



Sales Recovery: How to Win (and Keep) Today's Careful Customer

By Kate Dunn and Mike Chiricuzio





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Have things really changed? The correct and short answer is “yes.” This should come as no surprise to any of us. The very nature of commerce across industries has evolved over the past decade, and the more recent economic upheaval also has made its mark...churning out a new breed of buyers. When you blend a diminishing pool of human resources and shrinking budgets with heightened competition and market uncertainty, the result is a broad-based shift in organizational attitudes about spending.

The bottom line: every dollar has to count. Consequently, who is awarded the business has become more thoughtfully considered. This has a dramatic impact on your sales processes and redefines the ways in which you can successfully approach and win over today's cautious buyer. Following are eight keys to defining and refining your sales approach with businesses that are ready to make the most of the economic recovery.

1. Take a hard look in the mirror.

As humans, it is typically our nature to do things the way we have always done things. Not just because we are inherently resistant to change, but because we are usually unaware of the very need for it. As salespeople, we must have a healthy dose of ego and positive energy to even get out of bed in the morning and get in the game.

Those who recognize evolving external factors and the need for changes within themselves have a good chance at continued sales success. The necessity for new selling behaviors is perhaps most concerning for small businesses that offer products or services with low transactional dollar amounts.

These types of businesses tend to be more oriented to servicing an account than actually concentrating on the sales process. And, although the service aspect of sales has and continues to be an important part of any overall business and sales strategy, service alone is not enough and will certainly not bring you the business you seek.

By the Numbers

- 60 percent of a salesperson's time is spent in front of people who will not or cannot buy their product or service.
- 40 percent of all veteran sales professionals have experienced bouts of call reluctance severe enough to threaten their career in sales.
- In more than 50 percent of all sales calls made in the U.S. today, the salesperson just “wings it” and does not use a planned approach.
- 70 percent of sales leaders are not satisfied with their lead generation process.

Sources: Sandler Institute, The Marketing Edge, Sales Benchmark Index



Ironically, fear of change and a challenging environment tend to make us vulnerable to a life of movement from one sales job to another due to lackluster performance and unmet expectations.

An absence of introspection tends to fuel this scenario by fostering a belief that a checkered job history is a result of management changes, industry upheaval or economic downturns and not the real culprit – our own inability to succeed in the realm of true selling. Too often, past success has been a result of being in the right place at the right time and not a function of a professional skill set easily transferable to other industries and circumstances.

Did You Know...

Four percent of the country's salespeople sell 94 percent of the goods and services, according to research conducted by Harvard University, The Gallup Organization and the HR Chally Group during the 1990's and early 2000's.

2. Light the fire within.

All successful salespeople have a competitive drive to succeed, although the intensity of this drive varies considerably from one person to the next. This drive is often a natural characteristic of a “winner.” The commitment is not just to winning, but to winning the right way. True sales professionals work within a set of core business principles to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses to gain an advantage and ultimately win the sale.

Those who possess a real competitive drive to succeed believe that they can always do better. They offer to make the presentation to the board or senior staff along with their lower level contact. Though they may have never done it before, they remain confident that their best effort in front of the board will serve them well, rather than leaving the relationship and sale solely in the hands of a lower level contact.

3. Be prepared.

The confidence exhibited by true sales pros is tied to their ability to prepare. This appreciation for preparation drives today's most successful salespeople to:

- Read the same business books that CEOs are reading.
- Join social networking groups on sites like LinkedIn where decision makers congregate, so they can know “pain points” and motivations.
- Use technology, like iPhones or Blackberries to experience the same things the movers and shakers of the world use on a daily basis.

This commitment to preparation combined with a genuine desire to understand the world leads them to ask about customer objectives, uncover flaws in customer processes and seek ways to help their customers accomplish their goals. Relationships with customers are, therefore, mutually beneficial. They help those who have a problem to be solved and direct their efforts where they can provide the most return for the customer, their employer and themselves.

Service-oriented salespeople exhibit empathy and a strong desire to help their customers. But, feeling badly for the customer's plight and wanting to help is not all that is required. True sales professionals marry their empathy with the confidence that they are uniquely positioned to help their client solve a problem and that the solution has monetary value for the customer.



4. Deliver more than product specs.

Product knowledge is valuable for a prospect, and historically, the salesperson was the best source of information. Consequently, product education was considered the most essential component of training for newly-hired salespeople. Product demos were routinely used to validate the level of product knowledge a salesperson had achieved during training.

Very little attention was paid to business acumen. The sales rep was taught to call persistently with basically the same script until the prospect's situation changed and they agreed to meet. Unless the prospect already knew they had a problem and were in the process of evaluating options, these contacts were of little or no value to the prospect. With no real understanding of business best practices or the prospect's industry, the salesperson was and is hard-pressed to move an opportunity forward unless the prospect is actively trying to solve a problem.

The Internet has become ubiquitous in our lives, and the value of product knowledge for the client has diminished rapidly. They can learn much on their own. Social media has helped to accelerate the research process, providing easy access to others who have already made a purchase decision and can provide firsthand experience.

