

Are You Missing a Key Ingredient?

What it takes to build an effective sales training program.

By Marc Trezza

While both strategic and tactical excellence are essential to building a solid sales team, neither is sufficient by itself; the two must be balanced to achieve success.

If you execute the right strategy poorly, you will not be profitable. If you execute a poor strategy with excellence, your sales efforts will fail. You must have a creative, powerful, real-world strategy and carry it out with commitment, skill and well-trained salespeople. That last bit is key, because your training program is the bridge between your strategy and tactics.

Your sales strategy should include an understanding of how buyer perceptions and habits have changed, your agency differentiators and how to turn market information into a competitive advantage.

Your sales tactics should cover real-world phone skills—including limitations of the telephone—how to field objections, how to sell trust, presentation skills that close profitable deals and how to get it right early (getting a client and keeping a client are two different things—an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure).

Taken together, these principles can help you transcend old barriers and achieve goals that were previously out of reach—as one agency client found when it went from failing to win even one state contract in 30 years to winning two in nine months.

But integrating these principles effectively into your sales training program requires creativity, discipline and excellent sales leadership. You need a leader who has the ability to execute ideas and motivate the sales team to implement the new strategy.

Everything starts at the top. The killers of positive change are executives and managers who do not want to be challenged, consider disagreement

disloyalty and value managers who follow orders over those who are innovators.

A leader who doesn't know how to get the best out of people will almost always derail your sales efforts. You can't get the best out of people by crushing innovation or initiative. If we hire people "smaller" than we are, we become a company of dwarfs. If we hire people who are "bigger" than we are, we become a company of giants.

The ability to outclass and outsell your competition may prove to be our industry's only true sustainable advantage. Where absolute superiority is not attainable, you must produce a relative superiority by making skillful use of what you have, which often means bringing in the expertise to get it done.

The right training combined with the right sales management and leadership will enable your agency to attain new heights in sales performance, which will protect and build your agency's financial future.

When you cannot have absolute market superiority, your sales team must pit your agency's strengths against your competitors' weaknesses to achieve relative superiority.

Think about the weaknesses of your competitors' sales efforts. Do they use:

- Self-involved, seller-based pitches?
- Proposals that are boring recitations of facts that do nothing to distinguish them from other qualified agencies?
- Antiquated, buzz-word-filled brochures that are essentially "me-me-me"?

Do their sales people:

- Lack operational knowledge that matters to buyers?
- Use canned sales pitches?
- Rely on decades-old tactics long ago rejected by most buyers?

Understanding your competitors' salespeople is an essential first step in differentiating your agency in a meaningful,

positive way. Knowing how to get that information is the first step in developing a successful strategy. Knowing what to do with that information is the first step in developing successful tactics.

Another key element of a successful marriage of strategy and tactics is flexibility. At one agency I worked with, the CEO called a company-wide meeting and laid down the law: "The next person who utters the words, 'But that's not how we've always done it,' will be fired." Almost immediately, the resistance to change broke down and we began to achieve some major victories.

Winning isn't easy. It requires simultaneous planning and action. Planning is the basis for change—then you assess, revise, adapt and overcome. Adapting to the



Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of seven articles examining innovative sales techniques based on The Art of War by Sun Tzu. Read the first article in the May issue of Collector magazine.

“expected unexpected” is necessary, making adjustments as you go.

Business (or, in this case, collection sales) and war work the same way. Victory requires going around resistance and focusing well-trained, well-led resources where results can be attained. When resistance is met, it is assessed and you adapt by going around until you get through. It requires an empowered front-line offensive with results that can exceed any ordinary effort.

You need to give your salespeople the tools to do their job well. That means creating marketing materials that distinguish you from other top agencies and attract real interest from buyers.

It means professional sales management and coaching that maximizes salespeople's time and task management in a highly productive way. It means well-led and well-coached salespeople who are trained to understand true consultative selling from the buyer's point of view, and how to collaborate with buyers for a mutually profitable quality partnership.

It means salespeople trained to have real operational knowledge that will get the respect, interest and cooperation of buyers. It means salespeople trained in true phone

skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills and deal development. Anything less is a lack of commitment and a recipe for failure.

On a 1-10 scale, rate your agency's collection management expertise. Next, using the same scale, rate your agency's sales management expertise.

If there is a disparity of more than one point, your agency is out of balance. That's not healthy for any agency that wants to protect its financial future. Attrition happens, clients go away, economic factors change—and the only real protection you have is a robust sales effort that consistently builds profitable growth.

For a CEO, this is where recognition collides with commitment. Accept the consequences of that imbalance or resolve

to protect your agency's future health. Accept unhappiness with anemic sales or commit to positive change. If sales are not great, there are no other alternatives.

Strategic initiatives must focus on the critical factors that give you a competitive advantage. When you have a unique enough advantage, you are able to get a much more significant portion of the market. What counts is both the strength of your "attack" and the speed with which it is delivered. If you are going to unleash better-trained, more professional salespeople on the marketplace, it's best to do it before your competitor does.

Playing catch-up is way better than simply surrendering the advantage to your competitors, because that way you will get to at least a level playing field. But getting out there first with this kind of comprehensive professionalism enables

you to establish market dominance early, with all the obvious benefits to that.

A core principle of Insight Selling is the focus on the buyer. The driver of success in this approach is what the buyer wants:

- To be listened to, not pitched to.
- To be engaged by a salesperson who is knowledgeable about operational issues, including procedures, capacity planning, implementation process, quality assurance, compliance and data security.
- A collaborative process designed to deliver on the buyer's definition of positive change.
- Not having their time wasted by sales approaches that offer nothing that the buyer does not already get from their agencies now (except empty performance claims).

Have you trained your sales team to address these needs?

Tactical flexibility is the hallmark of successful collection sales. Well-trained collection salespeople understand their agency's capabilities and limitations, and within appropriate guidelines feel empowered to take whatever actions needed to serve the client.

These sales professionals sincerely want to work with the prospective client to build a mutually beneficial relationship, and they have been given the tools and skills to do so. These collection salespeople will become unstoppable and their agency will achieve exponential profitable growth.

That agency will be happy with sales. ▣

Marc Trezza is president of Search Net Corporation (www.searchnetcorp.com/agency). He has been providing sales management solutions to collection agencies since 1990. He can be reached at snctrezza@mindspring.com or (518) 263-3500.

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