

All Systems Go

A systemized approach to selling can lead to organizational success. By Rick Davis



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Every successful business organization has systematic approaches in structured departments such as accounting, IT, and production that ensure certain business goals are met; however, when it comes to sales, most companies lack a defined methodology to consistently achieve sales excellence and improve the bottom line. For example, in a retail environment (e.g., your showroom) how many times have you heard a salesperson say, “Can I help you?” We all know the standard response to this question: “No thanks, I’m just looking.” Yet salespeople throughout the country continue to ask this question with disturbing regularity. Rather than “take a number,” retail stores should simply ask people to pick up a “just looking” flashcard as they enter the showroom in order to save everyone time.

In light of the continued repetition of fruitless behaviors such as this, the 2006 series of Sell Sheet columns will illustrate ways in which your organization can create a systematic approach to sales success and determine what aspects of sales performance can be scientifically documented and repeated to build organizational success.

Most sales managers have great salespeople, good salespeople, and bad salespeople, but not much insight as

to why some are better than others. At times we hire individuals that seem like can’t-miss prospects and yet they somehow fall flat, while other sales job candidates of seemingly inferior talent become highly credible performers once they join the team. Managers often remain baffled by this mystery. They are unable to identify and isolate the skills that distinguish top performers from mediocre ones, and thus are unable to teach others in the organization how to help boost their performance and the company’s overall sales volume and profit margins.

A story that illustrates this point very well is one about a car salesman who both shocked me and engaged me wonderfully. After some very uncomfortable experiences at car dealers, I expected the same treatment from Chuck, the salesman I eventually bought a car from. When I entered his dealership, I braced myself for the inevitable blue suede approach and the standard opening, “What is it going to take to get you behind the wheel of a car tonight?” Or worse, “If I could ____, would you be willing to do business tonight?” You have probably harbored similarly low expectations about car salespeople.

You can probably imagine my pleasant surprise when Chuck asked, “So, please tell me, what changed in your life that brought you into the dealership tonight?” My first reaction to his question was shock. But after the initial amazement wore off, I began to talk about my very favorite subject in the world—me. In addition to putting me at ease, Chuck’s question enabled him to gain insights into my life and, more importantly to him, my readiness to purchase a car. After listening to me explain that I had just acquired a new job and would be replacing a company car, he knew that I was definitely in the market for a new vehicle—and soon.

This is a simple illustration of how a systematic behavioral approach can improve your chances of getting a sale. When I later asked Chuck why he asked me that question, he replied that, over time, through trial and error, he kept changing his greeting until he found one that considerably increased his effectiveness. He had developed his own method to determine more effective ways to engage customers at the dealership. Imagine how you could improve the performance of your team if Chuck worked for your company and you had in place a systemized methodology to capture his (and others’) successes and share that knowledge with other salespeople.

However, it’s important to remember that the sales discipline, unlike accounting, inventory management, or other business functions, does not provide certainty of

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outcomes. If inventory turns can be increased, then profitability increases. If purchasing can negotiate a better deal, then the cost of business is reduced. But in the sales discipline, the responses of prospects are always variable. When Chuck asks 100 people the same question that he asked me, not every one will open up to him the way I did. But it is likely that an individual may respond better to Chuck's question than the rote scripts mentioned earlier in this column.

Other activities within the sales discipline also can provide opportunities for performance improvement. In Chuck's case, he discovered that a single question improved his overall sales performance. Many other sales activities can be improved *individually* to enhance *overall* performance. For example, a scheduled appointment will yield, on average, better outcomes than cold calls. In the same way, prospects of high potential sales volume are worthy of more time investment than low-potential accounts. Thus,

a discipline of time management should include allocation that concentrates on high-potential activity. Questions about business challenges usually yield information far more useful than questions about personal hobbies. For that reason, a sales discipline that identifies critical business issues in a conversational manner will yield better results than an unplanned casual "chat."

The challenge for salespeople, managers, and organizations is to discover the methods that work better for all reps and take the guesswork out of the sales process and replace it with a defined business process. During the course of this year's Sell Sheet series, various behaviors of the sales discipline will be dissected to offer methods of overall performance improvement. Here are some tips on how you can begin the journey:

1. Recognize that success is a percentage game. Sales is a profession in which there can never be 100 percent success. In fact, if a

salesperson were able to get every sale, this might indicate that something is being done wrong, e.g., prices are too low. Rather than think about sales as a win-lose process, recognize that success is in the percentages.

2. Think objectively. Managers and salespeople that quickly become emotional in the face of failure lose sight of learning opportunities. Rather than criticize unfavorable sales outcomes, strive to discover the learning opportunities in each moment.

3. Repeat successful behaviors. If something works, keep doing it. This is the secret of success at any level of competition.

Business is not a game that requires perfection. You only need to figure out ways to stay ahead of the competition. Identify the behaviors that will consistently improve your performance and you will be well on your way to creating a powerful sales discipline. ■