



Sales Coaching and Value Creation



Most of us believe that we are above-average drivers, but we're not. The same is true with coaching. In fact, despite the prevalence of "coachability" in firms' sales hiring criteria, sales managers even overestimate the amount of time they actually devote to coaching their people. Sandler Training finds that only 15% of sales managers spend as much as 25% of their time on coaching.

Many managers believe coaching is about sitting down with a rep to examine sales results and discuss pending deals. That's an audit, not a skill-building interaction. And few managers will admit they don't really know how to give developmental feedback versus a "sell more" sermon.

Effective coaching begins by recognizing that a sales force comprises people with different capabilities and approaches. A manager must adapt feedback to individuals and their behaviors in relation to important tasks. Start by diagnosing whether the improvement need is motivation or ability. Some reps work hard, but lack certain capabilities: can training enhance those skills? Others demonstrate capability but lack motivation or effort: are their abilities better utilized in a different role, or is there an incentive that increases smart effort in their current role?

Then, good coaching ties the relevant improvement issue to specific actions in your company's sales conversion funnel. Consider

three common situations and how each is a distinct business-development issue where different coaching initiatives are relevant:

Prospecting. Research indicates a high correlation in most situations between the number of calls a rep makes and sales outcomes. Effort counts, but some reps have problems with prospecting. A common cause is spending too much time on unqualified opportunities. Coaching here can usefully focus on better customer selection criteria.

Other behaviors that dilute prospecting are time management issues, especially in call-intensive SaaS models. Coaching should then focus on setting a cadence of calls and perhaps metrics to monitor that cadence weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Finally, a surprising number of reps are reluctant to make cold calls, or they abandon contact attempts prematurely—e.g., after 3 or 4 attempts when it typically takes 6 or more attempts to reach prospects who have indicated

interest by going to your web site and providing requested information. Here, coaching must make clear the realities of customer contact in that market and confront a decision: is this rep a good fit for this sales model?

Opportunity Creation. Other reps may not have an issue with prospecting. In fact, their contacts and demo's may be way above the average for the sales force. But they have low conversion rates from contact and demo to proposal or trial. Here, the issue is not effort. Rather, is the rep building trust and credibility on the initial contact and during the demo? Coaching might involve having this rep observe others who do have high conversion rates. Or the salesperson might not be conducting discovery calls in sufficient depth. If so, coach the rep on questioning techniques with prospects.

Part of professional development in this situation is explaining how lead qualification deficiencies can result in poor performance despite good effort. Reps with many contacts but low conversion rates are often spending too much time with poorly qualified prospects. As a result, time spent there leaves less time for in-depth discovery calls, and so on in a downward spiral. Coaching is about breaking this Gordian knot with appropriate advice geared to that individual.

Closing. Another common problem is the rep whose behaviors are exemplary at each stage of the selling cycle except the crucial one--closing the sale. Poor close rates often involve a failure to develop the right sense of purchase urgency; coaching for this rep should focus on articulating the total value proposition and how various components translate into customer ROI.

Closing issues also often have root causes earlier in the cycle. The rep might not have

gotten beyond surface needs in proposals sent to prospects. Coaching can correct this, and also help the rep conduct appropriate follow-up and adjustments after a proposal is submitted.

On the other hand, closing might be a failure to reach the right buying authority. In other words, the rep might be doing all the right things but with the wrong person—someone who lacks a budget and purchase authority. Coaching here should focus on how to help this rep get the right people at prospects to attend demo's and provide input for proposals.

Performance issues typically differ by rep and in terms of sales tasks. Beware of one-size-fits-all coaching or a focus limited to outcomes. Coaching should clarify the different strengths, weaknesses, and developmental needs inherent in that person's ability to sell your product in your market at your price. It lets manager and rep then concentrate on behaviors that can be improved.

Remember that sales "reps" represent your firm to customers, and coaching is about where value is created or destroyed in most businesses: in the interactions between your people and those customers and prospects. As a manager, it's worth devoting quality time and effort to this key activity. ■

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