



# The Changing Face of Sales

## *How sales has changed over the past few years and how to adapt*

Over the past few years the sales environment has changed in a number of ways. The reasons are vast but typically relate to the changes in our society, economy, business models, technology and more. When it comes right down to the actual selling environment, there are a few distinct attributes that stand out today that didn't seem to be as noticeable, or even a factor, just five or six years ago. The key for all sales organizations and individual sales professionals alike is to understand and adapt to these changes. Few organizations today still live through the experience of the '90s where prospects would actually call them and buy something without having to work hard at finding and acquiring these leads. Back then, even poor sales performance was rewarded with revenue and quota achievement, in spite of a lack of skills and hard work.

Now that things have changed and the phone doesn't seem to ring off the hook for many businesses, sales people have to work harder to find and sell to these illusive prospects. In order to be successful in sales today you, as a sales professional, need to understand what changes have occurred and then work harder and smarter to make sure your prospects believe that your offerings will solve their problems and that what they are purchasing is better than your competitors' offerings. Let's discuss a few major changes that have occurred to get a better understanding of what you might need to adjust in order to adapt and become even more successful in sales today.

First of all, customers are much more informed these days which makes them smarter buyers. They use the Internet to research your company, your market, your competitors, and all the choices they may have available. Often times the consumer knows more about you and your competitors than you do yourself. It's not uncommon to walk into a prospect's office and see piles of paper on his desk containing your competitors' information. Gone are the days when you can tell the prospect what his choices are, and conveniently leave out some obvious choices offered by your competitor, and rely on the fact that the prospect is uninformed and unaware of his alternatives and therefore limited to your offering. Today, he may be more aware and savvy than you are about his options. Therefore, to succeed you must understand that your prospects are smart buyers and are well informed. You need to be more informed than your prospects not only about your own products and services, but also about your competitors' offering, the market, your prospect's business and industry, and other alternatives that might exist.

Another area that's changed is the economy. People are not necessarily spending less today, but they are questioning their purchases more than before. They want to make sure

they are making the best choice and will get a good return on their investment. There are more and more stories being published about people and businesses getting burned by poor product performance or bad service or some other form of disappointing results causing the consumer to become more cautious, even paranoid, about what they buy. Just look on the Internet at chat rooms, bulletin boards, blogs and other electronic social and professional networking environments to see how just one mistake or example of poor judgment can cause a company countless grief. Look at systems like YouTube and see examples of bad service and products. You can't hide from the truth like you used to (Not that I am recommending that it was okay to hide in the past, it's just that many businesses got away with abuse and poor performance in the past and it was easier for them to hide from it.)

With today's technology increasing people's awareness, it's no wonder they are more careful with their purchases. Whether selling to consumers or businesses, you need to be sensitive to the fact that they will not part with their hard-earned money, or their company's hard to access money, without first knowing that this will be a safe and wise investment. Your job as a sales professional is to demonstrate to them that they are making a good investment. Be a strategic partner by consulting with them as to what their needs are, what pains they are trying to remove, and what choices are available.

Another change in today's sales environment is the actual approach to selling. The old way of selling often times involved long lunches, gifts, scotch and cigars, and the good-old-boy type of selling. This approach to selling is long gone in the majority of industries. Most prospects today are too busy for long lunches, are not allowed to accept gifts, and don't trust sales people enough in general to be a good-old-boy. They are looking for someone they can trust, that they can rely on, and who can help them solve their problems in the quickest and most economical way. In other words, they want to work with someone they can rely on to be a trusted partner in their business. This takes a very different approach to selling, as well as much more patience than before.

Today's successful sales professional needs to research his prospect's business and industry, ask his prospect intelligent questions, listen intently, propose creative and viable solutions (even if it doesn't involve his own offerings), and follow up after the sale. He needs to be engaged in his customer's business not only during the sale, but long afterward by creating a life-time relationship. And let's not forget that CRM technology is also helpful here because it will track all the important information about your customers so you remember their key issues and can follow up when needed.

### **Keeping up with changes**

To help keep up with these changes, you need to first consider training. You must stay abreast with the latest selling techniques and skills. You also need to keep up with your market and your competitors' business and products so you know their strengths and weaknesses, as well as your own products. I have a client in the mortgage business and during a sales training session one of the brokers complained that they offer too many products to remember. I said you have two choices; either force yourself to remember

them all (which isn't necessarily feasible since there are hundreds and many don't apply to most customers since they are specialty products) or become an expert on the core products that are the most competitive, unique and beneficial to your best clients. In other words, prioritize and focus. In either case, he could not afford to make learning an obstacle or an excuse, especially when it comes to learning his own products.

Second, become a partner for your customers. Customers are looking for someone they can trust who can advise them on what choices they may have, even if it means buying someone else's solution. They don't want to hear product feature dumps. They want a business consultant who can educate them and offer solutions to their business needs. In a consumer environment, they still want to work with someone they can trust and rely on to give valuable advice.

Third, build relationships with your clients. It's not about selling something and then disappearing. It's about building long-term relationships where you continue to stay in touch with your customers and provide valuable information and education. Look for problems they aren't aware they have and consult with them on solutions – That's what a partnership is all about.

Finally, use CRM technology. It's virtually impossible to keep track of everything you need to do in sales these days. Juggling new business opportunities while maintaining your long-term relationships is a daunting task. Use technology to help. Track your activities, keep good notes, share this data with your sales team so they can help too, follow up when the system says you should, and maintain good communications with your customers and prospects. That's what top sales professionals do to succeed.

Good luck and good selling!

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