



Sales Excellence vs. Excellent Sales

by
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There's no room at the top anymore for those who just make their numbers – to separate the winners from the losers you need to look at *how* they sell.

What do Tiger Woods, Barry Bonds, Wayne Gretzky and Britney Spears have in common? OK, what do Mel Gibson, Anthony Hopkins and Bill Parcells also share with this group? Yes, they all make a whole lotta money, but that fact comes second. The reason they make a lot of money is that each is recognized as being outstanding in his or her field.

What about *our* field? What distinguishes an outstanding sales rep? No doubt, those who consistently achieve quota – steady producers – would top the list. These are the “go-to” guys who jump into action when the sales manager needs an eleventh-hour deal to put her numbers over the top. But last-ditch heroics are difficult to count on and even tougher to plan – so, while valuable, they are less valued today by senior management. Instead, emphasis is increasingly being placed on the steady part as well as the quota-producing part.

Making forecast, in addition to making the numbers, has important ramifications for companies and sales reps. With a reliable forecast, a company could leverage that information to invest in infrastructure and personnel (if sales were up), or begin to reduce expenses selectively (if sales were going to be significantly down).

Absent accurate forecasts, manufacturing companies have to keep huge dollars tied up in buffer stock, and service companies miss windows of opportunity due to lack of talented or trained personnel when sales unexpectedly soar. Conversely, finding out too late that



expected business will not materialize – after money has been spent – results in expense and headcount cuts performed with an ax rather than a scalpel.

Thus, forecast ability becomes another distinguishing characteristic of top salespeople. Other desirable attributes are the ability to penetrate accounts and call at all levels (from technical product information to conceptual ROI discussions), the ability to utilize internal resources appropriately, and the ability to facilitate lasting customer relationships.

For the past several years, we've been presenting the "Levels of Relationship" model. This is a pyramid with five levels, from Vendor and Preferred Supplier (at the bottom), through Consultant, Contributor, and, at the top, Partner. I've also seen this same concept presented as a spectrum with slightly different names (Trusted Advisor vs. Consultant). But the point is the same: different levels of relationship have different characteristics and require different skills.

Several interesting changes occur as you move up through relationship levels. Some characteristics *increase*: loyalty, trust and credibility, access within accounts, knowledge of accounts and their business, and opportunity for repeat business, to name just a few. The client's willingness to share future plans also increases, which bears directly on one's ability to forecast more accurately and over longer time frames.

At the same time, some characteristics *decrease* as you move up through the levels: numbers of competitors, sensitivity to price, the significance of any particular product feature or function, sales cycle length – again, only a partial listing.

As salespeople move up the pyramid, the likelihood that they will have direct sales contact increases. Moving down the pyramid (where the number of transactions increases dramatically) sales are more likely to lend themselves to indirect or nontraditional sales channels (telesales or catalog).

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Climbing the Pyramid

Let's look at the characteristics of salespeople at each level of the pyramid, from the bottom up:

Vendor:	Has a good product
Preferred Supplier:	Understands the customer's application and functional requirements
Consultant:	Understands the customer's business
Contributor:	Understands the customer's industry
Partner:	Understands the customer's internal issues

To start with, automation is eroding the base of the pyramid, taking over routine, repetitive sales transactions. It should be noted that the base of the pyramid is where the mass is – the most transactions, the most sales reps. Approximately two-thirds of all sales positions are at the consultant level, or lower. These are the jobs most likely to be reduced or eliminated by technology.

The upper levels of the pyramid are where fewer deals and fewer sales jobs are found, but where the future and the outstanding sales reps will be. Unless they are looking forward to doing battle on the price-cutting field, salespeople will want to move up to more creative and complex selling work.

That brings us to the notion of sales excellence vs. excellent sales. Traditionally, these terms were essentially synonymous.

Good production – good sales rep, bad production – no biscuit. But managers are growing more aware of the need to distinguish different types of sales skill – not just sales volume.

This sea of change, together with the availability of new sales metrics afforded by sales automation, opens the door for a new approach to recognizing sales excellence. For



example, in addition to compensation based solely on revenue, other factors can be taken into consideration: forecast accuracy and horizon, sales cycle reduction, close rate, and customer satisfaction, to name only a few.

Every company has mission statements and core values that it claims to live by. Too often, these values are really no more than words in the annual report or plaques on walls. When we begin to reward sales excellence, and not just excellent sales, we've taken a step toward translating those values from theory into practice.

And, for the salespeople themselves, it provides an entirely new and – judging from the thousands of sales reps who've responded enthusiastically to this message – exciting way of looking at their sales career. Some people today are simply trying to survive their quota and their company's sales automation efforts. Many of them won't make it. But those salespeople who embrace the possibilities will not simply survive, but thrive in the winner-take-most future.

When asked what made him so great, Wayne Gretzky replied, “Most players skate to where the puck is; I skate to where it's going to be.”

Excellent Sales are where the puck is today; *Sales Excellence* is where it's going to be.

Sell well.



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.csinsights.com