

The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams: 'Planning to Win'



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High Performing Sales Teams Plan to Win Competitive Sales Opportunities by Deploying Strategies and Executing Effectively

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 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 client 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 other 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.

Best Practice: Planning to Win



High performing sales teams plan to win competitive sales opportunities by deploying the right strategies and executing effectively against their plans. They recognize that when pursuing competitive business, their likelihood of winning is significantly greater if they develop and deploy plans to win these opportunities and then synchronize their sales and account teams accordingly. Because of their planning approach to selling, they are frequently able to garner strong resources to support their sales efforts, as eagles like to soar with eagles and winners like to work with

winners. Their customers also sense that there is something different when working with these salespeople, as their actions are more deliberate, their follow-up is more prompt and their sales execution more effective. They are more proactive and less reactive because they are “working their plans,” which helps them gain advantage as they are able to project greater confidence, reduce surprises and build relationships based on credibility and trust with their customers. Sound good? Sure it does – and the important question is “How do they do it?”

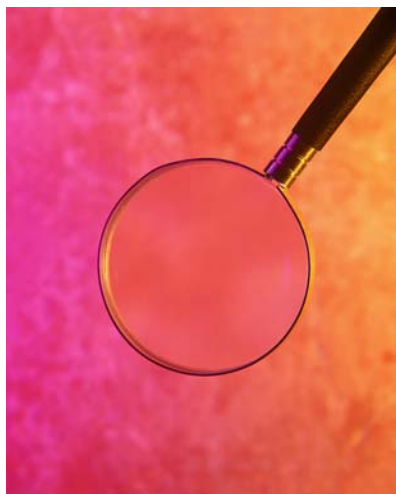
A Formula for Success

It has been my great pleasure throughout my career to work with some of the top salespeople in the world across a variety of industries. PMI begins each client engagement with an assessment of existing best practices, and we know of no better way to determine “what’s working and what’s not” than by interviewing top performers, sales managers/executives and thought leaders and asking them questions about how and why winners consistently win.



Talk to enough winners and you begin to see trends: top performers tend to do things a little differently, and this results in identifiable executables across companies, industries and even the sales profession. Things are different in 2010 than they were even a few years ago, much less in 2000, 1990, 1980 or before. We’re selling differently because customers are buying differently, and the most successful salespeople understand this. It’s part of their “secret sauce,” and we’re going to share some of it with you.

Discovery and Assessment



One phenomenon that we have observed repeatedly is that when business is lost, many salespeople think that the loss occurred later in their execution of their sales process than was actually the case. We know this because PMI has interviewed over 1000 of our clients’ customers to date, and when we talk to them following opportunity wins and losses, many times we hear just the opposite. Customers have told us that business was lost by a specific supplier early in their evaluation and selection process, and the selling team didn’t realize that they were losing until it was too late to do anything about it. We see opportunity planning as a process for “planning to win,” a series of connected phases of sales execution, with the first phase being for the purpose of discovery and assessment.

Most salespeople put their early sales focus on qualification of the opportunity, sometimes to the exclusion of discovering enough critical information about the customer and their business. The problem with this approach is clear. Let’s assume that two salespeople are competing: one is spending his efforts trying to determine if the opportunity is qualified and worth working, while the other is engaged in consultative discovery with the customer to better understand their business and assess the potential fit of her products, solutions and services

against the customer's objectives, challenges and unique requirements. We can predict which salesperson will achieve greater competitive advantage. Top performers consistently get off to a strong start when pursuing new sales opportunities and their plan to win includes an early investment of time in conducting discovery about the customer's business and thoroughly assessing each opportunity against a specific set of criteria.

Alignment and Development

One of the most ridiculous things that I ever heard a salesperson say is that "I don't care if my customer likes me or not, so long as they respect me." How many times have you bought something from someone that you didn't like, and with whom you did not feel personally aligned? If ever, then you must have wanted or needed it very badly, or else it must have been far and away the best solution, product or service for you. The problem that we see in today's business-to-business selling environments is that this almost never happens. In most cases, the customer has multiple choices for their business needs, and in many of these situations there are at least two suppliers that can sufficiently meet their requirements. So how does the customer decide and select one supplier from among a field of competitors when several can do the job?



The second phase in the opportunity planning process is alignment with the customer's decision team and subsequent development of relationships and solutions. Alignment refers to the ability of the supplier to map their selling or account team to the customer in a way that makes it easier for the customer to navigate the supplier's organization and leverage the resources and expertise of the supplier to the fullest extent. With alignment between the parties in place, it is then possible to develop authentic relationships that seek to understand the specific value expectations of the decision team members. Then, through these relationships, it becomes possible to extend the dialogue between the teams to include how the supplier's value is a potential fit for the unique requirements of the customer.

Without alignment between buying and selling teams, it becomes difficult to solve customer problems because there is not enough trust and collaboration between the parties to create an environment in which business problems can be openly discussed. Alignment "gaps" can be fatal during the sales process, because while one supplier may be falling behind, another is making progress and building genuine relationships with the customer. We believe that a significant amount of business is lost in this second phase of opportunity planning, because a lack of alignment will have a cascading impact on the next two phases, thus reducing the supplier's effectiveness in positioning their solutions and differentiating their value with the customer.

