

3 Keys to Transforming Your SALES CULTURE

By Mike Brooks



At some point in a company's development, it becomes a priority to focus on and possibly change the existing sales culture. This need to change can be driven by many factors, including slumping or declining sales numbers. Alternatively, a change in focus may occur, from a customer-service-oriented sales team taking inbound leads to a more direct-selling model in which outbound calling becomes a priority. Or perhaps there is a change in direction, such as a focus on growing new accounts. Sometimes a total transformation is in order, whereby an entirely new sales methodology is required and selling systems, processes, and other key sales drivers are developed and implemented.

Regardless of the change, and in spite of the work necessary, one common challenge remains consistent: getting buy-in from your existing sales team to adopt and implement the skills, processes, and procedures needed to make the change successful.

THE PROBLEM IS WITH PEOPLE, NOT PROCESSES

Changing processes and procedures is relatively straightforward; changing the attitudes and actions of experienced sales reps isn't. Those of you who have been involved in managing or directing a sales team know firsthand the resistance reps exert against changing the way they sell. Even when their current sales skills are ineffective, sales reps are reluctant to try something different. Many sales reps resist a scripted or process-oriented approach, preferring to ad lib their way through their sales presentation and arguing that they would sound canned if they did otherwise.

In addition, many experienced sales reps have been through enough "sales-culture changes" to know that if they wait long enough for the new changes to blow over, the current senior management team will eventually lose steam and give up—and then things will return to normal. Sales reps

have an uncanny ability to survive: They have often already outwitted and endured many other initiatives and have eventually been left alone to scrape out a living.

Getting your sales team to buy into your new sales initiatives—and developing key drivers for coaching, reinforcing, and measuring the implementation of these initiatives—determines how successful your new sales culture ultimately becomes.

RE-ENGINEERING A NEW SALES PLATFORM

Often, after a proper assessment of current sales operations has been completed, it becomes clear that a complete redesign and re-engineering of the sales platform is necessary. This complete sales transformation has three primary stages.

The first stage is to define the sales process (what we call the “DSP”), including identifying the benchmarks and best practices that facilitate the successful navigation through each step in your sales process. This best-practice methodology becomes the blueprint that each of the following stages follows and reinforces.

The second stage is to turn your DSP into your company sales-training program and to develop your sales playbook from it. It is important at this stage to understand what your top performers are intuitively doing and saying to close sales, and then turn these successful practices into your own sales playbook. This playbook consists of proven scripts, qualifying guidelines, closing presentations, and rebuttals that teach your reps, step by step, how to successfully qualify and close deals in your environment.

The third stage of the new sales platform is to develop drivers that allow you and your managers to coach, teach, and measure adherence to your sales playbook. This includes teaching managers how to monitor live calls, how to critique and grade call recordings, and other methods of being more active during a sales rep’s call.

Changing this focus to active management pulls sales managers out from behind their desks and makes them involved in—and more responsible for—the sales rep’s success.

At this point, developing a new set of sales metrics that measure activities actually driving sales is crucial. Although most companies measure things like number of calls, time on the phone, closing percentage to goal, and so on, these metrics are not “active” metrics because they look backward and describe what happened after the sales attempt. Your new metrics will measure activities that take place during the sales cycle, such as adherence to your best-practice scripts, the number of qualifiers asked and answered on the first call, commitments made and action steps planned at the end of calls, and so on.

During this process of re-engineering your sales platform, three key areas play an important role in ultimately changing and getting the buy-in of your sales team.

THE THREE KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL CULTURE CHANGE

As we noted earlier, convincing your existing sales team to buy into your new sales platform is not only



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crucial to its success but also one of the biggest challenges to changing your sales operations. Three key factors will help ensure that your team buys into the change, but it’s critical to implement these strategies carefully and thoughtfully. That way, you will have the best chance of not only achieving buy-in but also sustaining the momentum and growth of early successes.

KEY ONE: HAVE A CLEAR STRATEGY FOR ROLLING OUT YOUR INITIATIVE

Although it seems straightforward to suggest having a planned rollout strategy for an undertaking as big as re-engineering and implementing a new sales platform, you might be surprised by the lack of planning and cohesion with which

many new programs are developed and introduced. This lack of a clear strategy not only sabotages many well-intentioned and needed changes, but often introduces more problems than it effectively solves. The first key, then, to giving your new sales initiative a fighting chance is to carefully plan out each step in its development and implementation.

The best place to start is at the beginning—more specifically, to find ways of enlisting the support, feedback, and ideas of the very salespeople who will be asked to implement the new techniques. You walk a fine line here; the point is to solicit input from your sales reps by having them identify the sales situations they most need help with, without being overwhelmed by the reps' perspectives or allowing the reps to take over the project from the beginning. I'll clarify this aspect as I explain the second key.

