

A-GAME SELLING

IN A FOREVER CHANGED MARKET



A-GAME SELLING – IN A FOREVER CHANGED MARKET

by Leisa Mohler-Erickson

ABSTRACT

Agile sales organizations have opportunities to accelerate top-line revenue growth via a renewed commitment to re-engaging, re-tooling, and re-engineering their sales teams. “Back to basics” strategies are akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic—a losing proposition to effectively leapfrog the competition. New skill sets are requisite for sellers to create meaningful business impact within customer organizations that now leverage cross-functional buying committees who demand a demonstrable return on investment. Achieving an A-game still requires a laser-focus on driving meaningful behavioral shifts throughout the ranks; however, the skills required to be a front-runner today, versus 5 years ago are as changed as the market we now find ourselves navigating.

Advantage



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All hopes are that the doom and gloom of the past few years is behind us and that a rebound is eminent. As executives seek new means to drive top line revenue, new challenges have emerged. Many sales organizations now resemble tattered battleships. Their innards are exposed by gaping holes created by the anemic economy, and fewer hands are on deck for a newly charted course. Much of the crew has been lost as many were pushed overboard in an effort to make it into an EBIDTA safe harbor. When speaking to key leaders looking at a forever changed environment, one term comes to mind: shell shocked.

shell'·shocked', adjective: (per Merriam-Webster's Dictionary)

1: affected with combat [fatigue](#)

2: mentally confused, upset, or exhausted as a result of excessive [stress](#)



As total volume has dropped, fewer opportunities abound for the taking. Voracious competition for a smaller pie has created margin pressures unlike any time most have ever experienced. That smaller pie has made every opportunity critical, no matter the size or scope: "We need to make this deal happen. Do what it takes to get it done." Sound familiar? This commonplace approach has created shifts in seller behavior. Some classic consultative sellers have been lured into the dark, transactional side of selling only to make a sale. The great strides made in raising the bar of sales organizations' skill sets during the boom years are in danger of being squandered inadvertently as a result..

As leaders search for a new strategy, those sales organizations agile enough to react quickly to this changed market are poised to seize a greater share of opportunities. Although many rules of engagement have changed, one rule remains the same: Creating an A-game requires investment in people, processes, and systems.

Ship-Shaped Sales Teams

Even though the "seascape" of selling is forever changed, sellers still have to manage a sales process to closure. While this new selling "seascape" is markedly different, most sales teams have changed very little in response. When questioning executives whether their sales team has changed in the past 3 years, more than often than not, the answer is "no". Resoundingly, we hear that the skill sets of most sales teams remain *relatively unchanged* compared to the metamorphosis of the market and customers.

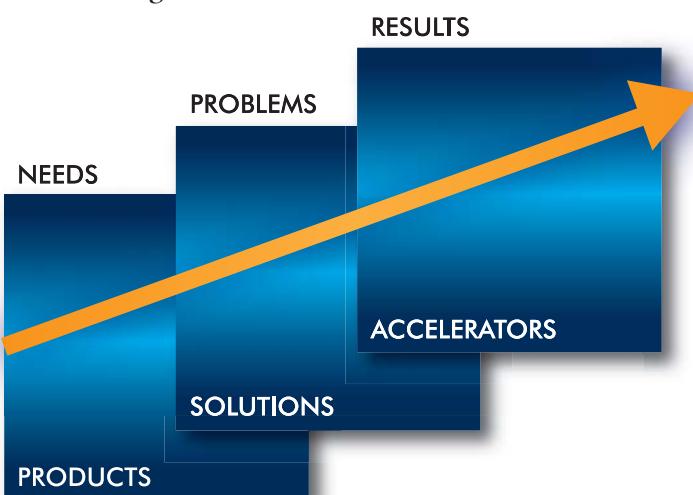
There is good news in this. Because so few sales teams were able to focus on capability development during the recession, the downturned economy created a unique leveling of the playing field. If before the recession you lagged behind more than you liked in developing your people, it's likely you aren't behind any longer. Taking quick action now can turn an old "B"-game into an A-game. However a cautionary note—what worked well in the past may not work well current day in terms of your team's skill sets.





