Strategic Selling

What got you here may not get you there

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You have sales reps in your bullpen who are working harder than ever before. They may be selling the same number of machines, but the average selling price has decreased. In addition, the gross profit margin (percentage and dollars) has gone down. This is a trend that will not reverse — and it may accelerate. While you may be growing your business, that growth is likely based on taking business from your competitors. You see the trends in the industry and know you must combine competitive takeaways with an increasing set of products and services to be successful.

It is likely that you have recently attended an industry event or read an article in a trade journal outlining the need to invest in a new business activity (like software solutions or managed network services) or to get your managed print services (MPS) business in order. These look like separate businesses with foreign sales processes. So how do you manage an additional business that sits next to your core business? Success is uncertain.

Your sales reps are looking for new tools and techniques. Just ask them. Chances are they like the industry, enjoy their customers and want to be successful within your company. While they generally know what to do, they are not sure exactly how to get there. In the past, you could rely on the manufacturer for assistance. But many of these new solutions are not made by your traditional core manufacturer. You must invest in your current sales force today if you want to succeed in this new space.

First, let us take a look back before we go forward. There has been a distinct evolution of the sales process in the office technology channel. If you started your business, or sold equipment for a company that was in start-up mode, you probably remember a very defined sales process and metrics focused on net new business. You managed a sales funnel with sales steps that looked something like this: calls, contacts, appointments, demos, proposals and closed business.

Over time, you built a base and, with it, the focus shifted to "base retention" tactics, while still focusing some attention on growing the customer base. Your reps likely migrated sales activities to accounts that were entering the "sweet spot" in the lease expiration cycle. It has been our observation that as this shift in the sales process occurred, you focused your management inspection on results (upgrades, retention, closed business, etc.) and away from activities (calls, contacts, appointments, demos, proposals, etc.).

The current emphasis is for the reps to go deeper and wider into accounts, offering a broader array of technology-based solutions to your customers. We recently talked to a client who told us that "there is no way we can put anything else on the plate for our sales reps; they have too much to sell already."

Many reps have resorted to "menu" selling, where they put a list in front of the customer (sometimes literally) and see what looks good to him (or her) that day. The problem with this approach is that success is based on timing and the balance of power in the sales process goes to the customer.

Another challenge today is that many reps have (or think they need) a different sales process for each solution type they sell. The short list of these offerings includes traditional equipment, document-centric software, MPS and managed IT services. They get frustrated and the sales process tends to resort back to "pencil selling the upgrade."

You can see the migration of three distinctly different sales processes for our industry described above. Your challenge (and opportunity) is to change the way your reps sell and how you manage. You do not need to change what you do, but rather, how you do it.

The answer to this issue is still in your sales bullpen, but it is also in your sales process. Experience has taught us that there are four steps to success:

(1) Getting to the right level (and getting better at securing appointments at all levels);

(2) Development of one consistent, repeatable process the rep can use;

(3) An ongoing sales engagement model for expanding opportunities between lease expiration cycles (some call this an account review);

(4) Adherence to a management and inspection cadence with the appropriate balance between activity and results.

Sales reps must move toward a solution and consultative approach. Failure to do so will allow your competitors to get their feet in the door.

Making More Meetings

Let's start at the very beginning, before the appointment even takes place. Lead generation should be designed to get to a new decision maker. We have been focused on the buyer of office equipment and we need to move higher in the organization. In today's competitive marketplace, core sales reps now have to do many things differently as they prepare to go after and land C-level prospects.

It starts with proper account planning. We believe account planning begins with deciding which accounts/companies you are going to pursue. Identifying potential prospects involves finding companies that fit the parameters of what your dealership has decided is an ideal client.

At the very least, we know those parameters must include sales volume, industry and employee count. Having this information allows for a better chance for you to discover a need for managed IT services, MPS, hardware, software and service contracts. Focusing on prospects within these guidelines will allow a sales rep to maximize his valuable prospecting time (which should be at least 10 to 12 hours per week) going after real, "predefined" opportunities. The account planning process needs to include identifying industry trends and business goals, and your solutions need to assist the prospect in achieving his own business goals. In simple terms, people will spend time and money to achieve their business goals.

One of the biggest time-wasting mistakes a sales rep can make is spending his prospecting time "geographically." Haphazardly approaching every business in his territory (by foot, phone or email) and canvassing everyone regardless of size, revenue or income is not a sustainable approach to prospecting. A sales rep must start his prospecting campaign by prioritizing and identifying 40 companies that fit his ideal parameters. We suggest 40 companies so a sales rep can focus and consistently contact each company on his list at least three times a week until a meeting is confirmed.

