

The weakest links

Which parts of the IT sales team need most attention?

Let's first look at the main job functions, summarise the strengths and weaknesses (see table) and then I'll stick my neck out with the weakest links...

Marketing traditionally comes in for much criticism from salespeople, but often only have themselves to blame. Recently a global telecoms operator asked my company to become involved in a major product launch. Our assignment was to spend 30 minutes giving a sales masterclass at the end of the launch, which we discovered was over 300 information packed slides delivered over 6 hours – nearly a slide a minute. It took many difficult meetings for us to convince them that they were not only going to waste a lot of money, the results would actually be counter-productive.

Senior sales management used to talk about empowering salespeople but in too many cases this has given way to management by process, short-termism and allowing the rest of the organisation to interfere with the sales teams through unreasonable demands. We recently had to make major changes to a project to gather the views of senior sales leaders on the key challenges they believed they would be facing in two to three years time – as too few had a view as to how they would be operating in more than 12 months.

First line sales managers often forget that they employ people to sell and that their role is to lead, support, coach and assist in the sales process – they are now the key change enablers in the sales operation. We regularly come across sales managers who put people on a training course, don't explain why the development is important and don't support salespeople with coaching. They allow themselves to be sucked into admin issues, perfectly illustrated by a sales manager working for a major integrator who recently gave me a stream of excuses as to why she couldn't go out on calls with salespeople, but was proud that she responded to all her emails within an hour.

Salespeople have many people conspiring to make them act more like a shopkeeper than a true professional solution seller. Their management and company may do a lot or a little to help, but they need to take responsibility for their own behaviour and professional development. These days of instant, always-

on communications has led to an expectation of instant answers – the challenge is to manage your customers rather than them managing you, which means fixing real issues rather than symptoms. A recent example is a successful account director working for a global hardware vendor who was complaining about the number of issues that he had to get involved with, and how other parts of his firm were letting him down. Yet it hadn't occurred to him to bring the account team together and agree responsibilities, a few simple processes and how they were going to educate the customer in a way of working that would give them better service and mean that he was less stretched with mundane activities.

A reader of my last two articles asked if I detected that solution selling and professionalism were getting better or worse. Obviously there are wide discrepancies but overall we see an improvement in understanding solution selling, although there is a long way to go in terms of practising it. Professionalism has gone backwards, not so much in terms of surface issues such as dress, grooming and quality of presentation



Steve Hoyle

materials, but certainly in terms of getting the basics right every time. Despite the availability of excellent tools, salespeople appear to do less research, are less prepared for meetings, spend less time crafting and planning strategy, don't review wins and losses in real detail, and don't take the opportunity to continually improve their capability.

So who is the weakest link?

- First line sales management, who should be driving change and accelerating revenue, but are often ill equipped, bogged down with administration, and forced to act as team leaders rather than true managers.
- Sales operations, who have only come to prominence in recent years, and who over-simplify, look for one size fits all approaches and are obsessed with process. We do need some tools and replicable methods, but the pendulum has swung too far away from recognition that selling in complex B2B situations is an imprecise art that can benefit from some tools.
- Salespeople – having to refresh or retrofit the basics of professional salescraft.

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Steve Hoyle is chairman of ProAct Business Development. See www.proactbd.com

| Function | Highlights | Lowlights |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Senior sales leadership | Professional and inspiring | Medium term focus at best |
| First line sales management | Hard working and caring | Understanding the difference between being a team leader and managing |
| Senior marketing management | Understanding industry trends | Disconnect with sales and rest of the company |
| Local marketing | Enthusiastic and creative | Measuring the impact on business performance |
| Sales training | Depth of knowledge and quality of materials | Relevance to practical application |
| Sales operations | Strategic thinking, systems and processes | Over reliance on process, which actually hampers sales. The law of unintended consequences |
| Presales | Technical knowledge, professional attitude | Technical account management |
| Internal sales | Telephone manner, hard work | Disconnected from the overall sales approach |
| New business sales | Understanding value propositions | Controlled, aggressive plans and activity |
| Account management | Development of multi-function account teams | Demand generation |