With information available 24/7, it has freed buyers from the need to jam another meeting into an already hectic schedule just to get a one-sided version from a prospective vendor.

This shift has revealed a significant gap in the selling skills of many sales representatives. Without knowledge of general business principles or an understanding of the prospect's industry or functional responsibilities, they are simply unable to demonstrate enough value to get through to a decision maker by phone or to schedule a meeting.

A recent survey of business decision-makers indicates that only 7 percent of the salespeople calling on them are considered worthy of their time.

Here are four ways you can show added value:

- Do your homework by researching your prospect, the industry and competitors.
- Ask open-ended questions about business needs and challenges.
- Use results-oriented terms (increase market share, improve profitability, capture new markets, reduce expenses).
- Share case studies and statistics that are relevant to your prospect's industry.

All factors considered in a competitive marketplace, decision makers have little time for sales professionals who cannot demonstrate added value.

Did you know...

With LinkedIn having more than 50 million members worldwide and 50 percent sporting management, director or executive titles, the reliance on the salesperson for product information will continue to decline.



5. Get proactive to satisfy today's buyers.

Today's buyers need a different type of assistance from sales professionals. Decision-makers are looking for proactive guidance that helps them grow their businesses or run them more efficiently to achieve overall business goals.

Becoming this type of advisor to executives is not easy. It requires a redefinition of the sales role especially for companies who have hired "caretaker" salespeople and focused training efforts solely on product knowledge.

Only individuals with a true competitive desire to succeed will have the work ethic and patience required to develop and maintain this level of expertise. Only companies willing to invest in either hiring sales professionals with this level of business acumen already or developing them internally will be able to successfully make this turn.

The payoff will be worth the effort. Results from a recent Aberdeen Group study of business decision-makers indicates that **sales professionals who positioned themselves as trusted advisors were 69 percent more likely to make the sale.**

6. Embrace a new sales model.

Products or services that don't have clear-cut features or price superiority do not typically lend themselves to online sales. These businesses still require a sales force to:

- help prospects understand their own organization's unique needs.
- position their product or service solutions as fulfilling those unique needs better than other alternatives.
- close the sale.

To intercept a sale before it becomes a commodity, the salesperson must be able to uncover a problem that they can fix before the prospect realizes they have a problem and/or solve it themselves. This is a perfect example of an area where a "caretaker" or

Selling Without a Sales Force

Many companies previously represented by a direct sales force have moved their entire sales process to the Internet. Goods and services with clear product or price advantages lend themselves well to this online sales model.

Dollars once directed to sales salaries and compensation are now spent on Internet advertising to create awareness and interest. Web sites and, in some cases, channel partners like Amazon, now handle the online purchase and even the shipping, effectively automating the entire sales function.

All types of products have become commoditized to the extent that they can be purchased via the Internet. In many cases, a streamlined process has improved the customer experience. The Internet sales model combines communication efficiencies – like online chats – with strong customer service practices.

Effective search engine optimization and Web advertising make it easy for those who need the product or service to find what they seek. Clear messaging focused on helping the consumer understand price or product superiority and user-friendly e-commerce functions help to convert interest to purchase.

Customer information and purchasing behaviors can be analyzed and turned into effective cross-sell and up-sell opportunities delivered via the customer's preferred method of communication, which minimizes marketing costs and maximizes profitability.



service-oriented salesperson cannot typically meet the challenge. They choose instead to focus their efforts on those within their client organizations who execute decisions that have been made by others, thus commoditizing the purchase. They wait to be told, “This is what we need. What can you do for us and at what price?”

Without a clear product or price advantage, the salesperson ends up discounting to win business. Their company, which built a value proposition based on a fair exchange of value for the price charged, ends up giving too much for too little and destroying their own profitability. Compounding matters, they often pay their salesperson a commission when they did little to create value or revenue.

With continually increasing employee costs, businesses that rely on their sales team to differentiate them must change the way they sell. Those requiring a direct sales model today have to think differently about their sales force.

7. Maximize sales productivity.

Even true professional salespeople can increase their performance with help from dedicated lead generation and lead nurturing campaigns. Today’s complex sales process is 22 percent longer than it was in 2002. Three more people participate in the decision than did just a few short years ago. Unfortunately even the best sales professionals are able to devote only 35 percent to 40 percent of their time to advancing a sale. The rest is typically tied up in administrative responsibilities and sales-related activities that are not moving a sale forward.

According to Brian J. Carroll, author of *Lead Generation for the Complex Sale*, 80 percent of corporate spend on lead generation activities and sales collateral is wasted. Sales professionals expected to use the materials to improve their productivity spent on average 40 to 60 hours per month re-creating sales-ready, customer-relevant collateral material.

Sales professionals from some of the nation’s leading companies were deliberately engaging in unproductive, redundant work. They were developing materials that were not trackable and in some cases, inconsistent with the brand, because they felt the materials provided weren’t relevant to their customer or were out of step with where they were in the buying cycle.

