

The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'Proven Sales Best Practices'



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Sixth in a Series, November 2009

High Performing Sales Teams Deploy Proven Sales Best Practices for Predictable, Repeatable, Measurable and Sustainable Success

Prior to launching PMI ten years ago, I held Chief Sales Officer positions with several organizations. Sometimes my Chief Sales Officer responsibilities included marketing and sometimes my responsibilities included customer service. But in all cases, it was clearly understood that I was the guy that was responsible for making the numbers. I often reflect upon these experiences in my client work today. It was probably the best preparation that anyone could have for the type of work that PMI does, and other PMI'ers with the same type of background agree: the challenges of modern sales executives are daunting and formidable, and "walking in their shoes" is the only way to truly understand the stress and difficulty of this role.



By combining my own experiences with the Chief Sales Officers that I have had the opportunity to work with, certain things stand out as best practices required for high performance. In some cases, success can be connected with a specific best practice because it has been implemented. In some cases, there has been a lack of success that appears to result from the absence of a specific best practice. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will focus on sales best practices that tend to be predictors of success in sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

Deploying Proven Sales Best Practices

High performing sales teams deploy proven sales best practices to increase sales effectiveness and boost sales productivity. These organizations seem to understand more about what's working in terms of sales execution, as well as why it works and how to replicate their successes. In our work with leading sales teams around the globe, we have found that the deployment of sales best practices is a best practice unto itself. Some companies have discovered that they have their own set of sales best practices and that these can be made available to all of their salespeople, if they can first understand what they are, and then determine how to deploy them across the organization. These sales teams are then able to optimize sales execution and identify benchmarks for effective sale coaching throughout the lifecycle of the sale.

We have found that sales execution and performance gaps exist in virtually all sales organizations. Should the sales team that is trying to drive sales effectiveness to the next level only consider what their top performers are doing and then feed this (and only this) back to the rest of the organization? Certainly not. But if a sales organization's existing sales best practices can be validated, packaged and complemented with other best practices from within their industry, then there is an opportunity to model sales excellence on an organization-specific basis, a very powerful formula for success. Our experience with these types of tools has shown that salespeople are naturally interested in how top performers are consistently successful, and are eager to have tools that can facilitate course correction when sales execution is not producing the desired results.



The Need for Predictability, Repeatability, Measurability and Sustainability

When the topic of sales process is discussed, there is typically a focus on predictability and repeatability. But what do these words really mean when it comes to sales execution? And does the story end there? Let's take a closer look, and examine the four pillars of sales process and best practices that should be the sales manager's (and salesperson's) "closest allies."

- **Predictability:** To some, predictability means that we see the future before it becomes the present. To others, it implies that the likelihood of success is greater if we execute best practices that have been proven to work. But in all cases, the desire to predict suggests the objective of improving sales execution while reducing the need for sales rework and "do-over," thus driving sales productivity up and increasing sales effectiveness. At the end of the day, what really matters most is that we understand what works and why it works, and then how to execute in a manner that brings the value created by this best practice to life for the customer through the application of consultative selling skills. (Please see Article 5 in this Series: ***Consultative Selling Skills***)
- **Repeatability:** What good does it do to be able to predict results if you can't be assured of getting it right when it's time to execute again? What about enabling middle performers to behave more like top performers? Doing things right the first time and selecting the optimal course of action based on having validated insight as to what action is most likely to produce the desired results is the essence of repeatability. The modern sales process should provide this insight to sales managers and salespeople and do so in a manner that is aligned and connected with their unique business requirements and go-to-market strategy. (Please see Article 4 in this Series: ***More from the Middle***)
- **Measurability:** How comfortable can you really be with predictability and repeatability if you have no basis for determining if your sales execution was effective? I once heard a sales manager say that he would know if his rep was effective when he saw the signature on their contract. Really? What if it took this rep twice as long to close the business as it should have? What if the cost of sales due to ineffective sales execution and rework was much greater than it should have been and the margin

that should have been realized has now disappeared. Finally, what if this marginal win was so close to being a resounding loss that the rep felt inclined to discount vigorously until the prospect finally said yes? Without specific metrics and measures that provide perspective on the degree of sales effectiveness across the entire sales process, there can (and likely will) be some nasty and expensive surprises at the end – when it is too late to do much about them. This is the power of measurement – the ability to make course corrections before the final destination is reached. (Please see Article 3 in this Series: ***Sales Effectiveness Measurement***)