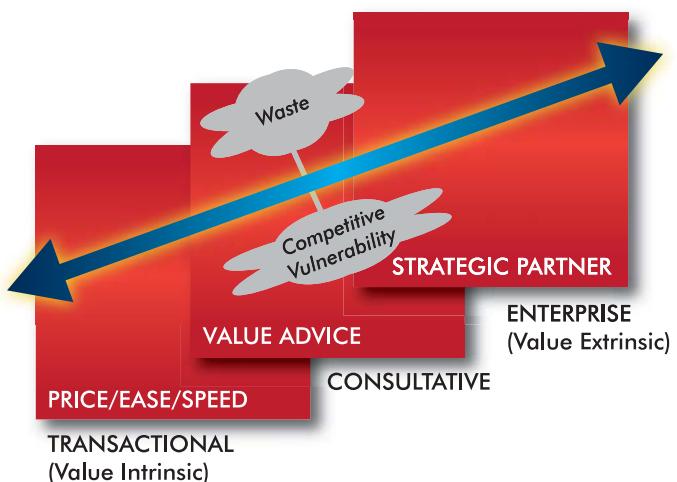
The SEC (Sales Executive Council) conducted a survey in 2009 of 450 sales manager and looked at attitudes, skills, behaviors, activities, and knowledge of over 1000 sales professionals within 30 organizations globally. They too found that a “back to basics strategy” as it relates to re-tooling your team “is a losing strategy”. As an outcome of their findings, a seller profile emerged which had the highest number of top performers. The result; the top performers embodied more unconventional characteristics than any of the other four profiles identified. The SEC’s study reiterates the need for creating a deeper understanding of what it will require to create an A-game today.

Today’s market looks very different than three, five or ten years ago. Neil Rackham, author of *SPIN Selling*, was the ultimate harbinger of consultative selling in the 1980s, and many others have furthered his initial work over the past 30 years—Lou Schachter, Richard Hodge, Tom Snyder, and Howard Stevens, to name a few. Although consultative sales skills still are very much a core competency for any seller, a higher-level skill set is emerging. The next generation of selling focuses on accelerating a customer’s desired business results via a unique embodiment of products, services, solutions, expertise, and value drivers. BTS has put a label to this new skill set, Accelerator Selling.



¹ Hodge, Richard & Lou Schachter. *The Mind of the Customer*. McGraw-Hill, 2006.

As shifts in buyer behavior continue, fostered by the Internet and its endless streams of readily available information, a new world for sellers continues to emerge—a nightmare for those who sell transactionally, but a boom for those who can elevate to an enterprise or accelerator level of selling. Neil Rackham foreshadowed this evolution in his book, *Rethinking the Sales Force*, and his insights have never been truer.



¹ Rackham, Neil, & John De Vincentis. *Rethinking the Sales Force*. McGraw-Hill, 1999.



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During the last decade, organizations have predominately focused on cutting fat from their organizations and driving lean initiatives to reduce costs. Much emphasis has been placed on reducing costs to serve in lieu of defining how to migrate up their customer's value chain. Gone are the days of marching sellers out to prospects that see no inherent value. The Internet is readily available with information and opportunities to self-serve where little to no value is realized (by both sales organizations and customers). Thus, the further proliferation of inside sales teams, distribution/reseller networks, and e-commerce platforms to cut costs and meet the customer where they are with a delivery mechanism that meets their needs faster, cheaper—and easier. Few have rallied to work on the other side of the equation, enhancing the skills of their team in order to evolve into the status of a trusted advisor.

Creating an A-game means a returned interest in assessing the condition of your ship, your crew's morale and skills, as well as developing a new plan of attack. Opportunities exist to switch strategy from a defensive to an offensive one. Take stock of the level of sales skills your sellers *actually* practice. Determine whether those skill sets measure up to your plan to strike strategically. If the skills don't match the plan, or you aren't certain, consult with experts in the field to assist in taking an objective assessment of your team.

Key Insights:

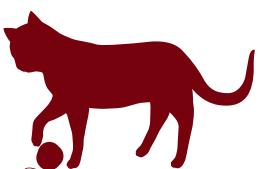
- All organizations can and will focus on expense reductions to drive cost to serve down. Define areas to migrate up the value chain of your customers to drive profitable growth from those customers who are willing to pay premiums for expertise, insights, and business impact created by your team.
- If you plan to migrate up the value chain, ensure your team has the right skills to garner credibility and execute at higher levels.

