, financial worries, etc. The list goes on for everyone. In addition, salespeople deal with stresses that are unique to their jobs: quotas, unpredictable income, difficult clients, rejection, working out of the house, and working on the road. Compounding these is the underlying, uniquely solitary nature of many salespeople's working lives. This context can be complicated by worries about job security or possible downsizing or by a sometimes bewildering barrage of new technology and communications expectations (Fisher, 1996).

Clearly, being a salesperson can be a difficult job. It is practically a cliché that salespeople have to be self-starters. Marketers recognize the primacy of emotions in terms of consumer behavior. Yet salespeople's emotions are also critically important. Learning to deal with the issue of call reluctance can mean that a salesperson will be successful in getting out of the starting box and making a good beginning with a sales career and that he or she will be able

to weather the storms of doubt that arise at some point in every person's professional career. Developing such skills can prevent him or her from bogging down or failing outright during some precipitous life's passages.

Purpose of the Article

This article provides insights for those who dealing with sales professionals. Professors of courses such as sales and sales management need to be aware of the importance of call reluctance so that they devote appropriate attention to the subject in their classes to prevent students' being caught unaware and perhaps being blind-sided by their own experiences of this phenomenon should they become sales professionals. Sales trainers need to be similarly aware of this problem so that they, too, can deal with it appropriately and lay the proper groundwork for both short- and long-term success of those whom they initiate into the selling ranks of their own firms. Sales managers need to be tuned in to symptoms of call reluctance so that they recognize and head off its early signs and learn to deal with it in their subordinates as constructively as possible while encouraging and facilitating the subordinates' successes at every level in the short-, intermediate-, and long-term. Most importantly, salespeople, themselves, need to learn to recognize their own call reluctance vulnerabilities. They should develop means of anticipating and dealing with it

as effectively as possible, for in the end the salesperson's success or failure will be his or her own. If no one else in the education, training, or management process helps a salesperson in dealing with and resolving the problem of call reluctance, then that salesperson must be willing and able to deal with his or her problem personally. A number of insights are available for individuals to use at all levels to optimize the likelihood of success.

The Subtly Ubiquitous Nature of Call Reluctance

Both the professional sales and academic literature indicate that call reluctance is an extraordinarily common experience; one that extremely productive and highly successful people have had and that successful people of the future will undoubtedly have as well (Ziglar, 1982; Dudley & Goodson, 1999). This is an important point to remember because an individual who is experiencing such a problem will not naturally perceive that he or she is going through something that others have previously experienced. Instead, the sense of solitude can be extreme, and the intense level of apprehension can be such that an individual can easily believe that no one else suffers from it. This is much like a slump that an athlete goes through. Reassuring voices that surround such an individual assuring him or her that the process that he or she is having is natural do not change the fact that, for that

individual, the experience is unique. To others it may appear to be a slump, but for the individual who is going through it, second guessing oneself is normal. "Will I ever get beyond this?" "Is this really a slump?" "Could it be that my career is over?" are questions that the athlete, as will the sales professional, will inevitably ask. To be in the presence of those who will say, "This is just something that people go through in our career field and there are things you can do to work through this," can be invaluable.

An abundant number of books provide insights into how to make contact with and interact successfully with large numbers of prospective buyers. One of the best such publications is *How to Make a Whole Lot More Than \$1,000,000* (Lant, 1990); however, when it comes to call reluctance, the need to know how to prospect and interact is usually not the problem for most salespeople. The problem is clearing the emotional hurdles to enable salespeople to actually make contact with potential buyers so that they can put into practice what they already know and do what they are capable of doing (Freeman, 1991).

