



Adapt!

Attention to detail could save your company

I have just returned from presenting at a sales conference. In attendance were 500 sales professionals from North America who are responsible for sales across different business channels: education, government, large businesses and small business. During the conference, salespeople were talking about the way that their customers are using PowerPoint presentations to convey a blunt message: “If you expect to do business with us, be prepared to sharpen your pencil!”

Does this sound familiar?

This economy is unlike anything our country or the world has experienced before. The train is off the tracks, and there is much debate about how to get it back online. The pressure to make concession demands is greater than ever. For many, it's easy to rationalize giving up margin to close a deal. But it makes no sense to go out of business trying to buy business. Instead, be adaptive while staying true to the key fundamentals:

Be proactive and strategic

Meet with your leadership team weekly if possible. During these meetings discuss: market conditions, best and worst scenarios and explore viable survival strategies. In every market, there are opportunities. Explore the practicality of each, decide which ones are realistic and then develop a flexible game plan so you can leverage your best potential.

Stay close to your sales team. Openly discuss workable strategies and tactics. Run through the potential scenarios they are likely to encounter and outline a plan of action so they are prepared to take action. Rapidly changing market conditions require a quick reaction time.

“Stay close to your sales team. Openly discuss workable strategies and tactics. Run through the potential scenarios they are likely to encounter and outline a plan of action so they are prepared to take action.”

Optimize sales effort

I encourage you to take an honest look at your sales team and ask yourself:

- » Is this the team that will get us through these difficult times?
- » Is the structure in place to optimize their performance?

It always takes me aback when I hear a sales manager describe his or her sales team's performance as a bell curve – one third are top performers, one third are mediocre performers and one third are low performers. I have to ask myself, “Why isn't the ratio of top performers higher?” If you eliminate your lower performing salespeople, territories become larger and your top performers have more opportunity to generate incremental business.

Your sales structure is also critically

important. Your best people should be out meeting with and talking to prospects and customers, not sitting behind a desk doing paperwork. With the right administrative support, a top performer

is freed up to invest more time conducting research and strategizing opportunities with prospects and customers. A good administrator can support one to three people: process paperwork, input data, schedule/follow up with appointments, track orders, handle local marketing, etc.

Retool marketing strategies

Develop new value offerings to appeal to customers who have business needs, but limited budgets. Explore re-packaging, re-bundling or scaling back your product and service offerings to offer more competitive price points. Real business needs exist, but operating budgets are shrinking. Without a deliberate pricing strategy, most sales people will cave under pressure and give up margin. Be proactive – discuss effective negotiation strategies and price options.

Reprinted from March 20 - April 2, 2009

Strategize sales opportunities

Invest in one-on-one time with each salesperson. Find out how they are feeling. Fear and sadness is natural – we are living in scary times. Talk about what you can do to best support them. Sometimes, just to have a safe place to talk is all that is needed.

Then, work together to identify the top 20 or 30 potential opportunities within their territory. The number is insignificant – what's important is to have a viable list of prospects. Discuss each prospect and then develop a game plan for each possibility.

During your meeting, discuss the types of resistance that the sales person may run up against and how to overcome these issues. Then, take it one step further and role-play the potential scenarios. The sales person should walk away from this meeting with a realistic plan where he or she can be proactive and focused.

Be a vigilant optimist and a realist

Team members will feed off of your emotional energy. Demonstrate emotional resolve, but be realistic. Be willing to test new ideas, then re-calibrate.

When faced with a roadblock or impasse, strategize how to overcome or move beyond it. Your team will encounter more no's in this down-turned economy than they are accustomed to. This can be discouraging. You might notice from time to time, that even your top performers may

lose their emotional balance. When this happens, talk candidly about how they are feeling. Honor them – don't try to cajole them into feeling something other than what's real for them. Just be present.

Offer to spend a day with him or her making calls, writing letters, doing whatever it takes to help him or her build their pipeline. Having a buddy to work alongside them, will do more to lift the feeling of overwhelm or doom than most any other intervention. When people break through that feeling of isolation it's amazing how quickly they re-engage. With the right support and direction, you can maximize your cumulative sales effort and reap the rewards of an active pipeline.

Resist the urge to tell your team what to do. Instead, to the degree possible, make them part of the solution. Act as a facilitator and help them think through situations and develop strategies. This will enable them to think on their own and empower them to take initiative.

It's becoming clear that in this economy, everyone may have to work harder and be more creative to secure new business – the wins will be sweet and many of the losses, uncontrollable casualties. Savor the victories. It's fun to win, especially when the odds are against you. ■

Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and consulting firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344.