

Blame The Salesman!

As I was enjoying a beer with a longstanding friend recently, we got to reminiscing over the many good sales people (and some not so good) that we had known, individually and collectively over our long and varied sales careers.

Apart from the “Where is he now? Wonder what he’s doing?” theme that threaded its way through our conversation, we somehow alighted on the rhetorical question, “Why do some excellent sales people fail to perform with certain employers, and conversely, why do some apparently mediocre sales people achieve noteworthy success at certain times in their career?”

I’m sure the question crosses the mind of every sales manager or director at least once a day.

We didn’t have a clear cut and agreed answer, of course.

We looked at each other, deep frowns on our middle aged foreheads, and attempted to answer this conundrum, dredging up all of our accumulated knowledge on the subject.

Pros and Cons

“Not enough or inappropriate training?”

“Poor motivation?”

“No aptitude?”

“Doesn’t smile enough?”

“Good listener?”

“Great closer?”

“Gets to the bottom of the customer’s needs?”

“Can’t articulate the USP?”

“Sticks to the sales process?”

As we droned on a light began to dawn as we thought deeper about our puzzle. Not a blinding flash of light, more like the gradual cranking up of a dimmer switch.

Perhaps we had been looking at the problem from the wrong point of view. It had been hardwired into our psyche. We had been indoctrinated to believe that any fault in failing to meet a sales target was singularly down to the sales person.

It must be, surely? If you failed wasn’t it a matter of attitude (must always be positive, regardless of the fact that your dearest aunt had popped her clogs that very morning), or circumstances (why, oh, why did Superspeed Logistics have to be taken over by Global Dropshippers), or territory (why did they give me Grimsby), or target (what planet are they on? This is 20% up on last year and I worked my backside off to make that) or longevity in post (Ron’s been here forever, knows all the wrinkles, and plays the system), or plain old cronyism (Ben’s always sucking up to the boss,

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even goes out socially with him and his missus; he gets given all the plum prospects).

They all seemed logical. They all seemed plausible. They are all only part of the story.

They are all only part of the story because we know (and you do to) that there are many exceptions to such obvious causes.

The normal process in our experience goes something like this:

Chief Executive: "We promised the market to improve our shareholder returns this coming year. Now chaps, what this means is that we have to sell more. As we all know margins on our current product range are reducing, and it will be some time before we get the new stuff on to the streets. So we need more sales of what we have. Correct, Charles?"

Finance Director: "Spot on Robert. All the projections show that we need a 20% increase over last year's sales. That should do the trick."

Chief Executive (looking menacingly at the Sales Director): "Any problem with that, Richard?"

Sales Director (sheepishly, fingers crossed behind his back): "Er, no. I think we can manage that."

An over simplification, naturally. But you get the gist. Of course, for those of us sales people who have been around this particular block many times, and putting power politics aside for the moment, we all know what the problem is.

It isn't the Chairman. He's from a legal background and the world of selling is a complete mystery to him. But he does know that he and the business won't survive without sales.

It isn't the Finance Director. Sales belong to that line on his spreadsheet that simply makes everything look good, or bad.

Then it must be the Sales Director (a 'he' in this case). It's his job to 'make the numbers' so if he fails to do so, it's as plain as a pikestaff where the blame lies. Plus he's got a wife and kids and a huge mortgage to support (after all, he is a salesman). This seems like the situation on a plate of bacon and eggs - the chicken is involved but the pig is committed.

Let me explain. When businesses (either newly founded or setting their forward goals) do their business planning, the Sales Director is usually a party, but in many instances as a bit player. At some point he will be handed a figure, cast in stone, not dissimilar to the manner in which Moses received the Tablet on Mount Sinai. Except there will only be one, very visible commandment. And he won't, I stress won't, argue with his particular boss over whether it's right or wrong. Trust me on this. So, he is the involved chicken in this situation.

He'll then decide that in order to make this number he'll need a plan. Now, our Sales Director is a very well educated and savvy man and he knows he will need a strategy

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in order to convince his people to climb yet another massive obstacle, higher even than the previous one which left him with a surprising number of casualties. So he has his number, he knows how many sales people he has, and he knows that his resellers can hardly be asked to provide more than a nominal increase in contribution. So his maths in theory is simple. Take the figure handed to him from on high, subtract what he feels can be contributed by his resellers, and then divide by the number of sales people. Easy! Everybody's happy! Until a reseller goes bust, or his best sales person leaves to go to the competition, or his products are in the declining part of their lifecycle. Or motivation levels hit an all time low.

Now consider his involvement as the pig, metaphorically speaking of course. Maybe, just maybe he can get his own number accepted first. He will need to present a thoroughly researched and substantiated plan to succeed. So he builds his strategy house, but this time from the foundations up. He asks himself some telling questions, the answers to which remarkably, are often absent from the business plan.

1. Do I have an agreed, documented sales strategy? If not, why not? And if I have, is it truly connected to the organisation's business plan and will it stay that way?
2. How well does the Management Team understand my strategy? Have I explained it to them fully?
3. Do I know what our target markets are? Have I focused my people in the most profitable areas?
4. How well does the Management Team understand our unique selling propositions in each market?
5. How is our sales revenue performing in each market? Do I know why the French love our products and the Germans won't touch them?
6. How are our distributors/resellers/agents sales revenues performing? Are they motivated to sell our products?
7. Do I have a consistent and well understood method for setting sales targets? Do my team buy into the way I set targets?

He wisely decides to become connected to the rest of the organisation and marshal his thoughts around what will be required to impress his boss.

The problem is he is too busy with the day to day operations to do it alone.

So what is the solution?

The real person that this story is based on hired a sales improvement specialist to assist him and his Management Team. Their brief was to develop a strategic sales plan; to assess his organisation's capability to carry out that plan; and to develop or confirm his Go To Market strategy.

So now there is science behind his number and buy in from the board (who have been actively involved in developing the plan). The Sales Director in this story now

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has a detailed plan to measure progress against. If things don't proceed as expected he will have an early warning, in time to identify the cause and make the necessary adjustments. Now, sales scapegoats should be the only redundancies.

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