The Need to Sell Oneself

The critical aspect of what is involved here is the need for salespeople to sell themselves as well as their products or services. Salespeople must be willing to let others know what they do and to solicit acceptance of the products or

services that they represent. In American culture, excessive self-promotion can easily seem inappropriate. Furthermore, the stereotypical image of salespeople as over-socialized, fearless mercenaries, is an image that no one wants to personify. Salespeople are asked to walk a fine line. They must engage in self-promotion within appropriate limits, and they must do so within a culture that is all too ready to conclude that excessive self-promotion is both unseemly and "uncool." Successful salespeople have to learn to deal with this contradiction (Dudley, Goodson, & Weissenburger, 1993).

Call reluctance arises from a basic fear of over engaging in self-promotion, depending upon what the represented products or services may involve. Furthermore, potential rejection or perhaps even alienation is a genuine possibility. Call reluctance can arise from a number of conditioned fears (Danskin & Crow, 1981). These factors may manifest themselves in the expression of any number of beliefs, diverse attitudes, or an array of behaviors (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1978). Some of these attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors may be more significant to the selling process than others, depending upon the nature of all the various dynamics that can impact the selling situation (Mann, 1987). These subjective components are not always logical or consistent, but they can become important in dealing with certain kinds of materials, discussing certain

concepts, or operating within certain strictures (Miller, 1985).

Recognition and Remediation

Dudley and Goodson (1999) have developed both a "selling styles profile analysis" and a "call reluctance scale," which, since 1982, they have applied repeatedly to thousands of salespeople, most notably in the fields of insurance and real estate sales (MacKenzie, 1982; Dudley & Goodson, 1988; Dudley, Goodson, & Weissenburger, 1993; Dudley & Goodson, 1999). Their research indicates that call reluctance manifests itself in 12 different ways, as is depicted in Table 1.

It is important to be aware that while an overlap between some of the ways call reluctance is manifested may exist, each of these sources of distress varies slightly (e.g., a struggling salesperson may see a little of himself or herself in a few of these descriptors, yet that same honest salesperson will finally acknowledge that one type is the best descriptor of all). Ultimately, however, each of these modes of behavior restricts the number and types of sales contacts that certain salespeople are willing or able to make. Regardless of whether salespeople are new or experienced, call reluctance can adversely impact solicitation efforts no matter how well the salespeople have been trained, how capable, knowledgeable about their products, how

Table 1
Ways Call Reluctance Manifests Itself

Type	Behavioral Characteristics
Doomsayer	Worries. Will not take risks. Continuously fears the worst.
Over Preparer	Overanalyzes. Under acts. Becomes an encyclopedia of technical information, but just cannot find the time to prospect.
Hyper-Pro	Obsesses about image, especially with sounding and appearing sophisticated. Fears being unjustly humiliated. Sees prospecting as demeaning and unprofessional.
Stage Fright	Fears group presentations to the point of avoiding or bypassing opportunities. Otherwise, may be completely comfortable and willing to engage in various kinds of prospecting.
Role Rejecter	Ashamed to be in sales. Must appear to be positive at all times, even at moments when it is completely unrealistic. Lacks objectivity.
Yielder	Fears intruding on others or being pushy. Likes consultative selling more than new client development.
Socially Self Conscious	Intimidated by wealth, prestige, or power; yet, may be overly dismissive of their importance in his or her comments. Hesitates to pursue upscale prospects.
Separationist	Fears loss of friends. Resists prospecting or even casually alluding to selling around friends.
Emotionally Unemancipated	Fears loss of family approval. Resists mixing business and family. This trait can impact negatively even if family members are dead or at a great geographic distance.
Referral Aversion	Fears disturbing existing business or client relationships by asking for referrals. May be comfortable with prospecting in other contexts.
Telephobic	Fears using the telephone for prospecting or selling. May not have problems with other forms of prospecting.
Oppositional Reflex	Rebuffs attempts to be coached, advised, managed, or trained. Needs to be right all the time.

much they believe in those products, or how loyal they are to their companies.

Dudley and Goodson (1999) recommend a number of measures that may be helpful in dealing with the 12 faces of call reluctance. Among these are the following. Please note that while the concepts come from Dudley and Goodson, the explanatory amplification is provided by the author.

