

Positive Thinking

Praising your salespeople is the most effective and least costly way to boost morale, reinforce behaviors, and increase sales. By Rick Davis



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Let's say you're the sales manager and one of your direct reports is 5 percent behind last year's sales numbers and 12 percent behind this year's budget. You had put him on notice two months ago and since then he has been doing a solid job of prospecting. In fact, he has opened positive discussions with nearly 10 new prospects. The problem is that his sales still just aren't up to par. What do you do?

A. Put more pressure on him to get his numbers up.

B. Cover your rear by telling your boss that you've done all you can to help the slacker.

C. Praise him for his work and assure him that, if he keeps up this effort, he'll see results in the long run.

If you answered *A*, you are like most sales managers who would simply apply more pressure and hope that the salesperson "gets the message" that he or she is in trouble. If you answered *B*, well ... you're probably not reading this article. If you answered *C*, then you are using your emotional and psychological intelligence in a powerful way to reinforce quality behaviors that will create positive results.

Sales managers make the mistake of focusing too closely on short-term sales goals and ignoring the quality behaviors that might create better long-term results. It is not enough for a manager to focus on sales results; it is essential that the sales manager reinforce and support the behaviors and activities—such as telemarketing, territory

lever whenever they were hungry for food, and *only* when they wanted food.

Skinner then changed the experiment by offering food only at fixed intervals—e.g., every five taps would release a pellet—an adjustment that the rats quickly adapted to by tapping the lever just enough to get the next morsel of food. Skinner then wanted to discover if the rats could be "persuaded" to perform the desired behavior (tapping the lever) on a constant basis. He succeeded in this goal by creating a variable schedule of enforcement. In other words, the rewards for the rats were random. Sometimes two taps of the lever would release a pellet, sometimes eight, sometimes 20. Because they had no guarantee of when the rewards would be provided, the rats eagerly performed the desired behavior on a constant basis.

Finally, Skinner experimented to see what would happen if the rats were penalized by giving a modest electric shock when they tapped the lever. As you might expect, he discovered that the rats quickly ceased performing the behavior that was penalized and never tapped the lever again, even when food was subsequently available had the rats taken the risk of trying one more time.

This is exactly the situation that occurs for many salespeople when managers criticize, or fail to praise, productive activities like telephone prospecting, computer

management, high-quality questioning skills, listening skills, and the like—that contribute to long-term sales success.

So how can you reinforce those behaviors? The answer is through praise. Praise is the most inexpensive resource available to you, and it may be going untapped.

B.F. Skinner, the psychologist who launched the theory of behavior modification, provided significant insights into ways in which both positive and negative reinforcement can shape and mold performance patterns. Skinner's theory begins with the principle of *operant conditioning*, the idea that a behavior is reinforced with an operant reward or penalty immediately after the behavior occurs. He tested his theory on lab rats in a box that became known as the "Skinner box." The rats in the experiment were provided a pellet of food each time they tapped a lever. The rats quickly figured out the game and thus tapped the

database skills, and similar beneficial tasks. For example, a salesperson who has a tremendous month of prospecting filled with numerous sales appointments but fails to achieve sales goals is



often criticized by a manager who does not recognize the long-term seeds being planted. The manager, failing to consider that the seeds of sales often take months to germinate, ignores the positive contributions of his employee. By criticizing the performance, the manager inadvertently sends a message of negative reinforcement to the salesperson. Not only has the manager failed to reward a desired behavior, he has potentially stopped it with the “electric shock” of criticism. In short, the sales manager is now part of the problem because he is sabotaging good behavior.

One organization I worked with penalized salespeople for not holding their margins and, at the same time, insisted that the salespeople “never lose a sale because of price.” Thus, if they held the price, they might lose sales; if they lowered the price, they reduced margins. (I swear, as ludicrous as this sounds, this is a true story.) The salespeople were in a lose-lose situation in which they would literally be reprimanded whether they made a sale (at low margins) or not (by failing to reduce margins)!

On the other hand, many sales managers are astute observers of behavior and manage to find time to praise competent performance. A vice

president of sales for one Chicago-based lumberyard consistently rewards and praises his sales managers for taking risks, even when the results of the risks are not profitable. He wants to instill an entrepreneurial spirit in his employees and his reward system matches his value system. The result of his strategy was a dramatic increase in sales margins within a year of his taking on the new position and a high-caliber sales management team.

A manager I know at an East Coast lumberyard channels his sales team’s efforts toward smaller, high-margin accounts. Salespeople are praised for the discovery and pursuit of such accounts. In fact, when salespeople boast of potential sales to large-volume accounts, they receive no credit on their prospecting records for these efforts. The result has been outstanding for this dealer, which has a solid base of small and mid-sized accounts that have created incredible margins and stability for the company.

Singing Praises

If you want to channel the efforts of your salespeople, use praise to reinforce valuable behaviors. Try the following steps to accomplish your objective:

1. Clearly communicate to your salespeople the behaviors that will support your vision. These are the behaviors that will create long-term sustainable results. For example, a manager who wants high-margin accounts should proudly praise a salesperson who confidently walks away from a low-margin sale. A man-

ager who wants significant growth in sales volume from an individual should communicate the importance of prospecting—and praise those efforts. If you don’t know the behaviors that will create long-term success for your salespeople and your organi-

zation, then it is time to rethink the situation and to identify and recognize the behaviors that will create desired results.

2. Proactively seek opportunities to praise. As B.F. Skinner noted, positive feedback reinforces behavior. Make praise a part of your daily management routine and you’ll create happier and more productive employees. The praise you offer should be specifically linked to the behaviors you desire.

3. Practice random management. If there was one thing that Skinner taught us, it is that a schedule of reinforcement (i.e., getting a pellet for every lever tap) creates a casual approach to business. This is why sales call reports are usually ineffective. They are requested on a periodic basis and, therefore, salespeople wait until the last minute to submit them. In other words, they are hitting the lever at just the right time. Rather than teach your salespeople to give you information at fixed intervals, use random inspections and praise to teach them to be self-managers. It is a very effective method of leadership.

The value of praise is incredibly powerful. Sincere praise provides economic value that is often more effective than money. You know this because you are probably someone that, at some point in your career, would have sacrificed a little income in order to receive a bit more recognition in the workplace. Praise creates loyalty and estab-

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lishes your credibility because people realize you are watching. It reinforces behaviors, builds morale, and makes you feel better about your role in the organization. There is no need to be frugal with a resource that costs so little and accomplishes so much. ■