

## **Inconsistent Sales Performance – Is This An Issue For Your Company?**

By Dennis Plank

Many businesses hire sales personnel with a primary emphasis upon their existing product knowledge or familiarity with a particular industry. This is not to say that product knowledge and industry experience are superfluous. On the contrary, experience especially when matched with all the other requisite skills of a real professional can enhance the overall impact of a well developed and consistently performed sales process. However, for many companies experience or pre-existing product knowledge are their primary hiring criteria. They often give little consideration to why the diverse skills that a “sales athlete” offers could make a significant contribution to their sales success.

This belief that product knowledge is the critical factor in the sales process – rather than the ability to communicate and develop a consultative relationship with prospects – is a major reason for the vicious, unrelenting cycle of hiring, firing, hiring, and firing that vexes many unproductive sales organizations. Oftentimes, companies will hire reps from competitors in hopes of perpetuating previous success. In essence, these companies are attempting to buy business from their competitors with an assumption that there will be a significant transfer of loyalty from the rep’s pre-existing customers.

In reality, this practice more likely indicates that the hiring company has neither a clear and focused sales program nor understands its own sales failings. In reality, they are paying tribute to the competition. While it would appear these organizations appreciate the value of the rep’s relationship, in fact they do not. They merely confirm that they do not appreciate the essence of bonding and all the elements that exist in such relationships. Such firms do not fully understand a relationship built upon value and trust. They seem to believe a switch in loyalty is easy for the customer because they are certain their product is better or at least equal in performance.

However, this change actually undermines the value and the trust. This is particularly true if the customer perceives the product now being offered by their former rep is inferior to what he used to sell them. Trust is further injured if the product is fairly complex, has high performance specifications, or there are heavy consequences for product failure or poor performance. After all, the rep is now telling them what they had been buying from him previously was really the wrong decision all along. Changing a team jersey, so to speak, may seem simple enough to many sales managers but in reality it is not. And, this belief that the customer can switch loyalties so easily illustrates a lack of understanding by the manager about why people buy and a genuine lack of appreciation for the skills of a sales “professional” necessary to develop such relationships.

Although every company certainly understands the importance of revenue, many seem to have a genuine disregard for the importance of the sales function which generates that revenue. And, some companies exhibit what amounts to a disrespect for sales as a profession. It is as if sales were something anyone could do since it seemingly takes little real talent or there are no real skills involved. This is similar to people who believe they can be a waiter or waitress to fill time until they get a “real” job. Some firms may even

view their sales personnel as merely just another necessary box on the organization chart rather than a critical element that determines business success or failure.

*Successful companies, however, understand the importance of having sales professionals in their organizations.* These are companies that treat their sales people with respect and want their sales programs to stand on their own. They want their sales process to provide the revenue and achieve the goals that they need for their company's ongoing success. They want to hire representatives who possess the "right stuff" and who can implement the company's game plan consistently and effectively. These companies want to control their destiny, not try to imitate or merely react to the competition. In other words, they want to play their own game and let the competition worry about them.

And, real sales professionals, the type of "athletes" who are multi-skilled and can play in this game, know that sales success depends foremost upon their ability to emotionally connect with their prospects. These reps understand the importance of creating an emotional connection with their prospects and customers so they can elicit the appropriate information which leads to an understanding of the real concerns or issues facing the prospect. *These reps know that if the sales process does not center on the prospect and if during the sales interaction the prospect does not trust and believe the rep can help him – then, the product or service being offered is literally irrelevant.*

Many sales managers and many reps still operate from the principle that once the prospect sees or hears about the technical elements (the bells and whistles, so to speak) or the "new, improved" whatever, the prospect will swoon. If the prospect, however, does not come to that state of nirvana, then the rep merely needs to provide the appropriate "closing" technique to finish the job. This belief in "closing" techniques, which are more often designed to move inventory or serve the ego of a rep than create long-term or repeat business relationships, is a primary reason that many reps produce inconsistently or create situations in which they may sell initially but the customer is lost to future business. Hence, these types of sales relationships are based more often on coercion, deft but oftentimes insincere techniques, and a general disregard for serving the customer. Some sales managers have been heard to describe the sales interaction as "a contest as to who can take the customer's money".

Although this attitude is evident and these techniques are broadly practiced within many industries, in the long run they are counter productive. They result in inconsistent performance within the sales teams. That is a primary reason for the old 80/20 rule (Pareto Principle): that 80% of the sales are created by 20% of the sales force. While this is great for some reps, it means the sales program is dependent upon a few talented individuals or "strong willed" or "hard closers" who are quite good at getting the money. However, the remaining 80% of the sales force under produces. This 80% not only exhibits inconsistent performance but this portion generally experiences consistent turnover.

