

# All pulling together

Published in Winning Edge Magazine



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# All pulling together

Companies must put sales at the heart of their business to survive and thrive, says Annalize Cuthill, Sales Director at Huthwaite International

**The role of the sales professional has changed substantially in the past decade. With access to the internet, buyers often know as much about the product as the seller. Plus, with the advent of the sophisticated, multi-phase procurement processes, positive relationships have to be established with a much broader range of individuals within the buying organisation in order to advance and secure the sale.**

Salespeople understand the demands of this more complex role but, in many cases, the rest of the company remain unaware of the unprecedented level of skill required to successfully sell today. At the same time, sellers can perceive the actions of their fellow employees as sometimes obstructing, rather than furthering, the sale.

Forward-thinking companies, however, recognise the real value of selling and the impact that the rest of the business can have on delivering a strong bottom line. They have realised that sales is an underlying philosophy, not simply a functional department, and that sales-oriented behaviours must be ingrained in the company ethos.

Therefore, to bring in and retain business, salespeople need the support of the rest of their colleagues. However, do they recognise this? Then again, how can they involve the broader business effectively in sales generation and retention?

One thing is clear: sales must move from a siloed 'solo hero' mindset to one of interacting proactively with colleagues across the business, so

ensuring they take full advantage of all the resources and skills at their disposal in delivering a positive customer experience.

In order to make this happen effectively, both parties must come together, recognising and respecting the other's role in the sales process and working as a team in sharing a common goal... the success of the business.

## Unified approach

There is a growing understanding at senior level that, throughout an organisation, there are many employees who can influence the sale to some degree. Many would echo the sentiments of a sales director at the end of a recent training seminar who remarked: *"I thought we only had eight salespeople here. Now I see we have hundreds."*

None of these has 'sales' in their job title. Indeed, some might even recoil from the view that they have any connection with selling. Yet their behaviour directly impacts on how a customer or prospect may view the organisation overall.

As with anyone of whom this is true, they can be trained and developed to deploy behaviours that will improve both the recognition and conversion of new sales opportunities and retention of existing clients.

At one level, of course, looking at how a receptionist or part-time chauffeur taking customers to the airport can contribute directly to the sales effort may seem little more than a restatement of the need for good customer service. Yet it is so much more.

By adopting a fully customer-centric stance, the concept of putting sales at the very heart of the business underpins highly pragmatic and strongly research-based sales performance improvement programmes that challenge the perceived worth of the sales role.

It drives a fundamental shift that restores the value of selling, encouraging the belief organisation-wide that sales is not the exclusive preserve of the sales team. As a result, rather than the traditionally narrow view of sales as a different department, it becomes a philosophy which defines the organisation's whole culture and is fundamental to the way the company does business.

To attract customers – and keep them – salespeople need the support of the rest of their colleagues, especially those in support functions who may spend significant periods of time in direct contact with the client and often on their premises.

Through focusing on the sales function, therefore, behaviours are learned, retained and applied at every level – from the way incoming calls are handled, through

accounting, technical support and even in the post room.

### Multiple touch points

It is sometimes said that 'every customer touch point is a sales opportunity'. As such, this becomes more important as the quality of the buyer/seller relationship takes over from the product or service as the key purchasing differentiator. Further, in complex, costly and multi-tier procurements in particular, so the number of such touch points will increase and operate at several different levels between the two organisations.

The delivery of a typical IT product offers an ideal example of the range of non-sales personnel interacting directly with the customer and how opportunities to realise the sales potential, such contacts provide are commonly missed.

At the outset, the pre-sales team (sometimes called technical consultants) are often ideally placed to ask questions, yet fail to gather information which could be used to inform the sales process. Similarly, post-sales will, over time, typically involve implementation, training, upgrades and maintenance, all of which involve customer contact, with the opportunity to enhance – or spoil – the broader relationship between the two companies.

This offers many parallels with other manufacturing and service

organisations. Critically in each case, such employees are not perceived as 'sellers' by the client, who is more likely to be open about the nature of the problems faced and their resulting needs. Non-sales staff actually spending time on the customer's premises can significantly increase the opportunity to identify up-selling and cross-selling opportunities, by communicating these to the relevant sales staff using a common language.

This also offers a further advantage in helping build a longer-term trading relationship. The more the vendor organisation becomes enmeshed and embedded with the client in this way – by adding essential value to their processes through the quality of such contacts – the more difficult it becomes for the vendor to be substituted.

### A 'real world' response

However, all this comes with a health warning. Not everyone can be made into a salesperson. That would be both unattainable and counter-productive to the broader sales effort.

It is no more sensible to encourage the purchase ledger clerk to imagine himself a 'super-seller, than for a regional sales manager to attempt to balance the creditor book. By contrast, every employee should be encouraged to think: *"how is my next action going to make it easier for our business to make a sale?"*

As a first step in enabling staff to adopt the right behaviours, sales training methodologies can be adapted for a non-sales audience. These will establish the concept of the buying cycle in their minds, define where typically they might fit within that cycle and determine how they can be influential in moving the process forward.

**"Every Employee should be encouraged to think: 'How is my next action going to make it easier for our business to make a sale?'"**

It is vital for staff to learn how to recognise areas of client dissatisfaction and then communicate these to their sales counterparts. In this way it is a highly practical approach to understanding each client's business, how they are organised and, ultimately, how they sell.

It is about adding and creating value at every given opportunity, having a greater awareness of and anticipating clients' needs – even before they may be aware of them – and finding exactly the right solutions for them.

At a time when customer retention is as high on the corporate agenda as customer generation, it also ensures a consistently high level of service quality, as the business presents a unified face to the customer.

### Taking a lead

Regrettably, despite the changing nature of the buyer/seller relationship, the 'career ghettoisation' of sales continues to persist in the wider business environment. It is now time therefore to give sales the credibility it deserves.

To achieve this, sales must be integrated and debated at top management level and given its rightful place on the corporate agenda – just as, on the other side of the negotiating table, procurement is now recognised as of strategic importance to the buying organisation. Marginalising sales as some kind of 'black art' or dismissing it as irrelevant to the way they do business is a luxury companies can no longer afford.

Within a fast-changing world in which standing still is not an option, salespeople now have both the opportunity and obligation to lead from the front in putting sales at the very core of their business.



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