Selling in 2016—Is It Time to Get Back to Basics!

If you are a sales executive and you find yourself telling your team to sell more in 2016, you may want to rethink your strategy. The New Year is often filled with excitement, hope and hype--especially at annual sales meetings. It may be time to take a step back and look at the New Year through the lens of your front-line sales professionals and see the challenges through their eyes. Here are several interesting facts and perceptions for you to ponder:

- Their sales quota has increased and many of your sales representatives will see the increase as unfair or unattainable.
- Year over year, the tools and resources provided by your organization are not seen as helpful in enabling sales representatives to engage prospects at different stages. As an example, a CRM system may be extremely helpful when sales representatives understand how it benefits them. Instead, it is often viewed as additional busy work that takes time away from selling.
- Most sales professionals are left to figure out for themselves how to achieve their new quota. Hopefully your Sales Managers (SMs) are using a formal process to assist them. In many organizations, however, there is no standard practice to help sales representatives prioritize their efforts, manage their territory and attain their quota. Left unguided, many sales representatives will focus on the quickest, easiest and least complicated sale.
- Many organizations are still focused on spending 75% or more time on product related training. Simply put, product knowledge is viewed as more important than improving selling skills. While product knowledge is important, you may be encouraging sales representatives to focus too much on their product while under-investing in building the skills necessary to uncover the needs and issues that drive the customer's buying process.

Maybe it's time for sales leadership to step back and review 10 "resolutions" for guiding a team of sales professional in 2016.

1. **Verify That Everyone Knows Where to Hunt.** Identify the right potential customers by creating or updating your Ideal Customer Profile. If you want your sales team to hunt properly, define the specific target. Devote time to defining both the demographics and psychographics of an ideal customer. If you don't, your team may be targeting or selling to customers you don't want or, worse yet, can't win. Help them invest their time wisely by ensuring that each opportunity in their funnel meets the agreed upon criteria.

2. **Take Measures to Increase Sales Productivity.** Undertake a study of how your sales representatives are spending their time. In sales, time is your primary asset; wasted time compromises your productivity. Ask yourself, "What steps can we take as a team to increase the amount of "face time" we spend with prospective customers and buying

influences?" If you have good people and good products/services increasing their selling time increases their productivity. According to CSO Insights, sales professionals only spend 35% of their time selling. This is down from 37% the year before. If you are not measuring this KPI, now is a good time to start.

3. **Map or Revise Your Buy-Sell Process.** It's surprising how many companies have not mapped their customer's buying process and aligned their selling and buying activity. Without a formal buy-sell process to guide sales representatives to achieve milestones, it is difficult to forecast individual and team success. Even worse, it often means that your selling activities will not resonate with buyers.

4. Periodically Prune the Sales Funnel. Now is the time to examine every opportunity in the sales funnel and reassess your probability of success. Is this an immediate prospect or a future investment? Does your sales representative have a viable chance of winning? Have you made inroads recently in penetrating the organization? Do you have a compelling and actionable sales strategy? Be especially vigilant for opportunities that have been stalled at one stage of the sales funnel for an unusually long period of time.

5. **Outline a Sales Strategy for All New Opportunities.** Most new sales opportunities have 5-7 people involved, each with different personal and business needs. The main competition is often a direct competitor or "do nothing" (status quo). This complexity requires a written plan that can be reviewed with sales leadership (coaching) to ensure that the sales representative is well positioned to win the business. When reviewing critical, must-win opportunities, are these sessions rigorous, focused and transparent? Do they encourage constructive feedback, explore additional resources and invite a broader team approach?

6. **Develop Compelling Messages.** Does your sales team articulate a unique value proposition that resonates with each buying influence and drives them to take action? True differentiation means your solution is better than the competition or that you are the only one that can solve a key problem. Being able to communicate value is essential to winning. Is this value proposition written out in some type of sales playbook or is each sales professional left to develop their own message?

7. **Handling the Elephants.** In many sales organizations the most difficult obstacles to overcome are two-fold: a) getting an initial appointment and b) selling against the status quo. Has your organization developed specific tools based on best practices to overcome these obstacles? Have you trained your sales representatives in these essential skills? Better yet, have you role played these situations to ensure competence?

8. **Increase Coaching Time and Effectiveness.** Data from CSO Insights indicates that on average 74% of managers spend less than 60 minutes per week coaching to specific sales opportunities; 81% spend less than 60 minutes each week coaching to specific skills or knowledge. Make this year the year you help your managers spend more time coaching their team. What activities can you eliminate or reduce to give them time? How will you monitor coaching efforts and activities?

9. **Focus on Mitigating Risk.** Every sale involves some type of risk to the buyer. A buyer's risk has two components: the probability that something will go wrong and the negative consequences if it does. Buyers hate risk and it often paralyzes decision processes. Top sales professionals encourage "risk" discussions to remove the concerns and fears harboring some buying influencers. Have you identified the underlying customer concerns and crafted a risk mitigation strategy? Do you routinely hold risk mitigation strategy sessions with your team? For more information on mitigating risk download our EBook here. http://bit.ly/1HXLIqG

10. **Strengthen Your Sales Enablement Plan with Compelling Resources.** Do your sales representatives have easy access to resources that can assist them with a sales opportunity? Have you developed or revised discovery documents, sales playbooks, presentation materials, proposal templates, case studies, testimonials and client references? Are your sales representatives encouraged to include technical specialists and customer service representatives in the selling process?

Parting Thoughts

Data from CSO Insights is that on average 47% of all sales professionals will not make plan this year. No one on your sales team wants to be one of them. Now is a good time to review the basics and ensure that your team is prepared for success in 2016.

As always we welcome your thoughts and input. Feel free to start a discussion.

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