



Hands-up for a Sales Process

by
Martyn Lewis
Market-Partners Inc.

It may be no surprise that, when faced with the challenge of increasing sales productivity, so many organizations ask their sales force for their input as to what they feel would help them increase results. And it's a pretty safe bet that the response from such a survey would invariably include:

- More time to spend with the customer
- Less administrative work
- Less internal meetings
- Better leads from marketing (or whoever)
- Less micro-management
- Better collateral support for presentations, proposals, trade-shows, etc.
- More technical or product-specific resources
- Better and more timely information regarding performance and commission

Sounds familiar, I'm sure. But are these the things that will actually lead to increased sales productivity? Well perhaps they may be - but do we know? Do they know? I doubt it.



In a notable study a few years ago, Miller-Heiman conducted a series of interviews with literally thousands of sales professionals in an effort to discover their secrets of success. In fact what they discovered was that even amongst the most successful sales people, not one in a thousand actually understood what it was they were doing that contributed to their success. It is not unlike asking hundreds of great athletes how they are able to do the things they do. For every Tiger Woods or Wayne Gretzky who seem to be able to analyze every part of their prodigious talents, there are hundreds of the “grip it and rip it” school who only know that when they take a golf club (or baseball bat, or hockey stick) in hand, amazing things happen. Successful sales people seem to be no different - as unconscious savants running primarily on instinct, they may not be the best people to tell you what they need to create more output. And when we take a closer look at some of the suggested wish-list items, you may start to see where I’m going.

Spending more time with prospects and customers always sounds very enticing as a way in which to crank up productivity. We should stop for a moment, however, and assess how that time will actually be spent. In fact, for starters, we should look to see how effectively the sales force is currently spending face-to-face time with customers. Sadly, we often find that we are not in front of the right people, at the right time, or with the right message. Is doing more of this a good thing? Is it the best place to put our bets on increased performance?

In another productivity study, an organization strove to minimize the time that the sales force needed to dedicate to internal matters. They succeeded in reducing the average work week from 53 to 44 hours. How did the sales force use those extra 9 hours a week? Unfortunately many of them were used to get home earlier or to take previously unheard-of lunch breaks – not quite the desired result.

There is also the rather significant, and often complex, issue that sales is actually a closed system, and this leads to some rather interesting observations. For example, what if it was determined that the sales force would dramatically increase productivity by making 20% more prospecting calls.

- Can the company feed them enough leads?
- Are there enough support people to work with the sales force on this incremental work load?
- Could supply match the anticipated greater demand?

Simply put - what we may be doing is just moving the bottleneck from one place in the organization to another resulting in an equally limiting effect on performance.

You may have figured out by now that when trying to increase sales productivity, I am not a big believer in simply asking the sales force for their input. For various reasons, I would use such information as a data point, but it would only be one of many.



So, what *is* the key to making swift, significant, and sustainable increases in sales productivity? Ironically the answer lies in one thing that very few sales people ever think will increase their results – sales process. It is only by assessing the current sales process that an organization can really get to the underlying challenges and opportunities. Once these are understood, an optimal sales process can then be designed. A sales process that is:

- unique to the company
- founded upon their own market strategy
- reflective of the way in which their specific target market buys, and
- introduced to the organization in a way that can be immediately adopted and is relevant to the sales force

Such a sales process will guide the sales force through best practices to ensure that all sales activities are synchronized with their customers buying process, and allow the sales professionals to be in the right place, at the right time, saying and doing the right thing. Adopting such a sales process will translate into more productive selling time, less unproductive activity (both internal and with the customer), and will maximize results.

Although the sales force probably won't ask for one, it is my opinion that it is only by adopting an appropriate sales process that an organization can provide the sales force, and themselves, with what is required and ironically with what everyone wants – increased results for less effort.