1. **Thought realignment** urges positive conceptualization and articulation of what is going on whenever that is

realistic. Many, if not most, things in life can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. Those who are inclined to see things negatively need to make conscientious and continuous efforts to turn that process around. This is never easy since changing bad habits never is. Learning to see obstacles as opportunities, however, can be enormously beneficial. A salesperson needs to be able to say silently and reflectively, "Some salespeople turn these

situations into successes. If they can do it, I can do it. Now, I wonder how they do it."

2. **Fear inversion** urges salespeople to redirect energies more efficiently rather than in internalized angst. Any emotion can be directed either productively or nonproductively. In the end, the individual chooses either the constructive or its destructive alternative. Fear can paralyze or express itself in misdirected anger, which is

almost always ineffective. If fear is directed constructively, however, the salesperson ends up saying something like "I'm feeling apprehensive and somebody's going to have to pay for it—and it isn't going to be me. Somebody's going to end up buying something." In other words, the salesperson can become empowered if the emotion is directed appropriately.

3. **Threat desensitization** urges keeping things in perspective in terms of the totality of a person's entire life. The world has many who, after the initial shock, will react quite nobly if a doctor tells them that they have cancer. Many of the same people come almost unglued if they cannot find their car keys. Salespeople are much the same way. The pressures of selling can seem almost unbearable in some difficult moments not unlike the franticness that so many experience in losing their car keys, but, if salespeople can stand back mentally and emotionally and consider the many positive aspects of their lives that will go on regardless of what may happen with the immediate threat, that threat can become easier to deal with even if it is not as dramatic as confronting the prospect of cancer.
4. **Negative image projection** urges a conceptualization

of adversaries, such as competitors or even customers, as enemies who must be defeated. If a salesperson wants to be liked too much, a certain amount of this kind of reconceptualizing can be quite helpful as long as it is not carried too far. Few customers will respond favorably if they come to believe that a salesperson is seeing them in an adversarial manner, but, if a salesperson can reconceptualize such customers in constructive ways, perhaps as a potential long-term friend who has to be won over by being "defeated" in the short-term, this technique can be highly effective.

5. **Negative thought zapping** urges a salesperson to snap a rubber band on the top of the wrist whenever he or she is fearful or has a negative thought. Sometimes it is not enough to tell oneself to "snap out of it." This technique employs some alternative device such as a rubber band, which is to be used gently and not in a potentially harmful way, to say to oneself, "Hey, I really mean it. I must snap out of this." If used correctly, this technique can bring a dimension of humor to the remedial process, but the use of the rubber band or other device is not the purpose here. The purpose is to train oneself to think more positively by somehow

physically punctuating the fact that the salesperson has been caught thinking negatively. The goal is to redirect the thinking process more positively by whatever means may be helpful.

6. **Assertion training** is learning to channel aggressive feelings in healthy ways. Assertive salespeople are neither submissive nor overly aggressive. They try to find potential customers who genuinely need their products and, then, use questions constructively to acquire information that can be even more helpful. They try to maximize the satisfaction of the customer, themselves, and their firms by recommending win-win solutions.
7. **Biofeedback** involves a conscientious awareness of one's own body messages, and dialoging with oneself, accordingly, in healthy ways. Defined literally, biofeedback is a technique by which one can regulate a bodily function thought to be involuntary, such as heartbeat, breathing, or blood pressure, by using an instrument to monitor the function and signal changes in it. Most salespeople will not be carrying such an instrument with them, but techniques such as clenching and unclenching one's fists or consciously slowing one's breathing rate can be used

to put the salesperson in touch with what is going on inside in a manner that can be initially calming and then gently empowering.

