

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, 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:

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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. 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). But is it a classic case of '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 God 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 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 your involvement as the pig, metaphorically speaking of course. You, the wise and creative Sales Director have thought about this long and hard, and decided that it would be interesting to swap roles with your God. Only you know you will never be God. Maybe, just maybe though you can get your own Tablet in God's hands before he has time to think. And you will do it in a scientific and reproducible manner. So you build your strategy house, but this time from the foundations up. You ask yourself some telling questions, the answers to which remarkably, are absent in 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?
(The 'I am in danger of going off in a different direction' syndrome).
2. How well does the Management Team understand my strategy? Have I explained it to them fully?
(The 'There I go doing my own thing again' syndrome).

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3. Do I know what our target markets are? Have I focused my people in the most profitable areas?
(The 'I am selling ice cream to the Eskimos when I should be selling it to the Hottentots' syndrome).
4. How well does the Management Team understand our USPs in each market?
(The 'They always argue with me when I tell them why we need a bell in France and a whistle in Germany' syndrome).
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?
(The 'I haven't got a clue but I'll muddle along to make the numbers any way I can' syndrome).
6. How are our distributors/resellers/agents sales revenues performing? Are they motivated to sell our products?
(The 'I've got enough problems with my sales people without babysitting the channel' syndrome).
7. Do I have a consistent and well understood method for setting sales targets? Do my team buy into the way I set targets?
(The 'Look people, it's not my fault. I've been given this, and we'll have to live with it, see?' syndrome.)

You wisely decide to become connected to the rest of the organisation and marshal your thoughts around what you will require to impress God.

The problem is you're too busy with the day to day operations to do it alone.

So what do you do?

You engage a sales improvement specialist, of course! Now the sales improvement specialist *isn't* there to tell you how to sell (you already know that); he isn't there to tell you what training your people need (they may well not need any); he isn't there to do your telesales (your people love cold calling), and he isn't there to tell you should have a CRM system (although you very well might).

He *is* there to assist you and your Management Team to audit or develop your strategic sales plan; to assess your organisation's capability to carry out that plan; and to develop or confirm your Go To Market strategy.

The objective being to bridge the gap between the figure you silently whistled at when you overheard it in the Executive Washroom, and what you know should be achievable if you get it right..

So now God (who has been actively involved) will have the greatest of confidence that there is science behind his single commandment to you, and you will have the confidence to know if things aren't working out as expected you will be in a position to identify the causes, discuss it with God, and together make the necessary adjustments.

Any maybe not always blame the salesman.

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