Positioning and Connection

If the supplier has been successful in the the Discovery/Assessment and Alignment/Development phases of the opportunity planning process, then the sales team should be ready to position the advantages of their products, solutions, resources, expertise and services...and the customer should be willing to listen and consider. The

concept of positioning is certainly not a new one – but the pervasive problem that we see with many salespeople is that they try to position effectively before they understand enough about the customer and their requirements (first phase) and before they have developed trust-based relationships with the customer’s decision team that will allow for the appropriate levels of collaboration (second phase).



Positioning is most powerful when it creates mindshare with the customer and:

- A positive perception of the advantages of the supplier’s solution
- A strong recognition of the supplier’s business value
- A vision of a successful partnership (or at least strong relationship) between the parties.

When the advantages of the supplier’s solution, the supplier’s unique business value and the supplier’s ability to partner have been successfully positioned with the customer, the bar has been set by which competitors will likely be measured and compared by the customer. Our experience has been that top performers position most effectively when they create a vision of success with the customer, and are able to connect their solutions directly with what the customer values most. These salespeople understand that it is much easier and more natural to gain agreement on the “fit” of their offerings when there has been ample discovery and alignment with the customer, resulting in a more authentic relationship based on trust and credibility.

Differentiation and Proof

So now that we’ve conducted the appropriate levels of discovery, aligned with the customer and positioned our solutions, it’s time to differentiate ourselves from the competition and prove that we can and will deliver the value that they expect from their supplier of choice. Differentiation of value becomes more achievable based on our prior investment of the time, resources and talent of our sales or account team members, and the result should be a customer mindset that causes them to feel a preference for us. In short, we earn the right to differentiate with the customer through our investment of resources and expertise on their behalf.



Customer preference for one supplier over another occurs for reasons, and these reasons may not be clear without the appropriate execution of the first three phases of the opportunity planning process. We’ve all had experiences with ineffective salespeople that tried to prematurely convince us that their offering was superior to someone else’s without first creating an environment in which we were ready to listen. When a salesperson has not earned the right to differentiate, they can be perceived as being “pushy” and unprofessional, which almost always results in losing the business and leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the customer. Top salespeople make decisions carefully regarding the opportunities

in which they are willing to invest their resources, and they realize that while they are executing their opportunity planning process, the customer is executing his buying process. The judgement and patience to wait before rushing the customer to acknowledge product or solution superiority is a best practice (and a common courtesy). The customer is much more willing and able to discuss supplier differentiation after we have effectively discovered, aligned and positioned with them.

Becoming the Customer's Best Alternative



I know a company that has an informal fraternity of highly successful salespeople known as the “Hundred Million Dollar Club.” The rules of admission are simple and clear: when you have achieved over \$100,000,000 in life-to-date sales, then you’re in, and once you’re in, you’re always a member. Even though you will never see anything in writing about this group, you can be sure of this: it is well

known who these people are within their organization, and they always seem to be able to assemble the most talented sales teams and resources to support their selling efforts and pursue their sales opportunities.

When you meet one of these individuals, certain things become apparent very quickly. They are deliberate, but not overbearing. They are confident, but not arrogant. They are demanding, but typically don’t ask others to do things that they would not do themselves. And they plan to win – each and every time that they take the field. Their customers like and respect them, because customers like working with winners, too. Their success has not been accidental, and when I asked one of them to share with me how and why she has been able to be consistently successful for so long, her response was interesting:

“In every opportunity that I pursue, I always plan to become my customer’s best alternative.”

Perhaps this sums it up best, because at the end of the day, planning to win your sales opportunities is all about seeking and finding ways in which you can predictably, repeatedly and consistently become your customer’s best alternative and fit. We know of no better approach for becoming the customer’s best alternative than through the effective execution of the opportunity planning process...and the win rates of top sales performers that adopt this best practice provide validation.

Conclusion

High performing sales teams plan to win competitive sales opportunities by implementing the right strategies, deploying the right resources and executing effectively against their plans. They understand that effective customer engagement results in competitive advantage when we plan to win, particularly when the customer is executing their buying or selection process (“planning to select”) and evaluating suppliers accordingly.

Because customer buying processes have evolved (and continue to evolve) in the new millennium, planning to win business is a function of a sales or account team’s ability to:

- Discover and assess customer needs and requirements
- Align with the customer's decision team and develop relationships and solutions
- Position solution advantages and connect with the customer's vision of success
- Differentiate value and prove superior customer fit
- Build authentic relationships based on trust and credibility (while executing the above).

Planning to win should be our objective each and every time we make the decision to compete for business. The salesperson that develops and executes a plan to win accrues an immediate competitive advantage over one that does not, because they have a process for discovering what's most important to the customer, assembling the resources to enable the win, connecting their solutions with customer needs and proving best fit against customer requirements. And as one salesperson recently put it: "While I'm planning to win I'm also planning a loss...for my competitor."

Next Month

Our next article will discuss new and modern approaches to managing sales territories, building strong sales pipelines and improving forecast accuracy. In ***Manage Territories and Pipelines as Businesses***, we will examine how high performing sales teams prioritize and implement best practices in the areas of **Effective Team Alignment, Consultative Selling Skills, Proven Sales Best Practices, Customer Value Focus** and **Planning to Win** (Articles 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 in this series) in the form of a sustainable territory and pipeline management business plan.

Performance Methods, Inc., recognized by TrainingIndustry.com as one of the ***2010 Top Sales Methodology 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.