- **Sustainability:** Finally, what's the point of pursuing predictable, repeatable and measurable results if it all becomes a “one hit wonder” and there is no basis for adoption, traction and sustaining the results of our execution of sales best practices – so that when we get it right we can keep it right? When we sustain effective sales execution we create the opportunity for our sales organization to get on the path to sales excellence. A particularly insightful PMI client had much to say about this a couple of years ago, and connected sustainability directly to the role and responsibilities of the modern sales manager as an effective sales coach – he was right!

I like to illustrate the role of the sale manager in sustainability with the notion of driving a car. When we're looking through the windshield, we're examining where we're going with an eye towards making the best choices as we pursue our destination. When we're looking into the rear-view mirror, we're having a glimpse into the past and where we've been, and perhaps even verifying that we avoided certain obstacles. On the other hand, when we're looking through the side windows, it's all about where we are at that moment, and the current reality of our travel as we continue our journey. The sales manager that adds value to each of these dimensions (the future, the past and the present) through assessment, coaching and review is making giant strides in the direction of sustainability, as well as adding immediate value to salespeople in the process. (Please see Article 2 in this Series: ***Effective Sales Coaching***)



The Modern Sales Process: A Roadmap of Sales Best Practices

So where do high performing sales teams go to acquire the tools that enable the predictability, repeatability, measurability and sustainability of sale execution? We know of no better place than the modern sales process, which is best deployed today as a “roadmap” of sales best practices.

Unfortunately, in the past, many sales training organizations had it all wrong. I remember a conversation that I had some years ago with a “sales training expert” regarding the adoption of his particular methodology. When I

questioned how his process would equip my salespeople to build and deploy the appropriate competitive sales strategies, his response was “Well if you follow our sales process, there won’t be any need to worry about the competition!” It sounds just as arrogant and ridiculous now as it did then. We are setting ourselves up for disappointment and push-back when the sales process becomes overly prescriptive and burdensome.



These old, tired notions of sales process “silver bullets” are, in part, why some salespeople resist them. PMI’s philosophy regarding the modern sales process is that while it should be based on a sales organization’s own, proven best practices (and never, ever deployed as a generic, off-the-shelf tool), it is best seen as a roadmap without any implicit guarantees of success or hard-wired outcomes.

Think of it this way: if we’re driving from Boston to San Francisco, while there may be many different routes and sets of directions that we could take, there is almost certainly an optimal route that we should take. If the salesperson feels during sales roadmap execution that she should deviate from the optimal

route for reasons that she knows best from her experience with the customer and the competition, then she should have the flexibility to do so without feeling as though she is breaking her sales process.

This is how sales process has evolved into the more contemporary concept of the sales roadmap – an approach that is less prescriptive and more predictive, and hence, much more palatable and acceptable to the modern salesperson.

Increasing Sales Effectiveness and Productivity: Getting It Right the First Time

When you consider how much waste and rework typically occurs in sales execution, it is no wonder that the cost of sales for many organizations is too high. Consequently, one of the things that I appreciate about top performers is their priority to get things right the first time – and this probably goes back to my days as a sales manager and then as a sales executive.

