



If Your Canary Dies, Then Your Sales People May Need Help

Dysfunctional Sales Practices

Most people are familiar with the age-old practice of bringing a canary bird into a coal mine to see if the oxygen is acceptable for human consumption. If the poor little bird dies, then the miners would know that either the air is toxic or there isn't enough oxygen to sustain human life. I certainly hope that in these current times there are more humane methods for checking the atmosphere. No – I don't mean throwing your boss in the mines instead of a bird! I mean technological equipment that measures air quality for humans. I DO know, however, that a similar inhumane practice exists in many sales environments.

The practice I am referring to is throwing sales people into a particular situation and waiting to see if they survive (metaphorically speaking, of course). Not familiar with the practice? Well then, allow me to explain. When I work with various types of companies of various sizes and industries, the one constant that I frequently witness is that there tends to be a survival-of-the-fittest syndrome that prevails. Hiring sales people with the expectation that they will either succeed or fail in the first six-months with minimum management intervention is a common mistake that businesses make and it gives me the willies.

As the new sales rep walks in the door, he/she is faced with a new culture, new products, new customers, new markets (perhaps), and more. Heck, it's hard enough to find the bathroom the first day. Yet I see management often times expecting these newbie sales reps to fend for themselves right from the start. Oh sure, they get the obligatory orientation and product training (disguised as "sales training"). But then they are set loose to close business for the company. And, like a poor little canary bird in a lethal coal mine, they are sure to meet their demise.

What is lacking in many of these situations includes processes, standards, proper sales training, and technology. Let's tackle processes first. It pains me to see the following scenario when I am asked to work with a company to improve their customer acquisition and retention. The sales person is given a quota (in which he had no input and which was concocted by upper management based on where they believe the business should be instead of a realistic growth rate, but that's another issue). He is also given, perhaps, a territory and some product training. However, there is no process as to how he moves a prospect through the system, from suspect to prospect to customer. There are no pre-

defined steps the sales rep can follow to help identify the client's needs based on what the sales rep's company has to offer. Instead, the sales rep ends up presenting features, the same features he was taught in the so-called "sales training" he received during his orientation. The customer can't see the benefits because the sales rep didn't present the benefits because the sales rep doesn't really know or understand the benefits himself. And it all goes downhill from there.

With a sales process, the sales rep would know what steps to take during the sales cycle. In the beginning steps, he would have the appropriate marketing material that had messaging targeted to the type of prospect the sales rep was meeting with. He would have the right resources for demonstrations when he reached that pre-defined step in the process. He would know what leverage he had when it came time to negotiate the final deal so he could close the sale in a win-win scenario. Yet many companies do not have such a sales process and their sales people are left to figure all this out themselves.

The standards I included in this list have to do with replicable procedures that a sales person can count on each time he tries to make a sale. This is actually something that should be part of your sales process. Are the contracts consistent? Is the order processing the same in each case? Can he count on the same actions and events to occur when he is conducting a transaction with his client? If not, then every sale will be like re-inventing the wheel and, a) your sales people will lose valuable selling time by being less productive, and b) the actual sale will be in jeopardy since a non-standardized approach to selling is fraught with errors, delays and frustrations.

Next up is training. When asked what sort of sales training a company provides its sales people, the answer I frequently receive has something to do with products, markets, competition, and the like. Sales training has to do with skills development, including how to cold call, listen, ask the right questions, negotiate, handle objections, close, and more. Many managers believe that the sales people they hire should bring these skills with them when hired. A large part of this thinking is absolutely valid. However, times have changed and so has selling. Hence, most sales people need to learn how to apply some of these skills in our new world, and sales training is of value to both the experienced and the novice sales people.

Additionally, even though they may bring these skills to the job, that doesn't mean they are excellent at each one. You will be hard pressed to find any sales person who can do all the selling skills, from cold calling to closing, perfectly. Sales training can enhance the weaker areas even for the seasoned pro. Finally, there are studies that show that the longer a person sells, then the less effective he becomes. An example is this – after successfully selling a product or service for a long time, sales people become experts. Unfortunately, this causes a tendency for them to stop asking questions about what their prospect needs or wants. As a result, they jump right into a recommended solution that they believe is the right fit for their customer. Although they are frequently correct in their assumptions, this causes unnecessary pressure on the prospect and causes him to look elsewhere. Therefore, even seasoned sales experts need to refresh some of the selling skills that they forgot or took for granted over the years.

The final item I mentioned was technology. By this I specifically mean CRM technology. Purchasing a bunch of licenses for a CRM product and throwing it out to your sales organization to start using is a complete waste of time. Most won't use it, and those that do will all use it differently. And management won't get a single useful report or forecast as a result. If you have a sales process developed, then the CRM product should model that process in order to assist the sales people with their selling activities. CRM technology can be a tremendous benefit to sales people by informing them of their next steps in the sales process, tracking customer information, logging activities so they won't have to write status reports, keeping track of forecasted sales, more easily following up with customers and prospects, generating personalized letters and emails, and lots more.

All this doesn't come easily. Management must be committed to providing the resources and dedication needed to develop sales processes, provide sales training and customize CRM technology to produce a world-class sales organization. The returns on this investment, however, will be well worth the effort. So don't treat your sales people like a canary by throwing them into a toxic environment. Build a healthy sales environment which will guarantee their, and your, success.

Want to learn more about Sales Training, Sales Processes and CRM Technology? Check out my newest book, *CyberSelling – Using CRM Technology to Help You Sell*, at <http://www.CyberSellingBook.com>.

Good luck and good selling!

Russ Lombardo
(702) 655-5652
russ@PeakSalesConsulting.com
www.PeakSalesConsulting.com

Russ Lombardo is President of **PEAK Sales Consulting, LLC** (www.peaksalesconsulting.com) and an experienced CRM and Sales consultant, trainer, writer, speaker and radio show host. Russ works with businesses to help improve their customer acquisition and retention for increased revenue and success. Russ is author of the books, "CyberSelling", "CRM For The Common Man" and "Smart Marketing." He can be reached at **702-655-5652** and email at **russ@peaksalesconsulting.com**.