

# Take Your Team to the Top

## How to Direct a Winning Field Sales Team

We often forget how it felt when we finally got a whole sales team of our own to run: the initial thrill was over quickly once the true magnitude of the task hit us. If your promotion was down to sales ability you may have experienced a loss of control – after all you used to be responsible just for yourself and it was easy to come up with goods. On the other hand if you earned the title because of your management potential, the job can still hold many surprises. My simple guidelines – under the headings of Quantity and Quality of Selling, Time and Cost – will show you how to steer a field sales team towards success.

### 1. Quantity of Selling

- a. It's likely that you will have already set the main criteria for quantity of sales – ie targets. However think about other areas you can measure such as market share and new business;
- b. Are there enough sales leads? Lead sourcing can either be done by reps themselves or, by an admin function. If you decide to set up a leads operation for your staff, do a basic quality check first – some people enjoy nothing more than to make a scapegoat from a lead passed to them by management, saying: "I might have hit target if my time wasn't wasted on that useless lead..."
- c. Examine the number of sales calls your team makes each day (or week or month). If you haven't already, consider setting a new target for calls or strikes which gain some form of commitment from a decision maker.

### 2. Quality of Selling

Regarding actual quality of selling – what checks do you have in place? Team target achievement is of course one obvious indicator; however few sales teams are balanced to the extent that not one member is suffering through inexperience or facing other difficulties - personal or otherwise. Since most sales managers have little leeway in lessening targets, keeping a close eye on the quality of selling is an important area of control. For example, a rep returning to work after a gap such as illness or maternity leave may need additional training or support in the field. Another rep may have a difficult territory either because it is small or contains problem accounts. One effective solution is to spend a day with the rep, with an hour's break for a pub lunch. Remember the aim here is to motivate - not the reverse - and a good starting point is to explain your objectives, including what you

## Take Your Team to the Top

will and will not do during face time with customers. There are as many management styles as there are sales managers (yes, really) so it's up to you. And also try to bear in mind how your presence may be interpreted by customers.

- a. Give the rep as much notice of the accompanied visit as possible. It will make your outfit seem more professional if they can say: "I'll be seeing you again next week with my manager – (s)he'll be spending the day with me to see what goes on in the real world!" Or: "(S)He wants to meet some of my higher profile customers..." or, whatever. The last thing you want is for clients to feel on the receiving end of a hard sell, or that the rep somehow is 'in trouble'. This brings us to:
  - b. Try to stand/sit back while the rep is presenting. Remember, if that rep is trusted enough to hold their own and represent your organisation the rest of the time, then the floor should remain theirs. On the other hand, do feel free to make valuable contributions to the discussion, such as new products your company may be launching, etc;
  - c. At the end of the day, talk your rep through a balanced summary of your impressions and follow this up in writing. I'm sure you won't need reminding that any criticism should be cushioned between positive observations (the praise-criticise-praise device) - but this is a proven way to train. It's in the DNA of all good sales people to want to achieve, and a positive day with you should be viewed as progress towards more sales.
3. Time

This is our old friend time management. Because of the target inducement, sales managers usually have an excellent built-in clock, instinctively understanding and making the most of the targeted week or month. Many, for example will have scheduled team and/or individual meetings at the start of a new campaign to get things rolling again. But what about department and individual team members' use of time? How can the structure of the working day, week or month be improved? Some suggestions:

- a. Are there lulls in the working week or month when productivity seems low? These tend to be during quieter periods - bank holidays, the slide before Christmas - or at the start of a new campaign when everyone is exhausted from previous efforts. If this is the case, think of a specific task such as a blitz on lapsed accounts to focus activity, and offer prizes as an incentive;

## Take Your Team to the Top

- b. Is your team's working day at an optimum? Set a time for when their first and last appointments of the day should be;
- c. What about individual time management? Even experienced, high performing teams have some disparity. Take a closer look at the poorer achievers, and see if enough time is being dedicated to selling. It may be a confidence problem of hiding behind paperwork or other distractions to avoid face time with new prospects.

### 3. Cost

Any sales manager worth his or her salt understands commercial reality and most are likely to be cost conscious. Remember, this does not mean parsimony (the posh word for stingy):

- a. You should be able to justify small amounts of department spending if you can demonstrate a quick return – for example incentives. Why not plan a tiered points system with prizes to boost an anticipated quiet period ahead? Salespeople love recognition and most will pull every stop they can to win a bottle of wine or meal for two. The return the company gets could be several times over;
- b. Earlier, we looked at leads sourcing: if your potential market is wide you may be able to justify some one-off or part-time help to input new leads onto your database or CRM system. You could save recruitment time and money by looking within your company for part timers who may want to do extra hours. I've often asked the kids and spouses of team members to help out, as well as college students.

All jobs get easier with experience and sales management is no exception. Leading a field sales team to win however, is more than just running things: you need to take action, grab opportunities and motivate people - often in an environment of fire fighting minor problems which are irrelevant to the main business of hitting targets. Addressing the key aspects of quantity, quality, time management and cost will extend your focus beyond just keeping things on auto pilot - so that your team isn't merely good – but outstanding.

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