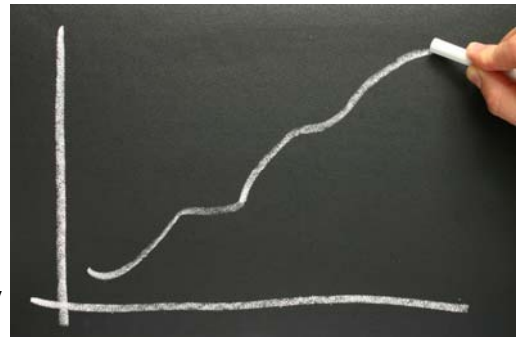


I can remember a number of specific examples of salespeople inviting me into their accounts, only to find out that we were not where we thought we were. The sale was frequently in the later stages, we were behind, and even if it was clear what types of corrective measures should be taken, in many cases there simply wasn’t enough time left to fix things. We suggest that there should be a series of “early warning indicators” built into your sales roadmap, so that before your car runs into the pothole or you miss the detour sign, you receive a notification. If your sales roadmap has the typical number of phases or stages (typically 4 – 8), then these early warning indicators must, by definition, be near the beginning of sales execution when there is time to make adjustments. These early warning indicators should send a signal to the salesperson and her sales team that we’re not where we need to be with the customer and that we

need to make some changes while there is still time to do so.

Determining Your Points of Inflection

Another concept that typifies the contemporary sales roadmap is the “inflection point.” From a PMI perspective, inflection points consist of that subset of sales activities or executables (typically less than 25% of the total number) that tend to represent the primary places where we either surge ahead or fall behind in our sales execution. With our clients, we are typically able to determine that of the primary activities or success factors (typically 10 – 25) that comprise their sales roadmaps, there are several



that almost always determine if the business will be won or lost. This indicates that while all of the sales roadmap activities or executables are important (or they wouldn't be in the sale roadmap), they are not all equal in value or impact on the overall outcome of sales execution.

Determining sales inflection points requires assessment internally (with your salespeople and sales managers focused on specific sales opportunities that have been won) as well as externally with the corresponding customers that can provide their perspective on the sales process. This is PMI's approach to developing and validating a sales roadmap of best practices, and as one might imagine, there is typically a gap between how the supplier feels vs. what the customer says regarding sales execution and effectiveness. An understanding of your inflection points can be extremely valuable in predicting sales performance and measuring sales effectiveness during sales execution.

Conclusion

High performing sales teams deploy proven sales best practices to equip and enable their salespeople with processes, skills and tools that will drive increased levels of sales productivity. These companies realize that their top performers have their own sales best practices, and that when these are harvested and modeled into a customized sales roadmap that fits their business, the likelihood of success across the entire sales organization is significantly greater.

Whether we're in good or challenging economic times, there is a need for more predictability, repeatability, measurability and sustainability in order to drive sales execution to higher effectiveness levels. We consider a customized roadmap of sales best practices to be one of the most effective tools that can be provided to a sales organization.

Deployment of proven sales best practices can be the difference between spontaneous sales execution based on “gut feeling” vs. a more disciplined, intentional and thoughtful approach. When salespeople engage with their customers by executing proven best practices and a model for success, their confidence, effectiveness and win-rates are increased.

Next Month

Our next article will focus **Proven Sales Best Practices** and **Consultative Selling Skills** on the creation of value for our customers. In **Customer Value Focus**, we will discuss how to connect sales best practices and skills directly to what the Customer cares most about: the creation of value for them by their suppliers' high performing sales teams.

Performance Methods, Inc., recognized by TrainingIndustry.com as one of the **2009 Top Sales Training Companies**, will be featured in a series of articles that will focus on the **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams**. PMI is proud to serve the needs of a broad group of industry-leading companies and will be sharing with the TrainingIndustry.com readership how leading global firms are deploying proven best practices to increase sales effectiveness, create customer value, grow customer relationships and gain competitive advantage. The **Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams** article series will cover a number of critical areas of sales performance and provide readers with insight into how sales best practices are being deployed effectively by world-class sales organizations in a variety of industries. These articles will provide special emphasis on key best practices driving effective sales leadership/management, sales performance/execution, sales strategy deployment and strategic account management.

