Six Essentials for Sales Force Success

Jeffrey Baker
Vice President and Practice Leader,
Sales Force Effectiveness
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Sales leaders: How confident are you that you will hit your targets this year and next? Or that your sales teams can differentiate themselves in the face of increased commoditization and competition? Are your sales teams as productive as they can be?

Although skillful and engaged sales professionals are critically important, they alone do not ensure that a complex selling organization will achieve its goals.

The following pages outline the six dimensions of sales success.
consistently calling on the right prospective customers and offering each one of them the right value proposition is key to sales productivity. Your go-to-market strategy provides frontline sales leaders and salespeople with essential guidelines for getting this right.

Here's a quick test to see if you have clearly communicated your go-to-market strategy: Simply ask several of your salespeople and managers to describe what they are accountable for, how they select customers to call on, what their value proposition is, and how it addresses their customers' needs better than the competition does. (Warning: You may be horrified by the inconsistency of the answers!) Crisp and consistent answers indicate a clearly communicated and supported sales strategy and suggest your sales teams have the direction they need in order to use their time effectively.

But here's the thing: Only 50 percent of salespeople characterize their sales strategy as “very clear.”¹ That means the other 50 percent of salespeople may be wasting significant time with the wrong target customers and may be vulnerable to competitive threats. Which 50 percent are your salespeople in?

Customer Knowledge

“Knowledge is the antidote to fear.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

When we say “customer knowledge,” we’re not talking about knowing the customer’s birthday and favorite sports team. Customers don’t care about that. In a recent survey, we asked 231 decision makers about their criteria for choosing an outside resource. Out of 21 criteria, “Knows me” came in dead last. First and second place? “Knows my business” and “Knows my industry.”

Salespeople often must do more than just understand the dynamics of the industries their customers compete in. In many cases, they must apply their understanding. They must articulate their ideas about how customers can compete more effectively.

When sales organizations fail to integrate customer understanding with industry insight, they are swept aside by more agile and information-savvy competitors.
A wise leader once told us, “A hippo in a tutu is still fat and slow.” An elaborate strategy (a tutu) will do nothing to improve the effectiveness of a sales organization (a hippo), if the right people aren’t aligned with the strategy and given the opportunity to develop strategy-specific skills.

Talent management is one thing sales leaders cannot delegate completely to HR or a training department. In fact, a full 80 percent of senior executives in best-in-class sales organizations are highly involved in and supportive of sales training efforts, according to the findings of the Aberdeen Group.¹ Sales executives should set performance standards for people they hire and develop; they should also actively participate in recruiting and training new talent, and regularly coach their people and reinforce what they must know and do.

Climate

“A positive work climate is not a fun-filled place, a lot of warm fuzzy stuff, or a place for relaxation; it is a positive, supportive climate, which is conducive to creative, productive work.”


What does it feel like to work in your sales organization? Believe it or not, that feeling impacts performance. One study suggests that climate is related to nearly one third of all financial results.¹

A highly engaged sales force has the energy and commitment to persist in the face of all kinds of marketplace challenges. This is a strong advantage, especially in volatile, uncertain times. A positive climate also reduces turnover, and so eliminates the need to find replacements (and see them through their lengthy ramp-up times).

Six primary factors determine employees’ perception of their work climate. Sales managers can improve the climate by applying specific practices to affect these factors:

- **Clarity**: Salespeople are clear about what is expected of them.
- **Standards**: Management sets high performance standards and challenges people to improve.
- **Commitment**: Salespeople are dedicated to achieving goals and contributing to the organization’s success.
- **Responsibility**: Salespeople feel personally responsible for their work and accountable for solving problems and making decisions without relying on others for direction.
- **Teamwork**: People feel that they belong to an organization characterized by cohesion, mutual warmth, trust, and pride.
- **Recognition**: Excellent performance is recognized and rewarded.

Processes

“Art resides in the quality of doing. Process is not magic.”

—Charles Eames

Every sales organization must define and follow four core processes to ensure optimal effectiveness:

- New customer acquisition
- Existing customer retention and growth
- Opportunity management (funnel or pipeline management)
- Customer service/customer care

To be most effective, all four processes must integrate a company’s sales strategy with its target customers’ buying process.
Support Systems

“Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships.”

—Michael Jordan

Support systems boost the engagement and motivation of the sales force and equip salespeople to serve customers, compete successfully, and work productively.

High-performing sales organizations invest in support systems such as:

- Sales support personnel (teaming with salespeople facing customers as well as in the “back office”)
- Business scorecard with predictive metrics (providing real-time predictive feedback on performance in executing sales strategy and achieving goals)
- Information systems (delivering actionable insights on customers, industries, and the competition)

Success requires more than simply checking these three boxes. Take sales support: Is it distributed equally, across the board? Should it be? How much effort really goes into each customer transaction? And what is the real profit margin? The 80/20 rule is fairly universal: Identifying the most valuable and most potentially valuable customers allows companies to focus sales resources where they are needed and to reduce waste—not value.4

How about your business scorecard? How many metrics are lagging versus leading indicators? Too many lagging indicators can derail growth.

Is Your Sales Organization Ready for Tomorrow’s Challenges?

The Forum Corporation has been helping sales organizations improve their effectiveness for 40 years.

Contact Forum to discuss how our sales force effectiveness assessment can improve the performance of your sales force. If you have already determined how to improve it and if you are in the process of designing or implementing changes, Forum can help you rapidly execute the changes and ensure you sustain the gains your investment yields.

For a more thorough discussion of the Six Essentials for Sales Force Success, click here.
Forum is a recognized global leader in linking learning to strategic business objectives. Our learning solutions help organizations effectively execute their business strategies by focusing on their most important asset: their people. We provide clients with practical and research-based advice and tailored programs that mobilize employees, accelerate business-initiative implementation, and improve agility. Forum’s 40-year legacy as a pioneer and thought leader continues with the release of our latest book, *Strategic Speed* (Harvard Business Press).

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