Give 'em a Reason Why

by

Barry Trailer

If your sales reps won't use it, your SFA system won't work. Are you ready to address their concerns about automation and ensure their buy-in?

Several years ago, I wrote an article for Sales and Field Force Automation Magazine called "Selling the Sellers." My main point in that article was that successful sales force automation implementation requires sales reps to buy into the system.

What I've learned since then is that not many people have compelling reasons why their reps should embrace an SFA system. I've validated this in presentations at conferences since the late 90's. Although my research has been informal, I offer here some of what I have discovered – and challenge you to test yourself on how well prepared you are to sell your reps on automation.

Ask Yourself

Below you will find 12 questions sales reps might reasonably have on their minds as you automate and/or re-automate their sales process. Do you have reasonable answers?

I have some suggestions for your consideration, but do keep track of how many compelling answers you can provide. We'll get to scoring at the end.

Q1: HOW MUCH MORE WORK WILL I HAVE TO DO – AND FOR HOW LONG – BEFORE I SEE ANY PERSONAL PAYOFF?

Your answer: Let's face it. Things are going to get worse before they get better. You're going to have to change the way you're currently doing something, or we're going to take your ACT! Software away and replace it with something you aren't as familiar with using. Or you'll have to run parallel systems for a while, until we know the new one is working. Or something else, like hardware problems, or software glitches, or the new system not working with the old fax software will require more effort from us before it results in less effort.

In other words, it is completely legitimate for your sellers to question what they're signing up for – and you need to acknowledge this.

Q2: WHAT WILL THAT PAYOFF LOOK LIKE?

Now this is an interesting, sometimes soul-searching question. Too often the quick answer is "increased productivity – you'll make more money."

But increased productivity is not necessarily good for sales reps because it may mean (and usually does mean) increasing quotas even though the reps end up making the same amount of income. This year, 100 percent of plan equals $1.4M in sales and $150,000 in personal income. With increased productivity and quotas, 100 percent of plan equals $2.1M in sales – and probably darn close to $150,000 in personal income. Did life get better?

Q3: SO, HOW EXACTLY DO YOU (MY MANAGER/COMPANY) DEFINE "INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY FOR ME/MY POSITION?

This question is so obvious most people don't have a compelling answer ready. Typical responses sound like, "Well, you'll sell more. You'll have shorter sales cycles. You'll be in closer contact with your customers and be able to more easily communicate with team members."

Your rep's translation: Your quota will go up, there'll now be monthly (or quarterly) pressure, not just quarterly (yearly); the sales admin help is going away."

Yep, that sounds like a good program.

Q4: IF INTRODUCING TECHNOLOGY TO SALES MEANS SHARING INFORMATION I'VE DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS, AND IF TELESALES (OR OTHER INDIRECT CHANNELS) WILL BE TAKING OVER ROUTINE SALES WORK (RENEWALS, UPGRADES, ETC.) WHAT, EXACTLY, WILL I BE DOING?

Well?

Q5: DO YOU SEE AUTOMATION REDUCING THE NEED FOR THE NUMBER OF SALESPEOPLE LIKE ME?

Questions 4 and 5 are getting at a pretty core issue: If I stay in sales and the company/market continues to innovate, will I be okay? The honest answer is "no", not unless you also continue to grow and innovate.

But there are viable options and powerful reasons for companies to retain and continue to grow their top reps. Their skills in managing relationships, facilitating communication between companies, customers and partners, and doing creative interactional selling (as opposed to routine transactional selling) will be increasingly valued – and valuable.

So rather than saying, "We don't need you anymore", you could be telling your best people, "We don't need you doing that (repetitive, low level) sort of thing anymore."

Q6: WHAT WILL BE THE CRITERIA HERE BY WHICH FUTURE REPS ARE DEEMED SUCCESSFUL?

Look, the times are changing and SFA leads directly to customer relationship management which, in our lifetimes, may even tie into enterprise systems. Reps who find success by continuing to plow up the same fields in the same way are going to be as rare as successful small family farms are today. So if doing more of the same, just faster and cheaper, still isn't enough to avoid becoming obsolete, what new things should they be learning/doing?

