Winning Sales Teams

What will you do to make 2021 a growth year?

by: Mark Perlo, Sales Growth Partners

Today, so many things are changing in our industry. As managed services becomes a critical part of the office technology dealership's offerings, it has demanded changes in the customer acquisition plan, the administrative process and service execution. All of these changes are critical and require investments and a willingness to endure a steep learning curve. Given all of this reinvention, what gets lost most often is what I believe is the most important change that is needed: sales talent acquisition and development. No matter how strong the offering and execution plan is, it will not succeed without the correct sales plan and personnel.

Given all the 2020 business uncertainty, sales professionals share these job search plans:

■ Sixty-eight percent plan to look for a new job in the next year.

■ Forty-five percent plan to look for a new job in the next three months.

■ Nineteen percent have no plans to look for a new job at all.

This is good and bad news; we might endure some sales turnover, but there will be a plentiful candidate pool. However, without a dedicated sales hiring and onboarding process, the chances of hiring success are minimal.

I have been in the office technology industry for close to 40 years. In addition, I have been a high school and college baseball coach. Building sales teams is similar to building winning baseball teams. The most important goal is to find/hire the best athletes and find the best positions for those athletes to play, then let them play with minimal constraints. In business, all too often we get caught up in making sure territories are filled and do not hire the best salespeople.

How Can This Be?

We have to admit that we do not know how to evaluate talent and, instead, we use our guts. We are impatient and think bad breath is better than no breath, so we knowingly hire less-than-top-quality talent. There is not enough budgeted for top talent. We have a job that takes multiple talents at multiple pay grades. Sales reps need to: sell to the CEO level, help with installation, help train, handle customer issues, etc.

All companies depend on sales; therefore, all companies depend on the production of their salespeople. Many companies take casual approaches when developing their sales teams.

Likewise, many companies are willing to settle and compromise on talent acquisition.

But the stakes could not be higher. On average, the cost of hiring a bad salesperson easily tops $50,000. Meanwhile, the production from a strong salesperson can easily exceed five times that of an average performer.

What Needs to be Corrected?

First, we must decide what we are looking for. Is it a low-cost jack-of-all-trades or a professional salesperson who can sell to the C suite?

I often hear: "I can't afford to hire premium talent." I say that you cannot afford not to. Territories are usually designed to maximize hardware sales coverage and they are geography-bound by ZIP codes. In those territories, we ask the reps to uncover prospects and then sell to the owners/CEOs. If they are successful, they will often help deliver, install and train. I am sorry to say this, but those need to be different job functions if you want to attract the best sales talent. Top sales producers need to spend their time selling to qualified clients, not crawling under desks trying to connect printers.

Here are the keys to hiring success:

■ Role-specific criteria for success

■ Well-worded job postings on the right job sites using the right parameters (e.g., Indeed)

■ An applicant tracking system (e.g., RecruiterBox)

■ An accurate and predictive sales-specific assessment that is customized to your criteria

■ A scoring system for objectivity

■ Great interviewing skills to challenge every claim on an applicant's resume (e.g., his [or her] last company; an elevator pitch, etc.)

■ Patience to wait for the ideal candidate rather than the first one you like enough to hire

■ Discipline to not skip steps in the hiring process

■ Thorough onboarding via a formal 90-day program (First impressions are critical and you do not get a second chance. Do not let a new hire see you have no dedicated training plan on day one.)

Develop the criteria for the perfect sales rep for your business. There are 10 fundamental sales competencies: hunting/reaching decision makers; relationship building; consultative selling; selling value; qualifying; presentation skills; closing;

sales process; and sales technology. Mastery of these 10 selling competencies is required for times like these, but fewer than half of all salespeople have them as strengths. We know that the top 20% of all salespeople generate 80% of the revenue, so if the bottom 50% are going to fail, that will either reduce revenue by 20% or place even more pressure on top producers to compensate for the shortfall.

Along with the 10 fundamental sales competencies listed above, there are critical skills that are even more important to identify in your candidates:

■ The will to sell: The grit, desire, commitment, motivation, responsibility versus excuses and personal self-worth.

■ The underlying sales DNA that is invisible or hidden weaknesses that neutralize the 10 skills above.

■ The need for approval: Successful sales reps do not need to be liked. When they have a strong need to be liked, they will spend more time trying to make friends versus getting business.

■ Emotional involvement: When sales reps are emotionally involved, they can panic and not listen to the client; they will

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be listening to the little voice inside their heads instead.

■ Supportive beliefs: What sales reps think will either support or sabotage selling outcomes.

■ Rejection-proof: The key is how long does it take to recover from a "no."

It is also important to note that "A" players will not work for "B" managers. Managers must have strong abilities to coach effectively, motivate, hold their players accountable to daily activities, and upgrade their teams with players who may even be stronger than their managers. This is a typical blind spot that can and must be fixed.

That leaves three viable strategies:

(1) Evaluate and train them — Sales force evaluation tools will identify the areas in which each salesperson needs help in each of the sales core competencies; then, training and coaching can be targeted. Typically, around 65% of sales reps will improve, but it may take eight to 16 months.

(2) Replace them with top performers by using customized predictive sales candidate assessments that will help you identify and select those who will succeed in your roles. However, this will not eliminate the need for on-boarding and you still have to allow for ramp-up time (the length of your learning curve plus the length of your sales cycle plus 30 days).

(3) Hope that things work themselves out and that you will not have to do anything different. We already know from last year how this option works out. Companies that asked for help during March, April and May of 2020 had absolutely outstanding fourth quarters. By the time the United States began reopening during the middle of the year, those who did not ask for help earlier were so far behind that they were no longer in positions to even pay for the help they so desperately needed.

What will you do to make sure 2021 is a growth year for your company? ■

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