

Rejection... A Debilitating Scenario That Impacts Your Performance or a Motivator to Take You to the Next Level?

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How well do you handle rejection? Do you simply brush rejection aside? Or does the failure to connect deflate your self-image and/or confidence? You are usually able to spot someone who is a successful producer or account manager by the way he or she handles rejection. Research suggests that the vast majority of people struggle with rejection. Learning how to overcome the ill effects of rejection is an essential survival skill in the business of insurance and risk management.

If you were able to go back in time and identify negative scenarios that impacted your moods, I bet that rejection is at the top of the list. A significant percentage of events that impact self-esteem and confidence are related to the feeling that the other person does not value the relationship as much as you do. There is disappointment when one fails to connect as the “drive to bond” lies deep in a person’s DNA. It is often rejection that triggers emotions and sends self-esteem into a tail spin – especially if there is emotional investment. Self-esteem reflects an overall evaluation or appraisal of your own worth...a barometer of your standing with others. It represents the sum of attitudes which depend upon perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, feelings and behavioral tendencies aimed toward yourself. Self-esteem rises with acceptance (“Congratulations, you earned my account”) and plummets with a put-down (“We are moving our relationship to someone else”).

Social Self-esteem

Social self-esteem acts like a radar, scanning the environment for signs of approval or disapproval. Most people fall into one of two camps – they assume that they are doing everything right, and it is the rest of the world that has a problem. Or they internalize rejection as a function of their personal shortcomings. For those who focus on their inadequacies, a blip on the meter often causes a drop in perceived self-worth. Duke University psychologist Mark Leary comments that “nature designed people to be vigilant about rejection because for most of history we depended upon small groups of people. Getting shut out compromised survival.” The need for love and belongingness is a fundamental motivation.

Numerous psychologists agree with Leary and theorize that the pain of being rejected has evolved because of the importance of social bonds for survival. Mathew Lieberman, a UCLA professor, suggests that “going back 50,000 years, social distance from a group could lead to death, and it still does for most mammals.” As the need for social connection is deeply rooted, exclusion from others often has an immediate and long-lasting impact.

Our fragmented, mobile society has weakened the strength of our social bonds. “Today, we are less secure,” states Leary. Even 200 years ago, people were part of a small clan. They lived their entire lives in the same town. Each and every day, they interacted with a tight group of people. Today, we often have to reintegrate ourselves into new social networks. The sheer number of strangers with whom we interact on a daily basis creates more opportunities for rejection. It is this increased general sense of uncertainty that makes us more vulnerable to rejection, leading to lower self-esteem and confidence.

Rejection Sensitivity

Research indicates that “rejection sensitivity” – a condition linked to depression – is on the rise. It is rejection sensitivity that makes many people cautious, and in some cases unwilling, to take social risks. Those who are on the high end of the rejection sensitivity scale pay a steep price as they rarely venture beyond their immediate social network. When they do, they suffer anxiety and fear. Although their pain is borne privately, it has repercussions in the manner in which they move about life. In the business of insurance, tell-tale signs include ineffective referral networks, call reluctance, and a random prospect research and qualification strategy.

While physical pain is understood, most people believe that social pain is in one’s head. Rationally, shouldn’t we be able to convince ourselves that rejection doesn’t matter? Professor Lieberman’s research indicates that physical and social pain may be more similar than we realize as rejection in our brain is much like a physical ailment.

As a psychology major at Princeton University, I studied rejection as part of the theory of Learned Helplessness – the perceived absence of control of the outcome of situations. When one feels helpless, he or she becomes anxious, loses confidence and motivation. When a person fails to

respond, even if there are opportunities to gain positive rewards, they are seen as being “helpless.”

Typically, people who suffer from Learned Helplessness fear rejection. They have encountered the pain of failing to connect and now believe they are incapable of improving their performance. It is this erroneous fear of rejection that hinders their personal and professional progress. History reminds us that there are countless people who pushed through rejection to become icons, such as, Colonel Sanders and Sylvester Stallone. Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken received over 1,000 rejections before anyone would buy into his concept. Sylvester Stallone was turned down by just about every agent in the United States when he was a struggling actor. Rejection is inevitable. You just have to keep saying to yourself, “Some will, some won’t, so what!”

Using Rejection as a Motivator to Take You to the Next Level

High-performing producers and account managers have a positive attitude toward rejection. They use rejection as a motivator...a signal that indicates it may be time to tweak their performance. They ask questions such as, “What might I do differently?” or “How can I better present my value proposition?” Before moving on to the next opportunity, they use rejection to help them change the outcome of future opportunities. If you encounter a few rejections, do not be alarmed. This is natural. Yet a consistent pattern of rejections suggests that you need to step back and study the manner in which you are delivering your product, services, and resources. It may be that a simple tweak of your process, packaging, or positioning will create instant results.

The following represents five steps to use rejection as a motivator to take you to the next level:

Step 1 – Don’t take it personally. The prospect or client is not rejecting you. Rather, they are rejecting your offering.

Step 2 – Know when to cut your losses. Decide in advance how much time and effort you will put into the acquisition of a particular prospect. Use a “Criteria Filter” to screen out price shoppers.

Step 3 – Rely on your support system. When confronted with rejection, your ego is damaged. It helps to open up to others to get your hurt feelings and frustrations off your chest. A support system enables you to heal the wound by offering encouragement, guidance and counsel. They also can offer constructive feedback.

Step 4 – Maintain your focus of control. Focus on the controllable outcomes. Do not lose energy and confidence by dwelling on uncontrollable forces which influence the buying decision.

Step 5 – Keep a positive attitude. Use your failure to connect as a learning experience...an opportunity to find out what you might do differently in each phase of your business development and client service process. With every “no” you hear, you are much closer to the next “yes.”

When faced with rejection, please consider the excerpt from Theodore Roosevelt in a speech in Paris, France on April 23, 1910:

"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory or defeat."

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About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.