

Manage Reps Like Customers

The sales manager's job has never been more difficult than it is today. In addition to all the usual responsibilities of the role, you've got the added stress of having to do more with less, of managing people who are fearful of losing their jobs, and of having to make numbers in an environment of nearly unprecedented challenge. And many managers are dealing with these challenges all wrong. They're jumping in to "save" deals when their focus should be on coaching reps; they're urging reps to work harder when they should be teaching them how to work smarter; they're calling for their teams to "get back to basics" when the basics barely get reps in the door anymore.

"Sales managers lead the way in navigating the sales force through the troubled waters of a recessionary economy," says Ron Koprowski, executive vice president of The Forum Corporation. The best managers accomplish this by managing their sales force in the same way that effective salespeople manage their customers – by focusing on acquiring, retaining, and growing their *salespeople*, says Koprowski. Here's a look at each of those elements.

Acquiring. The best sales managers look to attract top sales talent with the attitude and skills necessary to get results, even in a down economy and even when the message from above is to shed people, not acquire them. Top managers will spend more money to bring on top performers, knowing those people will pay for themselves many times over.

Retaining. Retention of good salespeople is equally important, especially in consideration of the high cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new reps. But don't retain blindly. Now is the time to let go of your poor performers and invest more heavily in your stars. Just as you need to invest in your best customers to retain them, you must also invest in your best reps and shed those who are dragging down your performance.

Growing. High performing managers understand the importance of continuing to grow and develop their reps through regular coaching and mentoring. These managers view coaching and development as an everyday activity; they are adept at assessing the skills of individual reps and they respond accordingly. Koprowski points out that while the area of coaching/development has been "a crucial one for quite some time, the distractions of needing to achieve business results in a recession are now immersing managers in closing business at the expense of developing salespeople." Managers who do develop their salespeople, he adds, enjoy a "decided advantage" over their counterparts who are neglecting this important role.

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