8. **Neuro-linguistic programming** involves a heightened awareness of one's own physiological responses to certain situations and articulation of constructive responses. Learning to hear one's own voice in certain situations can be extremely revealing. When negative or counter-productive expressions arise, they need to be recognized and accepted for the value of the insights they provide and, then, articulated anew in more positive and opportunistic ways. Like so much of what has been discussed previously, this process turns negative thoughts and expressions into constructive programming and redirected actions.
- 9- **Physician-prescribed medication**, if necessary; **Fragrance and/or massage therapy**; **Target reversal**; **Nutritional supplements**; **Hypnosis**; **Subliminal messages**; **Positive mental images**; and **Positive attitudes**.

Call Reluctance Model

An overview call reluctance prescription model emerges in Figure 1. Broken lines are used to clearly separate those call reluctance

manifestations that should be dealt with by using one prescriptive method from those that should be dealt with using one of the others— which happens to be located next to it in the model. Thus, thought realignment is an appropriate prescriptive method for dealing with all the call reluctance manifestations, whereas fear inversion is only advisable for overcoming oppositional reflex. Threat desensitization, as a third possibility, is useful in dealing with doomsayers, hyper-pros, stage-fright, yielders, the emotionally unemancipated, the telephobic, and those with the oppositional reflex. This call reluctance prescription model has been developed for the reader's ease of reference in determining which prescriptive methods fit which reluctance types. This model is entirely consistent with the work of Dudley and Goodson (1999), which provides an exceptionally in-depth discussion of the subject of call reluctance.

Other extremely helpful books for dealing with call reluctance include *Time Tactics of Very Successful People* (Griessman, 1994) and *The Greatest Salesman in the World* (Mandino, 1974). Among journal articles, "The Fear Factor: Why Traditional Sales Training Doesn't Always Work" (Fox, 1992) is excellent; "Overcoming Sales-Call Reluctance Must Be Done to Build Up Business" (Kadansky, 2001) is extremely helpful; and "The Dirty Little Secret" (Blackwood, 1994) is quite insightful.