New Buying Patterns: "Herding Cats" Is Easier



Major buying decisions are rarely handled by one individual or even a few. Many organizations call for cross-functional buying committees for large project buys and even smaller, seemingly mundane ones. These committees embody competing interests, requirements, and a dichotomy of success factors as well as intended business impact. Interests are heightened across multiple functions on a large majority of purchases as many have become mission-critical given emaciated budgets, proliferation of interlinked systems, processes, and initiatives spanning multiple departments. "Herding cats" can be an easier task than selling effectively to these groups. The challenges facing sales teams employing "status quo" skill sets are compounded by the growing complexity of selling, which necessitates new skills in the following areas:

- Facilitation and presentation skills for conducting meetings ("Mega Meetings") for all key customer stakeholders
- Deeper understanding of the customer's business in order to create value across functional interests, not competing solely on a product/solution/price basis





- New questioning models which focus on capitalizing on opportunities creating linkages to a customer's business results, not just developing and solving for myopic needs which are seen as uncorrelated to key business drivers
- Expert skills to extract, understand, clarify, coalesce, and create real-time alignment across varying points of view into one set of decision criteria, outcomes , and metrics for success

Those organizations who can most effectively manage the challenges of this new reality will become frontrunners in their respective markets. Shaping your team's skill set to meet these new, more complex customer environments is within range, but it takes a laser-focus.

Key Insights:

- Determine what your customers value—beyond good price and service—and arm your sales team to deliver on this value.
- Determine how your customers want to buy and interact with your sales organization- Dividing customers by size is becoming passé.
- Increase the wattage of your team's skill sets to meet them head on throughout your customer's buying process.

Greatest Lever to Pull for ROI: Frontline Sales Leaders

Consider the following equation:

$$\text{RESULTS} = [\text{KNOWLEDGE} + \text{SKILLS} + \text{PROCESS}] \times \text{MOTIVATION}$$

The most important variable in delivering breakthrough results is motivation. Nowhere is this more critical than in sales organizations where motivation is the multiplier of all the other variables. Research consistently shows that the biggest drivers of motivation are immediate managers. Conversely, the number-one reason employees opt out of an organization is directly attributable to their immediate manager.These two data points make a simple connection that is often skimmed over as organizations look to raise their A-game.

Most sales training initiatives seeking transformation to an A-Game focus on variables such as content, learning objectives, participant experience, meals, and delivery mechanisms.Additionally, emphasis is typically on frontline sales professionals, whereas sales leadership is an afterthought. Leaving managers as an afterthought or worse, not building their skill sets in tandem with their team, is hazardous. Research indicates that without sales managers becoming an enrolled captain who immediately reinforces, coaches, and demonstrates the new behaviors amongst their team ,87% of their investment is gone within 30 days.



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A sales manager's ability to create buy-in and motivation by coaching and developing their team's skills are cornerstones in creating world-class, results-oriented teams. As such, improving the skill sets of your frontline sellers without doing the same with your sales leaders is hazardous. Without including them in the development plan initially as well as on an ongoing basis often leads to compromised returns on investments, and more often than not, failed attempts at changing seller behavior. Failed efforts in changing behavior create organizational disruption, negative impacts on business results and worse yet, backpedaling in an organization's overall strategic intent, whether internally or market-facing.

Life Rafts for the Great Ones Left

Key Insight:

- Pull the most under-leveraged, but most powerful lever available in the pursuit of positive, sustained behavioral shifts, the sales management team.
- Empower sales management with the knowledge, skills, and tools to create positive, intentional change which aligns to strategic goals.

The ability of organizations to invest time, resources, and capital into thinking, planning, and executing strategically has taken a hit. The order of today has overridden the order of thinking of tomorrow's plan. The ability to maneuver away from disaster has buoyed organizations in rough waters. However with so many course corrections, dramatic changes in course, no strategy other than survival, along with headcount reductions, and increased role responsibility, individual contributors have become dazed and confused.

From executive sales leadership to line sales, everyone has experienced the impact of the economic downturn whether it be in the bank account, in morale depletion, or general fatigue. Quota attainment and the trajectory to hit the numbers have been exhausting. A collective sigh of relief can be felt in the sales ranks as the worst seas seem to be behind us. For those left on deck the storm has been weathered and clearer skies are in within sight.

For those remaining on deck, most are desiring of praise, investment in their development, and feeling like valued contributors. These factors, in tandem with the pervasive micromanagement of opportunities and sales pipelines during the do or die times in the height of the recession, can come home to roost in unwanted turnover. To retain your top talent post recession, take stock of their morale. Work to boost their levels of engagement in order to ward off unwanted attrition. Improving engagement and commitment are critical tonics needed to upright the ship and return it to splendor. Those organizations who





can take a moment, and not a moment longer than their competitors to create a renewed sense of camaraderie, commitment, and engagement, have the opportunity to jumpstart their journey to recovery and even leap-frog their competition through quick action.