Q7: CAN THE COMPANY WIN AND I LOSE?

How are we defining winning and losing? Lots of reps fear that now that the company has all their contact info, history and details about recent conversations, they are expendable. If your response to this concern is, "Yeah, so what's your point?" just figure you don't have a good answer and move on to Question 8.

Q8: CAN I WIN AND THE COMPANY LOSE?

Although many reps may not be credited with actually considering this question, you should. Are your reps brokering or not fully disclosing their contact and/or opportunity information? If they are, you might want to consider why this would be. Clearly they feel, rightly or not, that having a bargaining chip (e.g., information) is a good idea. Your question must then be, where would they get such an idea?

Q9: HOW DO WE ALL WIN?

The payoff question. What's in it for all of us and how do we get there together? Do you have an implementation plan that actually has legs – or does it culminate with "all systems up and working?" This is a good place to share "the vision thing." Not an intergalactic, blot out the sun, "here's how great it's gonna be someday" thing, but a pragmatic, phased, believable and exciting story. Got one? Better get one.

Q10: WHAT IS YOUR (MY MANAGER'S) PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO THIS PROJECT'S SUCCESS? HOW DO YOU LOSE IF THE PROJECT IS UNSUCCESSFUL?

Too many sales executives have abdicated SFA to IT people, figuring it's their job to "make it happen." This isn't purposeful; it is most often expressed as a willingness to invest in tools for “our” people and a necessity to get on with the business of selling until the new tools are ready.

If this is true of the sales exec, it’s doubly true for first-line managers. These folks are the good troops who go about recruiting, motivating, reporting and doing the myriad other tasks required to keep the wolf from the door. “SFA?” they’ll say, “Sure, bring it on. Tell me what I gotta do. Throw one more monkey on my desk (or back) that will only take 30 minutes a day. Why not?”

Your question: How engaged are your managers and, seriously, what’s in it for them? How ready are they to take on this task? And what work will be removed if they do?

Q11: WHO WILL TRAIN/SUPPORT/COACH ME THROUGH THIS PROCESS?

Based on Question 10, you may be thinking this isn’t just about the sales manager. Good thinking. Is there a help desk available at off-hours when your reps are trying to sync. up from a hotel room or on the road? How was the training initially provided – and will it be reinforced/available on an on-going basis? And, last but not least, what is the plan for making it so?

Q12: DO YOU HAVE A DETAILED PLAN TO ADDRESS ALL THESE ISSUES, INCLUDING THE NITTY-GRITTY OF COACHING ME (THE SALES REP) THROUGH TO COMPETENCY?

This is something that’s easy to put off or cast in only general terms. Work with your vendor, integrator, SFA/CRM consultant and internal training/Ops people to iron out the wrinkles.

Rate Yourself

Here's the chart to score yourself on how many questions you could answer well.

10+… You have an excellent chance of success.

8-9… A successful implementation is likely.

6-7… You've thought of most of the key issues.

3-5… You need to think about more key issues.

0-2… Forget about it.

In my research, talking to sales execs across the country, this is what I found. Of those attending my presentations (and responding), only two percent said they had solid answers to 10 or more questions. Another eight percent were in the 8-9 range. Nearly 60 percent claimed to be in the 6-7 range, and 15 percent scored two or less.

Granted, my scoring comments are somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but the questions were legitimate. So consider this: Only 10 percent of those surveyed claimed confidence in their ability to answer their reps' concerns.

Where do you rank? How well prepared are you?

Barry Trailer has consulted with companies with complex B2B sales for the past twenty years. At FrontRange Solutions (formerly GoldMine Software Corporation) he served as VP of North American Sales, VP of Corporate Initiatives, and finally, acting as President of the GoldMine Division. In 2002 Barry interviewed hundreds of executives for the just released ***'Sales & Marketing Excellence Challenge: Changing How the Game Is Played,'*** available at www.csoinsights.com

