



## “Why can’t your sales people sell”

- *Jim Lewis, Founder & President, Princeton Sales Partners, LLC*

If your sales organization is like most, there are a few top performers who carry the entire team. I wish the ratio was as good as 80:20. 80% of the revenue is coming from 20% of the salespeople. But the fact is that it’s much closer to 90:10. At the beginning of the year do you look around at your organization and ask, “What am I going to do to improve results?” Here are some ideas to consider.

Past performance is no indicator of future results. Why?

- Sales people get hired on what they may have done in the past and, in the mind of the sales manager, “if they have what it takes”. Typically, managers look for qualities and traits that are deemed desirable in the selling environment or closely resemble themselves. But is it really possible to determine in a 1-2 hour interview whether someone will succeed or not? What about after one month. What were the circumstances of that sales executive in their previous position? What stage growth was the company in? Why were they successful? If they were selling a new technology, process or service – were they selling to early market buyers who tend to buy on features? If that “successful” sales person tries to use the same selling approach to a mainstream buyer they are likely to experience one or more of the following problems:
  - Difficulty gaining access to decision makers

- Price becomes an issue too early in the sales cycle
  - Sales cycles become much longer.
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- The fact that each salesperson came from a different selling culture, experience and skill base there generally no consistent way to find suspects, develop prospects into customers. Each person doing their own thing. How do you help when each person has their own method and practice?
  
  - When it comes to evaluating specific sales opportunities the situation gets even worse. The grading of each salespersons pipeline often becomes a highly personalized, subjective and judgment based activity. It takes a lot of time to filter through all those opinions and biases because there is no common way to decide neither what stage of the buying cycle the prospect is in nor what next steps to take. How long does it take to for your opportunity reviews with your team? If each situations requires more than 10 minutes than ask yourself, “What are we discussing?” Are you trying to garner as much information as you can so that you can individually assess the opportunity? Isn’t this a duplicate of effort? What about next steps? Is there agreement on what the next step in the sales cycle is? Every company should have a standard way to evaluate (grade) pipeline opportunities. If not, hours and hours can easily be consumed debating the opinions of salespeople. And all of this is time taken away from selling.
  
  - How long does it take you to decide that you have made a good hire? The most common way is to wait for a full sales cycle to determine if the salesperson has enough qualified opportunities in the pipeline to justify their expense. To maintain the aura of success many salespeople engage

in activities to at least look busy with opportunities. Instead, we want salespeople to be effective, not just busy. If your sales cycles are long, say 6- 9 months, or even longer – you may have been forced to wait months despite your feeling that they were not going to succeed. Having a structured sales process gives you the capability to identify skills deficiencies beyond just looking at total performance. Consider it an early warning system.

- How will you transfer your knowledge skills and wisdom to 8 to 10 salespeople all with varying degrees of training, personality and skill? One approach is to make joint sales calls with each sales person so that you can demonstrate how it's done. But is this really skills transfer? How much better golfer or dancer are you after you have watched a professional? Certainly you could pick up a few points but you would have to spend hours and hours' watching before any real skill transfer occurs. Most importantly, do you have enough hours in the days to devote yourself to fulltime training of your staff?

Selling is hard work. It's even harder if every time your organization interacts with a prospect they do it differently. How many different positioning statements do you have? Is there one (or more) for every salesperson? How do you grade the pipeline? Is it based on the opinions of sales people, rather than a documented conversation with a prospect? How much time do you spend trying to demonstrate selling skills you learned 10 -15 years ago?

The best strategy to successful selling is to have a process. Here are some of the important components

1. **Have a Process.** Whether you are making a cold call or calling a warm lead from a referral, have a consistent, repeatable process that all your sales people use. Most of the time sale people are “winging it”. This just

isn't effective. An effective process should lead with a business issue that another customer faced – and what the results were after you helped them. This is NOT the time to get into the details of you product or service. Having a process makes calling more consistent, allows buyers to buy, instead of being sold, and helps position your company and your capabilities in a consistent and effective manner.

2. **Always document the call.** Demand that salespeople document each and every conversation with a decision maker with a summary letter that includes a discussion of the prospects goal, their current situation and asks for feedback to your letter. Without this, no one really knows what happened during the conversation. Buyers have selective listening skills and salespeople have “happy ears” and tend to hear things that didn't happen.
  
3. **Inspect what you expect.** Review the pipeline weekly using the letters to prospects as the guide as to whether there really is an opportunity for you. First, if your prospect does not provide feedback to your letter or worse, says, “It's perfect”, consider that this may not be real. What are the chances that during a typical one hour conversation where your salespeople are asking questions, listening (I hope) and taking notes that they are going to get everything exactly right? Zero. That's right! If the prospect doesn't change something in the letter then they really haven't committed to its contents. It also means that they have not yet committed to the goal. With out a goal shared by the prospect that you both understand and agree to (in writing) is there really a business opportunity? Is there a business problem that they are willing to spend money to solve? No goal, no prospect. Keep working the opportunity if it makes sense and talk to other people in the organization. But, don't put it in your pipeline.

To repeat, selling is hard work. By implementing a repeatable sales process sales managers can take control of what is seen by many in their organizations as a mystery, even a dark art. By spending less time teaching sales people how to sell sales managers can do more selling. And more time selling is what it's all about.

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