Key Insight:

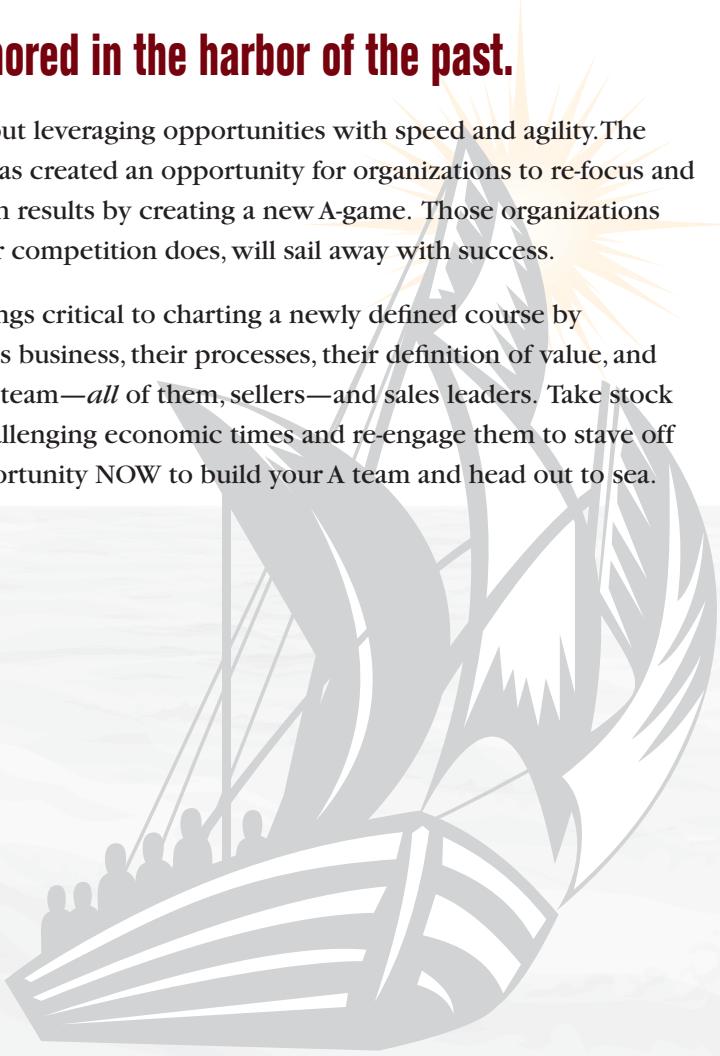
- Re-engage your crew by buoying the value of their contributions, demonstrating appreciation for their efforts in the battle.
- Light the fuse to empower the team to actualize a strategy to leap-frog your competition.

Set course for the horizon, engage all hands on deck and unfurl the sails of your tall ships...

...while your competition is still anchored in the harbor of the past.

The net of this forever changed sales “seascape” is about leveraging opportunities with speed and agility. The winds have calmed and so too have the waves. This has created an opportunity for organizations to re-focus and re-energize their teams in order to drive break-through results by creating a new A-game. Those organizations able to re-energize and re-tool rapidly, and before their competition does, will sail away with success.

Take risks, but heed the experts. Refocus on those things critical to charting a newly defined course by developing a deeper understanding of your customer’s business, their processes, their definition of value, and your sales organization’s value to them. Develop your team—*all* of them, sellers—and sales leaders. Take stock of those who have waged war for you in the most challenging economic times and re-engage them to stave off yet another battle in the war for talent. Take this opportunity NOW to build your A team and head out to sea.





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About Leisa Mohler-Erickson and Advantage Performance Group

Advantage Performance partner Leisa Mohler-Erickson helps organizations and their sales teams achieve the transformative change that accelerates meaningful business results. She brings clients a unique perspective from working and consulting at all sales levels across a wide range of organizations, from industrial to professional services firms and from executive to line management to individual seller. She has particular expertise in talent selection, competency assessment, and sales and sales management development.

Mohler-Erickson's experience comprises multiple business development roles, including a long tenure at Huthwaite, creators of *SPIN Selling*, where she last served as Associate Vice President of Intellectual Property and Product Development. She has worked exclusively with Fortune-500 organizations in a variety of industries. She earned a BS in marketing with a minor in international business from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. She is fluent in Spanish, and she lives in St. Petersburg, Florida, where she enjoys boating, cycling, and competing in triathlons with her husband, Matt.

Business words I live by:

"The shortest path from A to B is a straight line. Without focus, perseverance, and a plan, any path can get you there, but the journey to the summit may be long."

I work to find the shortest path, which mitigates corporate carnage while achieving the maximum business impact.

If your organization is considering a paradigm shift or rethinking the current approach to achieving results via the performance of your team, I would be honored to have an opportunity to learn more to determine whether I can help.



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