

BUILDING YOUR SALES FORCE

by Dr. Scott Downey

Common football logic when facing fourth down and short yardage at the end of the half would suggest kicking a field goal for a high probability of three points. But in this year's Super Bowl, the **Philadelphia Eagles** believed they had players they could trust to accomplish a bigger goal. It paid off with a 10-point halftime lead.

How do you, as an agribusiness sales manager, make sure you have that kind of confidence in the players on your sales team?

In the past, sales managers looked at the characteristics that made them successful as salespeople over the last 20 years and sought out those traits in potential hires.

But what about when the world is more complex? When the gap between the largest and smallest customer is tens of thousands of cows or acres? When interest rates are rising, markets are falling and weather is more extreme?

Do the same traits that have always gotten us over the goal line still matter? Yes, some of them do. For example, intelligence and a passion for serving farmers are still important.

Some, however, do not. Identifying which ones no longer matter is harder because it depends on who the customer is. If most of your business comes from serving farmers who primarily operate with the same approach to farming that they had 20 years ago, then those traits are still relevant. If you're serving more progressive customers, then some of the traits that helped make salespeople successful 20 years ago are less relevant.

TRAITS THAT MATTER

The gift of gab used to be a hallmark of the salesperson. Everybody loved hearing a good story. While most still enjoy spending time with people who are fun to talk with, that might not be enough to make a business-oriented customer want to make a purchase. A farmer today is probably more likely to prefer strong technical



skills to storytelling.

The sales role has also changed in other ways. Sales professionals used to be salesmen, with an emphasis on gender. That's hardly a notable trait when it comes to a professional salesperson now. Even if a primary decision maker on the farm is male, it is highly likely that other professionals associated with the farm are female.

Spouses, daughters and many other professional influencers on the farm are as likely to be female. No gender or other demographic characteristic would prevent a person from being successful as a professional salesperson today.

This point isn't news. It seems kind of old fashioned to even mention it. The reason it is relevant here is exactly that, though. Times change without us even noticing.

It used to be that the primary traits that made a good salesperson were closing and handling objections. A salesperson who wouldn't take no for an answer was thought of as being unstoppable.

Today, that type of person is just annoying. That doesn't mean that gaining a commitment isn't necessary or that salespeople won't need to deal with objections.

But the salesperson who understands company capabilities and connects them with the goals of the customer in order to benefit both parties is going to be far more successful over the long haul.

CONSIDER YOUR CUSTOMERS

All of this to say that there is no

single way of developing a sales force that can be trusted at the goal line. Every manager has to consider the traits necessary for serving their unique customers and be clear about how important each is when looking for sales job candidates.

It can also be helpful to challenge yourself by considering whether you know what those traits are from your own experience, or whether you've made a thorough analysis of what it takes to be successful today. Sometimes things change without us noticing. Kind of like the Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback catching a pass in the end zone, it might not be what we expect.

SALES MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Building Your Sales Force is a key topic at the 2018 Sales Management and Leadership program from **Purdue's Center for Food and Agricultural Business**. It runs May 30-31 on the university's West Lafayette, IN, campus. Learn more: agribusiness.purdue.edu/Sales-Management. **AM**

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