

Turn On, Tune In— or Drop Out

When the going gets tough, the tough get connected. Knowing how to use PDAs, PC spreadsheets, and similar tech tools has become a core survival skill for sales personnel. By Rick Davis



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In my September column, I illustrated the impact the technological revolution has had on business communication and, in particular, the careers of salespeople. This month I'll describe opportunities the technological revolution presents for those intent on improving their sales careers.

Personal computers enable salespeople to manage information incredibly efficiently through database systems, spreadsheets, word processors, and personal digital assistants (PDAs). But an astounding number of salespeople have yet to adopt these technologies. That is an error in judgment that puts their careers in jeopardy.

I am reminded of the cartoon in which a warrior is at the front of his tent fighting a battle with bows and arrows. His assistant is trying to draw his attention to the salesman at the back of the tent, to which the warrior responds, "I have no time for a salesman! I'm in the heat

of battle." The salesman was attempting to sell a rapid-fire Gatling gun.

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Hard Times

As I prepared for a recent presentation, it struck me that most of the salespeople have never had to endure a serious slowdown in our industry or, for that matter, the economy at large. Salespeople have been able to simply service customers reactively and enjoy constant economic growth. This fact, coupled with constant material price increases,

has enabled salespeople to enjoy lucrative times without having to upgrade their sales skills.

But these days, success and survival are about speed and the ability to adapt on the move. Every day, the cheetah, one of the fastest animals on earth, arises to hunt its prey. Success comes to the fastest cheetah and its victim will be the slowest zebra in the herd. It is no different for salespeople.

Consider the management of database information. There are a number of software options—Act, Goldmine, Microsoft Outlook, and salesforce.com, to name a few—that enable salespeople to manage immense amounts of information at the touch of a button. Yet rather than employ these technologies, many salespeople still adhere to ancient methods of information management, such as the ever-popular stack of business cards wrapped in a rubber band.

Sell Sheet

If you have ever found yourself looking feverishly for a misplaced phone number or regretting your inability to locate an important contact, then

and realize simultaneously that in the slowing economy—much like the dry season in the wild—every opportunity for a new customer must be explored.

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you probably realize the importance of organizing information more effectively. But if you need another example, consider two salespeople who have a lull between scheduled appointments

momentum in the relationship. Before the meeting is concluded, he schedules a firm appointment to discuss a sales opportunity. Meanwhile, the other salesman still is plodding through his

stack of business cards. Ultimately, he discovers he won't have time after all to squeeze an extra stop into his day.

Survival Skills

Besides the obvious increase in productivity, the technologically savvy salesman is able to rapidly manage larger amounts of information. For example, upon learning of the unique aspects of the prospect's business and upcoming project challenges, the technologically savvy salesman enters that data into his computer while the plodding salesman may scribble a few notes on the back of a business card; eventually, the plodding salesman discovers he is about as ready for the dry season as a toothless, aging cheetah.

The future Sales Leaders of our industry will most assuredly be those that manage larger amounts of information than their competitors do and do so faster than the plodders. Consider the

following if you want to be among the success stories.

1. Plan a database strategy. You may not realize it now, but the information you gather today will be the information that gives you

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power that endures for many years in your career. And the only powerful way to manage that information is with modern tools of technology.

To get started, just visit your local office supply store and buy some

database software. The worst thing that could happen is you invest \$200 and later discover a better method. But this is part of the process of self-improvement and becoming the fitter performer in the jungle of sales.

2. Use spreadsheets to manage data. There is almost no better way to manage large amounts of numeric data than a spreadsheet. Spreadsheets are simply tables of information that enable you to track relevant data such as prospecting efforts, customer purchases, sales projections, and more. The problem for many salespeople is that they feel intimidated because of their inabilities. The key is not whether you know how to use a spreadsheet, but rather is the way in which you want to manage

information. Figure out what information you want to manage and then go to work. You'll quickly discover that spreadsheets are easy to use and your grasp of important career information will quickly improve.

3. Make your information portable. Speed and maneuverability are contingent upon your ability to quickly access information. PDAs and laptop computers make quick information access readily available. Invest in a device that will permit you to manage information while on the go.

The most important aspect of your career development is the investment you make in yourself. There is no need to wait for someone else to provide you with the technological tools. If you are waiting for the price of computers to come down, you are late. And the longer you wait, the further behind the pack you will be. ■