*This is not to dismiss the need to close the process.* No, what I am talking about is a sales process where closing is an ongoing and assumptive aspect of the entire process. And, when done in a smoothly orchestrated and customer-centered process, the resulting sales

will be not only more consistent but result in satisfied customers. Unfortunately, many of the “closing” methods used by sales reps are actually last minute attempts to overcome resistance that is created because the sales process they are using is based upon the wrong concepts.

*The real goal of any business should be to develop a sales process designed to assure more consistent, dependable, and measurable production by the largest number of sales persons possible.* The only way to do that is to create a sales process that is based upon an understanding of human behavior and that is designed to create effective sales professionals. In this way, the organization will not have to depend on only a few “superstars” but can have a consistently performing group that reflects the company in the best light while providing more reliable sales results.

I say this because a sales process that is constructed primarily around the “closing” abilities of individual reps and not focused upon the customer is a process that is counter to human behavior and demonstrates a lack of understanding of the buying motivation. The buying is done unconsciously and is an emotionally-based action. All the technical elements or aspects of your product or service are only reinforcement, a source of reassurance to the unconscious mind that the prospect has made the right decision.

While the purpose of any sales process is to obtain revenue, what I am espousing here is a process that is designed to make the transaction a win-win situation for both participants. It is a process that is not adversarial but rather a joint effort by the rep and the prospect to work together in uncovering needs, problems, and – perhaps most important - wants. Any concerns or questions are addressed and answered early in the process and, if done correctly, will not result in the often messy or occasionally deceitful closing tactics that tarnishes the image of sales professionals in the eyes of many. This is in effect an “opening” process, not a “closing” process.

It is a process that will enhance the prospect’s belief in the rep. It is a process that will assure the prospect that he has made the right buying decision. This process will create a relationship which provides for future contact and potential additional business. It also will differentiate the rep from the competition so he/she will be perceived as a *consultant*, a true professional who is interested in serving his/her customers. This also will enhance the image your sales personnel and your organization in the marketplace – and the reputation of the sales profession as well. And, finally, such a process will provide for a more comprehensive, consistent, measurable, and profitable performance within your sales program because it will expand the sales beyond the old 80/20 formula.

**(Note:** This is not to imply the 80/20 statistical spread will disappear. There will still be a normal distribution. However, the spread ratio may change and certainly the value of revenue per rep within the resulting distribution is expected to increase. Thus, what a well developed and consistently orchestrated sales process will achieve is a greater revenue increase among the reps, raising all boats, so to speak. And, if the program is designed properly – such as selling more profitable items (or services), items (services) providing more value and competitive differentiation, and items (services) that offer commissions accordingly – overall sales revenue will increase, rep satisfaction will improve on many

levels thus decreasing turnover, and increased revenues and profits will accrue to the company.)

Consequently, unless your sales process is built around these concepts; unless you have created the appropriate emotional marketing message for your prospects; unless your sales process (and this includes all in your organization who encounter your prospects or customers) is customer-centric; unless you focus on hiring “sales athletes” who possess the understanding and fundamentals (or the skills to learn and practice these fundamentals) to implement this process; and, unless your leadership believes in and reinforces this type of sales process – then, you will continue to go through a constant hiring cycle which brings all the costs, faltering sales, and lost opportunities that come with misguided belief in the wrong process.

It would be well to remember that in human communication, it has been demonstrated that the impact upon another individual is dependent upon three (3) factors. And, you will note that the technical or the substantive element of the communication is the least important of the three. These factors and their corresponding importance are:

**How You Are When You Say It** - **56%**  
(Dress, Attitude, “Presence”, etc.)

**How You Say It** - **37 %**  
(Sense of Conviction, Clarity, Choice of Words, Modulation, etc.)

**What You Say** - **7 %**  
(Technical Information, Clarification, etc.)

So, if you are satisfied with your sales program, your sales process, and the current production of your sales team, then you already know and practice these elements.

However, if you are not doing these things; if you are not sure how to implement such a process; if you are tired of hiring reps using the same “old” process and getting bad results; or, if maybe you still disbelieve the essence of this article – then, perhaps we should talk. That is, if you want things to change and your sales performance to improve. Give me a call - I’ll be glad to discuss how I might be able to help you.

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