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BY RICK DAVIS

It has been said that the only constant is change, and that certainly has been the case recently in the building industry. Some of the most dramatic shifts include industry consolidation, technical evolution, and new regulations, to name only a few. And within this whirlwind of activity, today's lumber and building materials salesperson is being forced to take on a greater leadership role. While the old-time salespeople of bygone days were able to foster strong relationships based on personal friendships and the sales reps of more recent decades have been able to rely on their product knowledge and technical skills, today's modern Sales Leaders must continually *innovate* and become sales pioneers in their quest to remain one step ahead of the competition.

In this case, the competition is not other LBM dealers, it is other salespeople. As consolidation continues and purchasing decisions are made at the top of organizations, it is virtually guaranteed that some salespeople will be relegated to lower-paying service roles, either as inside salespeople or as project managers. The high-paying sales slots are

## Journey to Self Improvement

There are salespeople who have utilized one year's worth of experience over and over during their 30-year careers and there are salespeople who



experience 30 years of ongoing professional growth. More often than not, most salespeople fall somewhere in between, advancing their skills some years and remaining stagnant in oth-

er factor that can help you achieve that goal: innovation.

On average, salespeople tell me that they receive personal coaching less than five days per year, and many salespeople receive no coaching at all. In both of these cases, the only person who *can* provide ongoing daily feedback and create performance improvement is you!

Thomas Edison was famous for the pride he took in hard work and objectivity. He once remarked, "I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward." Thus, the man often cited as the greatest inventor in world history courageously embraced failure as a learning experience. All too often, salespeople view failure as a lost sale rather than as a learning opportunity. Thus, many salespeople plod along, habitually employing the same tactics over and over, neglecting to consider the cause-effect ramifications of their behavior. As Albert Einstein said, "Insanity is

# Sales Pioneers

**TO CHART NEW GROWTH, YOU MUST CONTINUALLY INNOVATE AND STAY ONE STEP AHEAD OF THE COMPETITION.**

becoming the sole domain of the top reps, and in order to earn and maintain one of these positions, great Sales Leaders must continually find ways to use scientific methods and creative innovation to achieve personal growth.

ers. One of the keys to learning is to never lose your passion and commitment to self improvement. And assuming you are a salesperson who is strongly committed to a regimen of personal growth, there is only one

doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." This insinuates that we must experiment to improve our skills. Put these two great thoughts together, and we can conclude that the key to positive change is innovation and review.

Building on this premise, when I work with salespeople, I help them on their journey to self improvement with a simple three-step process: 1. innovate; 2. evaluate; and 3. habituate. Scientific

# Sell Sheet

## EXPERIMENTATION LEADS TO NEW DISCOVERIES, AND YOU CAN APPLY SCIENTIFIC PROCEDURES TO YOUR OWN SELF-MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS.

systems have demonstrated for hundreds of years that experimentation leads to new discoveries, and you can apply scientific procedures to your own self-management behaviors in order to expand your repository of selling skills with this method.

### Formula for Success

**1. Innovate.** I have asked many salespeople how they came up with a new selling technique. In most cases, they aren't really sure. They will tell me, "I think that one day I just tried something new...and it worked! So I kept doing it."

In other words, they accidentally stumbled onto a new and better approach to handling a situation. You probably feel the same way. The difference between accidental innovation and real innovation is that the latter is more efficient because there is a conscious effort to change.

Let's track the process using an example: One day Homer, a sales manager for a retail roofing installer near Dayton, Ohio, decided that he was not as successful as he'd like to be on his initial sales calls to homeowners. His closing ratio was approximately 30 percent on first-time

sales calls. He also felt he wasn't getting nearly enough referrals to boost his career objectives.

As a result, he consciously decided to change his objective on first-time sales calls in order to improve his overall performance. His innovation was that he only would gather information on the first call, with the objective of getting permission for a second sales call. He didn't know if this would improve his performance overall. He just knew he wanted to "back off" the pressure a little.

**2. Evaluate.** The second step to successful self-coaching is measurement, though in reality most salespeople simply try a new tactic and then sense instinctively whether or not it is working. Whether you make careful measurements of an innovation or simply "feel" its

# Sell Sheet

impact, the key is to consciously consider the outcome of your innovative behavior.

In Homer's case, after employing his new innovation for only a few weeks, quite remarkably he noticed that his low-pressure approach was still netting him a closing ratio around 20 percent on his *first* sales calls. He also noted that, of those that did not buy the first time, nearly every prospect allowed him a second meeting. Amazingly, he found that more than 50 percent of these customers bought from him during the second meeting. Moreover, he has gotten referrals as a result of the trust he built with his clientele. He admits that he does not measure the results formally, he "just knows." While it's always better to establish some form of measurement, if success is obvious there is little need to question the value of an innovation.

**3. Habituate.** If Einstein's statement about insanity is correct, then the converse implication also must be correct: Sanity is doing the same thing over and over in order to achieve the same consistent result. In other words, if you find a tactic that works, then the key to success is to repeat it habitually until a better method comes along.

Thus, in our example, Homer should continue to perpetually strive for a two-call sales cycle until the method stops working or a more successful way of doing things is tried. While he enjoys his success, however, he should continue to strive for new innovations that can make him even more successful.

The one certainty in our fast-changing world is that continuous improvement is

necessary. Homer, for example, eventually will discover that many other salespeople also are striving to lengthen the selling cycle in his market. At that point, he will need to discover a way to stay ahead of the competition, such as offering more accessory items during the sales process. If he *stops* innovating, he may discover—too late—that other salespeople in his market are outselling him because they are more innovative.

As you get ready for the New Year, recognize that changes are based on subtle, incremental improvements to technologies and processes. Apply the same philosophy of incremental improvement and innovation to your selling skills, and step-by-step you will become an innovative Sales Leader and a pioneer that others try to emulate. ■