Imagine the inconsistent messaging floating around the marketplace, undermining the marketing and sales efforts of these companies? How many decisions took place that these companies did not participate in because their salespeople were busy redesigning the wheel?

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The simple solution: marketing and sales must collaborate. Front line salespeople know customer “pain points.” These should be some of the key messages addressed in marketing materials. Similarly, a sales plan must be in place to capture inquiries generated by a marketing campaign so they can be fulfilled, qualified and managed.



8. Make your marketing relevant.

Successful sales organizations need marketing support so they can devote their valuable time to calling on decision-makers, learning what they need to accomplish and figuring out a way to help them get it done! That support consists of awareness, lead generation and nurturing processes, and sales support collateral.

Whether provided by in-house or outsourced resources, it must be relevant, automated, ongoing and measurable. The goal of awareness and lead generation activities is to position the company, uncover interest, qualify that interest and pass sales-ready opportunities to the sales force.

It is then the salesperson's duty to:

- develop those opportunities using relevant collateral specific to the prospect's needs, situation and buying step.
- convert the opportunity to the first sale.
- prepare the ground for all future sales.

The investment in a professional salesperson is not complete until they have been given a process which allows them to do what they were hired to do. This is especially critical for companies without clear competitive advantages who depend on their sales force to differentiate them in the marketplace.

Companies develop sustainable competitive differentiators every day. Products enter the marketplace daily from companies with deep pockets and big names and from small start-ups with a great idea and a plan to spread the word inexpensively with social media and "guerilla marketing." Each day, firms re-evaluate their business models to carve out unique niches for their products and services.

In this global economy, the pace of these changes is remarkable and they will continue to accelerate. To compete, all businesses will need to maximize their sales productivity. Technological improvements and data analysis will help those with Internet sales models and remarkable products stay ahead of their competitors. For those with a direct sales force, sales productivity will be the defining factor in their future success.

Final Five Wrap Up

1. Embrace necessary changes to your sales approach.
2. Be confident and prepared to find new ways to help your customers achieve their goals.
3. Provide solutions to customer "pain points" rather than simply product specs.
4. Ask open-ended questions to understand your customers' business needs and challenges.
5. Capitalize on the synergy between marketing and sales.



Where Do You Go From Here?

As a marketer or sales professional in a small or mid-sized business, you are contending with a growing list of challenges – both internal and external – that influence your ability to achieve your goals.

In a tough economy, the pressure can build. You have fewer inside resources in people, time and dollars. There's increased competition in the marketplace. Everything seems to work against you when you need to demonstrate results.

Where do you begin?

First, it's essential to adopt the mindset that your marketing and sales activities will work hand in hand to be the most effective. For instance, if you have a trade show appearance as one of your marketing strategies for lead generation, do you have a follow-up plan in place to re-connect with those who stop by your booth? How will you move them along the sales cycle?

Similarly, before you go out with a direct mail campaign, do you have a plan in place to capture the inquiries so they can be fulfilled, qualified and managed?

Direct marketing is a proven strategy that generates measurable outcomes when done right. But, managing all of the components of a successful marketing campaign can be time-consuming. That's why the most effective use of your staff, time and dollars is found in consolidating your program with a single source to develop, produce and deliver your direct marketing programs.

Beginning with creative development and design, Allegra works closely with you to define and refine key messages tailored to target audiences. Next, we can help you to finetune your marketing communications to ensure you are getting the most bang for your buck. We'll recommend the best direct mail formats, craft compelling offers and assist you with managing your mailing lists.

Of course, we all know a great-looking piece will fall flat on its face if it doesn't get into the hands of the right people. That's where Allegra's mailing expertise comes into play. We know all of the USPS requirements that must be met, so your mail gets delivered...and at the lowest possible cost. And, we won't forget about the necessary sales follow-up.

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Allegra is locally-owned and operated. Our focus is on small and mid-sized businesses and organizations that need marketing services and print-related communications. Our skills include customer/donor communications, lead generation, sales support materials, special events support and brand identity – whatever it takes to make an enterprise like yours not just survive but thrive. We're a one-stop source for successful, integrated communications strategies.

Want to learn more? Contact your Allegra representative today.



Authors' biographies



Kate Dunn is president and founder of Digital Innovations Group (DIG) in Richmond, Va. DIG is an award-winning marketing firm that specializes in targeted, personalized sales campaigns and collateral. She began her professional career in marketing with Xerox Corporation, where she was instrumental in developing programs that resulted in millions of dollars in new business. She is currently on the faculty of the University of Richmond, Robins School of Business – Management Institute teaching Sales and Marketing Management for Small Businesses.



Michael Chiricuzio is a highly-regarded expert in the specialized field of digital color printing. His background includes more than 35 years in commercial printing with more than a decade as a pioneer and leader in digital color printing. He now shares his experience and expertise as a consultant, educator and advisor. He is a frequent speaker at print communications industry events and is a contributor to several printed and online publications.

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