

Re-skilling the sales force

Re-skilling the sales force – The 21st Century's number one must-do task for successful future-proofed businesses.

Customer needs have changed dramatically over the last five years, and they are continuing to change in an accelerating manner. Why, because the world has changed dramatically over the same period driven by the amount of information that is now freely available to anyone about anything. No one is more than five mouse clicks away from whatever they need to know. Is it surprising therefore that people expect more than ever before.

Customer expectations of sales people have also changed over this period. Whereas in the 1980's and 1990's customers were willing to put up with, indeed came to expect, or even encouraged, the adversarial sparring of one sales person against another, using each point made by one person against the next to drive down price and, in doing so often unwittingly also driving out value; today, this no longer works. What has changed so rapidly and dramatically over such a short period of time, that this approach has gone from being the norm to being completely devalued?

Customers today are operating in a marketplace where the old order and the business certainties that this brought are no more. Jobs for life, a clear expectation in the 80's and 90's, gone; Market dominance by a national or market leader, or even a monopoly organisation, gone; The old approach to adversarial selling, gone with them.

So what is selling all about in the 21st Century? Selling has become a misnomer. The term today should be Client Competitive Advantage Advisor, a bit of a mouthful maybe, but nonetheless it encompasses exactly what clients now seek from Sales Professionals. If a sales person is not identifying how they add value to their clients and in so doing supplementing the client's own constant quest to develop stronger sources of value and differentiation, and then helping them formulate approaches to their customers showing how they in turn get greater value, selling in 21st Century terms is not taking place.

Sales professionals today have to be seen as a value adding element of the client's own business solution, working together with their client to develop more value for their clients in turn and through this creating net new Competitive Advantage for all parties.

This is known as Partnership Selling or High Performance Selling.

"Sales people in the Partnering role develop and maintain relational exchanges – exchanges in which the buyer and the seller devote their attention to 'increasing the pie' rather than 'dividing the pie'. Increasing the profits of both the buyer and seller typically involves the partnering firms making risky, idiosyncratic investments. Since these investments are unique to the relationship they are difficult for competitors to duplicate and thus have the potential for building a competitive advantage for the buyer – seller dyad over competing dyads".

(Weitz, B.A., Bradford, K.D., (1999) Personal Selling and Sales management: A Relationship Marketing Perspective. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. Vol.27, No.2, PP 241-254.

The second key differentiator that sets high performance teams apart from any others is their ability to understand what is really important to their customers. This requires a significant mind set change and a willingness to adapt, as what may be thought of as important today by the sales team, and what customer's really want, may be some considerable distance apart. Bridging this gap frequently requires different knowledge and a different way of operating. The required changes can be significant personally and organisationally.

Not all organisations, nor all sales teams are ready for change of this magnitude, nor are they all capable of implementing it. Those that can and do, however, will be the winners. So what are these differences? In many cases the answer is deceptively simple. Identify what is truly important to your customers; build offerings to meet these real requirements; deliver the right offerings to the right people in the customer, in a way that is appropriate for them. So if it is this easy, why is everyone not doing it?

Most organisations invest in the wrong activities, identify inappropriate information, and build their futures on what they think is important, not what their customers think is important. ICDL call these organisations 'Inside-out'.

Inside-out organisations sit in their offices, analyse their offering and invest time, energy and resource in trying to identify how they can 'beat the competition', and where they can sell more of their products or services. They do not invest in understanding the customer's needs and continuously adjusting their offering to achieve best fit. The result is generally seen as follows:

- Unreliable Sales Forecasts
- Poor Customer Service
- Focus on Cost Cutting
- Highly Competitive
- Blame Culture
- Take no Risks

ICDL call high performance organisations 'Outside-In'.

Outside-in organisations go out and stand in the shoes of their ultimate end users, look back at them and their competition and ask themselves, "standing here, looking back, what do I need to do to make my organisation, our offering and our partners seem more valuable to this end user than our competitors"?

This thinking drives remarkable change throughout the organisation, and through this, changes the perception of the end user. The results are clear,

- Take 'Customer' Risks
- Reliable Sales Forecasts
- Focus on Customer Needs
- Everyone Focused on 'Customer'
- Strong Orientation on 'Partnership'



Indeed the ability of any sales team to become a high performance sales team is predicated on the organisation to which they belong having a high performance mind set.

For more information on creating your own High Performance Sales Team, contact ICDL on +44 (0)118 979 8433 or by e-mail enquiries@thebusinessaccelerators.com.

For more information on how ICDL can help you, call us today on +44 (0)118 979 8433 or e-mail enquiries@thebusinessaccelerators.com

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