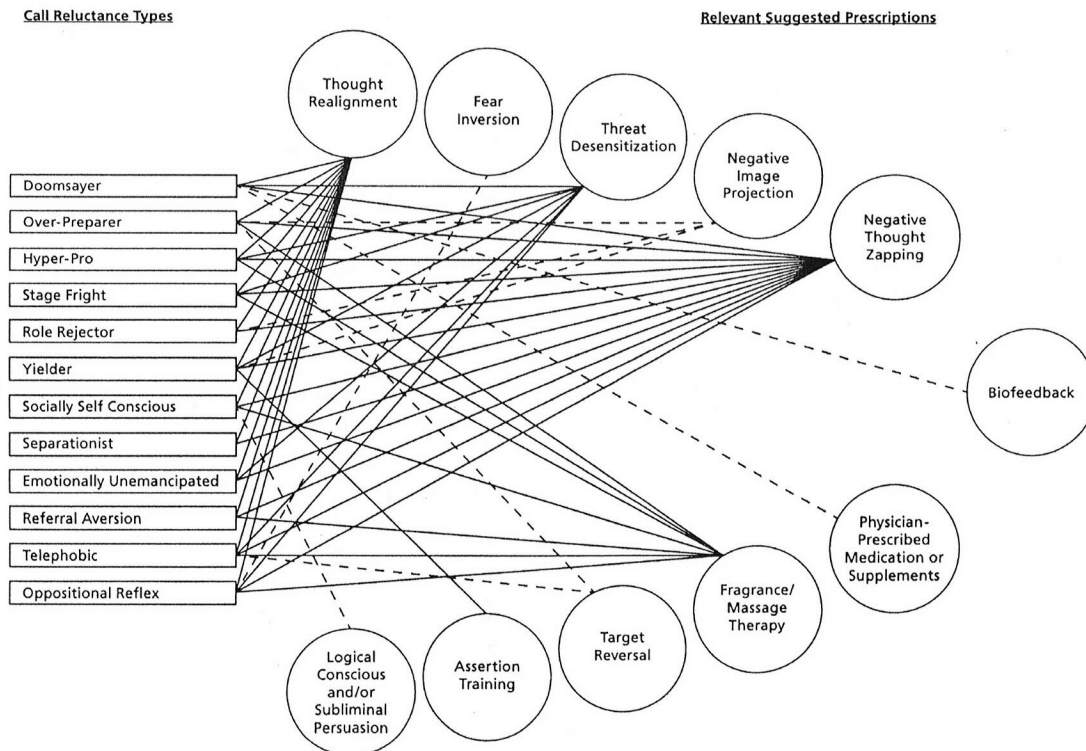
Applying Corrective Measures

Effectively managing the problem of call reluctance should undoubtedly begin with a process of acknowledging its existence and its potential importance as already discussed. It should be recognized this acknowledgment will be extremely difficult for certain call reluctant sales-people, such as the oppositional reflex type, but this acknowledgement is essential if corrective measures are to be effective and enduring.

It should also be noted, however, that not all apprehension is adverse or undesirable. Some level of nervousness, like stage fright, can have a positive effect once one actually begins to function (Rega, 2000). So, beyond the process of acknowledging its existence in the various forms it may take, some determination as to whether actual performance problems exist needs to be made. Usually, organizations fastidiously monitor and measure the activities and productivity of their salespeople. Those who have call reluctance in dimensions that are problematic will probably find those difficulties reflected in their sales activities and in their productivity.

If performance problems exist, or if successful salespeople are interested in developing better coping skills in terms of dealing with their own call reluctance, some form of intervention or interaction

Figure 1
Call Reluctance Prescription Model



may be desirable. It may very well be that those who need to fine tune their instincts the least will be those who will be most accepting of programs that are clearly intended to help them improve themselves in dealing with matters such as call reluctance. Almost certainly, some of those who need to deal with call reluctance most will find remediation and retraining difficult to accept.

It will undoubtedly be easier to motivate some salespeople to take the necessary action. If some of the organization's better salespeople are willing and, perhaps, even enthusiastic, about developing insights and

practicing and implementing improved ways of doing things, that willingness can have a wonderfully positive effect on those other individuals who really need to transform their attitudes. Teachers, trainers, or managers may find themselves needing to impel or compel some students or sales staff members by confronting them with evidence of their sales call reluctance. Discussions of the possible causes should, obviously, be as constructive as possible; however, signs of call reluctant attitudes consistent with the typography that was previously provided will be likely to emerge during such discussions. The thumbnail descriptions of the 12 types

outlined earlier should be helpful in determining the kinds of call reluctance problems that exist. The revelations that emerge can be extremely helpful in determining what needs to be done to help one individual as opposed to another.

The more successful the teacher, trainer, or manager is in getting students or salespeople to "open up" and share any unpleasant feelings they have about tasks, people, and situations associated with their jobs the more helpful it will be. This may actually be easier than it sounds. Many salespeople dislike paperwork. Getting them to talk about that should not be hard. In every

line of work, dealing with some people is difficult. For salespeople, these are likely to include certain kinds of difficult prospects. Getting salespeople to talk about such individuals should not be hard either. Once such a dialogue has begun, a sensitive and skilled person in an appropriate position, such as a teacher, trainer, or sales manager, should be able to direct the dialogue in meaningful ways. Part of what such a supervisor should wish to determine is whether salespeople's emergent feelings cause them to engage in inappropriate or unproductive behavior. In order to obtain objective data, teachers, trainers, or sales managers might want to use a standardized test specifically designed to identify call reluctance in its various forms similar to those developed by Dudley and Goodson (1999).

Some sales personnel will not only need to implement techniques of one sort or another that will be helpful in overcoming call reluctance but they will also need to learn positive reinforcement techniques as well. It is extremely important to realize that attitudes and habits developed over a long period of time are very deeply rooted, and, even when remedial steps are learned, the overwhelming inclination will be to slip back into those old habits.