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a part of its design, and, more importantly, see how they can benefit from it. Again, you'd be surprised by how many companies develop a sweeping new sales platform in the safety and comfort of the senior-management think tank and then hand it down as a mandate to the reps. It's no wonder reps think their best strategy is to hide out and outlast the new program. And they are right: without their buy-in, the program will disintegrate.

The next stage to consider is the development of the sales playbook. Scripting out best practices and word-for-word rebuttals, introductions, closes, and so on will undoubtedly be the fundamental aspect of the success of your new sales initiative—but once again, careful timing of its introduction and enlisting your reps' input and revisions is crucial to the new method's acceptance and implementation. Resist the temptation to pass the new scripts out before they have been thoroughly tested.

As you develop your sales playbook, you will undoubtedly be caught up in the fervent belief that these improved scripts and sales procedures can have an immediate positive effect on sales. And they can. But handing out scripts too early has undermined many a positive change and has negatively affected sales team buy-in and adoption. Instead, have your managers or top reps test, refine, and retest the scripts until they are ready to be used (read: tested and refined even further) by the rest of the reps.

The last piece in the successful rollout of your new sales platform is being clear what your goals and benchmarks are during the initial rollout—usually the first 90 to 120 days. Many companies make the mistake of expecting total buy-in and adoption by the reps of the sales playbook. But it is more realistic and useful to measure and reward adherence to the gradual usage and adoption of parts of the playbook, starting with the first call. Bringing reps along slowly, reinforcing each success as it comes, and rewarding initial adherence is the better way to go.

KEY TWO: GET STRATEGIC BUY-IN AND CHAMPION INVOLVEMENT EARLY ON

Developing a clear rollout strategy for each stage of the new sales platform will allow you to identify target areas that will help you enlist champions early on. The first group involved consists of the front-line managers. The formula used to get their buy-in is the same as the one used for the reps: enlisting their feedback and input on the key areas of change you've already identified and are committed to changing (see the three stages mentioned earlier).

It's important to involve managers early and solicit their input throughout the process. This is especially true with the beginning stage of defining our sales process; managers can be particularly helpful here if they were at some point a top producer in your company and are familiar with the best practices of your sales cycle. In addition, involving managers in the development and practical use of your scripts is crucial for their continued investment in this process.

Enlisting your top producers and turning them into champions is also pivotal, as you might imagine. The easiest way to do this is to listen carefully to and incorporate their best practices into both the DSP development and the sales playbook. Your top producers are intimately familiar with the best practices of closing your particular sale, so enlisting their participation and capturing the practices they intuitively use will go a long way in getting buy-in from the rest of the team. It will also ensure that your top reps don't turn

on the process and undermine its implementation down the road.

Enlisting the rest of the sales team's input is important as well. Sales reps all want to know one thing: "What's in it for me?" If you can help them resolve the problem areas they run into—the objections they have trouble overcoming, the blow-offs they can't get past, and so on—you will more easily win them over. To do this, have them submit the objections and stalls that regularly frustrate them and provide them with effective rebuttals in your sales playbook.

Other champions include support staff and those who will be involved in compiling and updating the new metrics and design of the sales dashboards and reports. By identifying these key people in advance and establishing target areas for their involvement, you can ensure the steady development and implementation of your new sales platform.

KEY THREE: DURING IMPLEMENTATION, FOCUS ON PROGRESSIVE SUCCESS

Nothing will alienate your sales team more than your expecting total adoption and adherence to your new sales playbook and platform during the early stages of its introduction.

While this seems obvious, management and ownership—after investing the time, energy, and money required to make a change—are often in a hurry to get the team to buy in. Don't worry, they will, but it takes time and a plan.

The first step is to coach, measure, and reward the adoption of each part of the new sales process, one step at a time. Have your managers focus on the opening of your first call for the first week, and then move on to building rapport, qualifying, and getting commitment. After your team is scoring high (using a script-grading adherence form) on the first call, turn your attention to the closing call and build momentum (and buy-in) one step at a time.

Next, focus on the reps that are most bought in and emphasize their successes in team meetings. Record them for using the scripts successfully; highlight their script-grading adherence percentages, and reward them for their closed sales. Sales reps carefully watch what the others do; once they learn from their peers that the new playbook and techniques work, they will follow suit. Ultimately, the best way to get your more senior or stubborn reps onboard is give attention to and

reward those other, often newer, reps who are doing it your new way and succeeding. Sooner rather than later, the other reps will want the same results and attention.

Measuring adherence to your new playbook, and reinforcing progressive success, will yield sustained commitment and, eventually, buy-in from your entire sales team.

CONCLUSION

Often, successfully implementing a new sales platform and transforming a sales culture depend on senior management's ability to carefully roll out new initiatives in alignment with a clear strategy and a controlled set of key drivers. Having and following a defined process allows a company to, when necessary, outwait and outwit the sales team's natural resistance to change, providing an environment in which the new platform truly can transform the culture. **N**

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