

WINNING THE COACHING WAR

Battle Tactics For Sales Managers

by Scott Downey

Quick question ... do managers have more or less time to coach their sales teams today than three years ago? The answer, of course, is that they have the same amount of time now as they did then. Word-play aside, many managers feel they are spending more time putting out fires than ever before. The biggest threat to coaching today may not be ability, but time.

In a survey of agribusiness managers conducted by Purdue University's Center for Food and Agricultural Business (CAB) in the fall of 2002, there was a general consensus that managers wished they could spend more time coaching. Managers are pinned between flat organizations and demanding customers. While salespeople are out fighting the battle on the field, their managers are fighting to figure out the best way to use the limited firepower they have in order to help them.

THE BATTLEFIELD

Before talking about tactical responses, it may be helpful to take a look at the battlefield. Are there really more fires burning today, or do sales managers just like being professional fire extinguishers? Probably a little bit of both. A 2003 study of the decision-making habits of large commercial producers showed they expect to continue to grow in terms of volume of acreage they control and also in terms of the complexity of organizational structures and uniqueness of the agricultural products they produce. They demand great products from input suppliers. They want great service and great prices. In this environment, margins are under pressure, and companies seek efficiencies in order to meet the demands of customers. Sales organizations are stretched across broader territories in order to control costs and respond to growingly complex customer needs. As a result, there really may be more fires burning. The problem for sales managers, though, may not so much be the pace of sales management as the large volume of sales activities each manager supports.

Managers may feel like they don't have as much time for coaching because they are responding to the needs of more salespeople, each of whom has more customers. As a sales manager in my first career, I relished hearing one of my people say, "Hey, I've got a quick question for you." I enjoyed the opportunity of helping them solve problems by answering their questions. It reinforced that my opinion was valuable (which of course it was!) and that I was putting my experience to work. When the volume of these questions exceeds the capacity to respond, though, there are some tough choices to make.

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Answering questions is not always bad; there's often a legitimate need to get involved. Good sales managers have a perspective on the industry, experience and — maybe most important — authority such that they can truly improve the outcome of most selling situations. They are an effective, but limited, resource, which should be invested not at the whim of circumstance but sparingly and intentionally. The downside to training salespeople to come to their managers for help on a large volume of issues is that managers may become a barrier to production and stifle the development of the salespeople they worked so hard to recruit. The toughest choice sales managers have to make about coaching is how to balance the time needed to solve problems personally with the benefits of teaching others how and when to solve them on their own.

To achieve this balance, it may be helpful to answer another quick question. Do salespeople have more or less time to work with customers today than they had three years ago? Many of them are responsible for more relationships. It is not uncommon for a salesperson to be responsible for hundreds of customers in their territory. To deal with this, many agribusinesses are investing in training on issues such as time management, market segmentation and account prioritization to better equip their salespeople. These are hot topics in agriselling, but little attention seems to be given to how sales managers manage their time, segment their sales teams and prioritize opportunities. Paying attention to these three areas are the key to defending the ranch.

BATTLE TACTICS

Coach Mike Krzyzewski, in his book with Don Phillips, *Leading with the Heart*, says that his only promise to new recruits with regard to playing time is "fair but not equal" treatment. That's really the same issue that salespeople struggle with today in determining how to invest resources in customer relationships. Not every customer wants or is willing to pay for high levels of service, so salespeople have to manage their time. Sales managers have to manage their time similarly, treating salespeople fairly, but not equally.

Treating salespeople fairly but not equally may mean that some "quick questions" go unanswered. Good sales managers know that their job is to allocate limited resources — like time and money — but not to be the primary limited resource that needs allocating.

There's no silver bullet to managing time. Reacting to urgency is as addictive as any other habitual behavior. It takes real discipline to give salespeople the power to answer their own quick questions and to support them when they make a decision that's different than the manager may have made him or herself. Ultimately, though, their development will be enhanced and the manager's time will be utilized more effectively by doing so. The first battle tactic for sales managers is to repeatedly chant the mantra, "I have confidence that you have the ability to make a good decision about this. I trust your thoughtful consideration of all sides of the issue and will support you whatever you decide."

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"Ah, but you don't know my team," a manager may say. "I have Alex. Alex is young, inexperienced, and I don't have confidence in his ability to make a good decision." This brings up the second battle tactic for managers: segmenting the sales team. Not all salespeople are top performers. Just as not every customer is responsible for an equal portion of business, not every salesperson is responsible for an equal portion of business. The 80-20 rule used to evaluate customers is just as applicable to the sales team. While that may be intuitive, managers often fail to practice that rule. If Alex has the potential to be a high performer, then time with Alex may be well spent. If not, then his manager may want to invest some time in succession planning. In general, a man-

ager's resources are probably better invested in helping high performers perform well than in helping underperformers perform moderately.

Finally, the third tactic is to prioritize opportunities, but it's more than that. Customers continue to grow more complex. At the same time, sales teams are spread more thinly in their markets and competition is evermore cutthroat. Despite these factors, opportunities continue to abound in nearly every segment of agribusiness. Sales managers are probably more suited than anyone else in the organization to take an eye-in-the-sky view of both marketplace and company dynamics in order to spot these opportunities. A formal periodic review of opportunities in terms of personnel, customers and competitors can help set the direction for determining which opportunities have the highest likelihood for matching the company's ability to provide them. Boiling down this broad view and communicating the best opportunities to salespeople can help them prioritize their own markets. The third tactic also includes formalizing the planning process for allocating management time to specific areas that represent the best opportunities.

Sales managers must be responsive to market demands and the needs of the salespeople who report to them, but the responses must be more intentionally directed than is traditionally done. As customers grow in complexity, salespeople have to become more sophisticated in managing their relationships with them. That takes more time to develop and will not happen without managers who understand and coach more formal tactics and approaches to markets.

It's not business as usual. The days of sitting on the porch drinking iced tea are gone, if they ever existed. There's a battle out front, and sales managers must actively allocate resources, segment their sales force, and prioritize and plan for opportunities in order to win. **AM**

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