Beyond the steps of acknowledgement of the problem, recognition of the call reluctance type, and assessment of performance that have already been mentioned,

concrete and constructive behaviors will also be necessary (Mandino, 1974; Mahoney, 1994; Hughes, McKee, & Singler, 1999). Techniques that have previously been mentioned (e.g., thought realignment, threat desensitization, and biofeedback) can be extremely helpful (Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1979; Bagozzi, 1980; and Badovick, 1990).

One contribution a teacher, trainer, or manager can make is in providing insights into cues or triggers that may result in call reluctance within a particular salesperson. Recognizing the factors that can create such emotional havoc can be invaluable. Making the salesperson consciously aware of these cues or triggers so that counterpoints can be brought to mind when they arise in the future can have a transforming effect (Dudley, Goodson, & Weissenburger, 1993; Plotkin, 1994).

Positive thoughts and reinforcing behavior can be extremely beneficial. Salespeople who wish to be successful need to develop ways of giving themselves positive messages, and they need to do so even if they do not always believe that those messages are completely true. It may be necessary for some skeptical salespeople to continuously tell themselves, "I can do this" or "This is going to be a great call" (Dudley, Goodson, & Weissenburger, 1993; Plotkin, 1994). In another arena that can provide a parallel insight, those who are struggling with matters of religious faith may be told,

"Behave as if you have faith, and faith will be given to you." So too, salespeople who wish to save themselves and who want to have long and successful careers will have to find ways to give themselves positive messages about continuous sales calls, which will sometimes involve difficult individuals. This combination of positive thoughts and accompanying action will go far in reducing call reluctance.

Behave as if you do not have call reluctance and success will be given to you.

Conclusion

Those who need to remedy their behaviors must be motivated to do so, and they will also need to be motivated to engage in enough repetition and reinforcement of the right kinds of behaviors to make those improved behaviors become as second nature as their counter-productive behaviors were previously. Strategies for dealing with call reluctance should focus on positive behavior and positive messages about sales calls (McCarthy, 2001). A number of suggestions can be found in the professional literature such as

- sending out cards or notes ahead of time to advise a prospect that the salesperson is coming (Noon, 2000);
- memorizing a few easy lines of conversation that can be used with anyone (Slaunwhite, 1999);

- consciously endeavoring to be patient while focusing on the prospect's needs (Chase, 1998); and
- laying future groundwork by sending thank you notes on a follow-up basis whenever appropriate (Dobkin, 1999).

It should be noted that call reluctance is not a character flaw. It is a set of potentially detrimental counterproductive behaviors. Salespeople who have call reluctance are not bad people although they may have a bad problem. It will be important to communicate this from time to time. Beyond acknowledgment and recognition of the problem, however, important steps such as those stated earlier involve what is to be done about it. The positive steps are what is important, not the negative condition (Dudley, Goodson, & Weissenburger, 1993).

The salespeople, themselves, should be provided with techniques for neutralizing their fearful reactions; for example, with ways of conceptualizing matters more positively (Kadansky, 2001; Brooks, 2003, 2004). It is important that salespeople be empowered to react productively. Putting these steps into action should involve a monitoring process of some sort (MacIntosh & Gentry, 1999).

Sales activities should be observed carefully but from a distance. The number of calls an outside salesperson makes should begin to manifest more sales activity as such a problem is being resolved. If telephone prospecting is a part of the

normal course of transactions, a low number of phone contacts can be a danger sign. Positive or negative body language can be observed. Greater levels of enthusiasm may manifest, or more continued activities of avoidance, such as performance of other tasks, the taking of breaks, or extended conversations with coworkers may arise (Griessman, 1994; McCann, 1996).

It is important to realize the dual aspect of resolution of the problem of call reluctance. One ingredient is an effective process for dealing with call reluctance, which provides as many means as possible for people to improve themselves in dealing with the problem; however, another aspect of equivalent importance has not been explored in this article. It is the determination of salespeople to deal with their own call reluctance effectively and to be better in the long run. Attitude alone is not enough in dealing with such a problem. Tools and techniques must be provided, but tools and techniques in the absence of a great attitude are useless.

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