Once the companies and the specific C-level prospects have been identified, a sales rep has to schedule meetings to sit down with these prospects in order to start the sales process. There are at least two ways to accomplish this goal.

One way to get that meeting is to pursue the C-level prospects themselves. The quickest way to communicate with them is via phone and email. Systemizing your approach to include calling, emailing and re-emailing has to be part of that strategy. Being mindful of the content of that communication allows a sales rep to present a salient, well-crafted debate on why the decision maker should stop his business day to let a sales rep come in and try to sell him something he is not even thinking about. It is not a small task, but landing that meeting is the exact job description of a sales rep.

Another avenue for getting to the C-level decision maker is to be championed by a lower-level employee. Often, these are our day-to-day contacts. Research indicates that when a C-level individual receives a recommendation from a trusted subordinate to meet with a sales professional, 84 percent of the time he will "usually" or "always" accept the meeting. This sponsorship is achieved through establishing credibility as a solution provider, and describing the ways in which your products and services can assist the company beyond "speeds and feeds."

The core sales rep must combine these two approaches if he wants to stay relevant in today's environment. Sales reps must move toward a solution and consultative approach. Failure to do so will allow your competitors to get their feet in the door.

One Consistent, Repeatable Process

So now we are at the right level. Our meeting is with an executive who has a broader view and understanding of his company's business goals, problems and processes. The essence of a time-tested solution sales process is in the ability to tie a solution into helping the company achieve its business goals. Business goals represent the direction the company is seeking to go (opportunity) combined with the areas in which the company has not performed as well as it would like (pain). Companies invest time and money in achieving these goals.

Additionally (and increasingly), companies are seeking a better way to plan for technology investments. The shift in technologies that include cloud computing, mobility and social media bring with it an opportunity for companies to utilize technology for competitive advantage. Often, the best sales opportunities are associated with companies that need a technology road map created for them, which may require a virtual CIO partnership. This means a sales rep must investigate and produce technology recommendations by understanding what that specific C-level decision-maker's interests and responsibilities are at his company.

Not only must you address the issues concerning the particular individual you are approaching, but you must conduct this discovery by addressing the specific language of his industry. For example, when dealing with a law firm, it will help if the rep can include specific descriptions of its proprietary uses of technology.

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Ongoing Sales Engagement

Nearly all of the business being closed today is on lease transactions. Your reps have built their businesses by maintaining contact with their accounts, while the dealership ensures that it provides customers with high-quality service. In fact, the BTA Channel provides better service on its office equipment than virtually all other office technology providers. You leverage these great service relationships to facilitate the upgrade to the lease. The downside to our traditional sales process is that there is no real incentive for sales reps to have ongoing, meaningful account reviews with their customers between lease cycles.

Many customers are not aware of the depth and breadth of your offerings. How many times have you heard a good customer say: "I wish I would have known your company sold (pick a solution category). We just bought one and would have preferred to work with your company."

Account reviews should combine a review of the outstanding service you have provided with a discussion of additional areas you can assist with. By establishing a consistent review format, to include solution descriptions, case studies and a discussion on company direction and goals, you have an opportunity for expansion. A key metric for our clients is revenue per customer. It is a strong indicator of our success in cross-selling products and services to your base of accounts.

Management Inspection

Implementation of any new process requires practice and discipline. There is a tendency to slip back into old habits. Consistent implementation of quality processes will yield consistent results. Managers need to be able to manage a time-tested solution sales process. There should be inspection tied to activity (quantity and quality), in addition to results. The processes should be consistently utilized by all sales reps, and ongoing training and development should be part of the sales culture.

The Time is Now

As our industry evolves, our sales processes need to evolve with it. Old habits will not yield new results. There are significant opportunities for companies that choose to focus on building (and managing) new sales techniques and processes designed to deepen and widen strategies. Investing in your sales reps will bring the results you are seeking.

Now is the time to focus on the success of your current sales force. After all, you want to continue to prosper and grow your business so that you will remain successful for many years to come. ■

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Kingston, founder and president of the Kingston Training Group, is a motivational sales trainer specializing in landing qualified meetings. With more than 17 years of success in making appointments with decision makers, she is a recognized authority on lead generation, cold calling and new business development, using humor, audience participation and proven techniques in her training sessions. She has trained more than 7,000 sales reps and managers to land more meetings with their ideal prospective clients. Visit www.kingstontraining.com.

Morgan, Ryne and Kingston will be leading BTA's Building My Business webinar, "New Skills for Your Current Reps," at 4 p.m. Eastern on Wednesday, Sept. 26. Visit www.bta.org/BuildingMyBusiness to pre-register.