

DEVELOPING AG SALES MANAGERS

by Dr. Scott Downey

What does it take to be a great sales manager? We know that the majority of sales managers at agribusinesses are promoted from the ranks of successful salespeople. There is good logic in that. Sales managers must know what they're doing in terms of the sales process. If they've been successful as salespeople, they've demonstrated that knowledge.

A good sales manager probably needs to know something about the customers in their area, what they're like, who of them is the most influential, and how they buy. Again, successful salespeople have usually demonstrated these abilities.

There are a few challenges for sales managers who come from the ranks of salespeople, though.

THE CHALLENGE FOR SALES MANAGERS

Most of us, salespeople included, tend to think that our success comes from our hard work, intelligence, and ability. But, we are not usually good at self-evaluation. Managers who are promoted because of their sales success, might incorrectly believe that their approach is the right way to sell.

Take hypothetical salesperson Jim, for example. Jim is great at building relationships and always has a joke to tell. He rarely has to even talk about product because people just like, trust, and are loyal to him. Jim knows he's a good salesperson and has the numbers to prove it. His customers respond positively to him and his bosses tell him he does a great job.

However, there is a large group of non-customers Jim never sees. Those who don't buy from him think he wastes their time. He remembers them, but doesn't take their business seriously.

Jim's sales success isn't because he's a good salesperson. It's because he's good with a subset of the marketplace. If he tried to teach other salespeople how to use his technique,

there could be an entire segment of prospects in the marketplace who might not be served.

measured than the wins in helping others develop. It can be very satisfying to see someone you have

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Good managers understand that helping others be successful in sales doesn't come from copying techniques, but from helping people identify and develop tools and their approaches that work for them, uniquely. That means managers must recognize and support techniques that they don't possess themselves.

ENVIRONMENT VS. ABILITY

Some of the foundational research in the area of sales management shows that when things are going well, sales are usually attributed to the salesperson's ability. When things are going poorly, the cause is usually attributed to the salesperson being in a challenging situation.

A good manager must be able to correctly identify the challenges that salespeople face in the same way that a good coach must be able to accurately identify problems with each player's game. Attributing performance to the wrong problem wastes time and leads to poor outcomes.

COACHING OTHERS

Even when managers have an accurate understanding of what works in a specific market environment and are able to match specific techniques to specific individuals, not all great salespeople are strong enough as leaders to help other people work through challenges. A manager must be able to positively diagnose and focus on losses as well as wins, without jumping in and "saving" a struggling salesperson unless it's absolutely necessary.

Some salespeople are driven by their own wins. The wins for salespeople are much more easily

trained be successful. But that big sale is something a manager only gets to experience vicariously. Someone who needs that type of motivation in order to keep going, might not be the right fit for management.

WORK ON THE CRAFT

The message here is not that salespeople make bad managers. On the contrary, successful sales experience is a real bonus in understanding the product, the industry, and some of the customers. But managers must work on their craft and evolve tools that allow them to help others be successful. That's a bit of a different ballgame.

SALES EDUCATION

The **Purdue University Center for Food and Agricultural Business** will host two seminars in West Lafayette, IN, focused on sales and sales management. Sales management and Leadership, which focuses on techniques for becoming a better sales manager, is June 1-2. Precision Selling is June 8-9 and will include strategies for working with agricultural producers. Learn more at <http://agribusiness.purdue.edu/sales16>. **AM**

Dr. Scott Downey is associate director of the Center for Food and Agricultural Business. You can reach him at downeyws@purdue.edu.

