Sales and Service
Excellence

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SALES/COMPETITION

Dealing Effectively with Competition

You can compete better by sharpening your sales skills.

by Dave Kahle

COMPETITION IMPACTS every industry, business, and sales position. What the competition does (or does not do) can either squeeze you out of business or create opportunities for growth and profits. The competition—and its impact—is a fact of life. You can't wish the competition away; however, you can change your attitudes and behaviors toward the competition. What you say and how you act about the competition has a daily bearing on your bottom line. An appropriate attitude and set of practices for dealing with the competition should be part of every salesperson's repertoire.

Here are three parts of that mindset:

1. Respect the competition. Speaking badly about the competition, looking down on them, finding fault with them and disparaging them are common behaviors. It is easy to see why. In sales meetings, we are told how our products stack up against the competition, what makes our service superior, why our people are more experienced and more knowledgeable. I often test the truth of these positions and make observations about these claims. I find that there is usually some degree of truth in these claims. For example, your hot new product may have features that your competitor's does not have. However, your competitor offers a sound business option to your customers. While your product contains some new features, his product may contain some features that yours does not. And while you claim your service

to be superior, so does he. And your people are probably not more experienced and knowledgeable than his. If your competitors were as flawed as you think they are, they wouldn't be in business, and your customers wouldn't be buying from them. Your competition is made up of educated, committed people who are trying just as hard as you are to be a viable option to your customers, to conduct their businesses with integrity, and who strive to do a good job and to provide for their families through the fruits of their labors. So, bury those attitudes of superiority, and cast off that disdain for the competition. If your customers didn't think they presented a viable option, they wouldn't be buying from them.

2. Don't believe everything you hear. Your customers may complain about the competition or tell stories about how they messed up on some project. This, of course, contributes to your smugness by confirming your views. Take all of that with a healthy degree of skepticism. The people who share that information with you are typically those with whom you have the best relationship—those that you consider your friends. What you see as confidential information about the competition's weaknesses may be the natural human inclination to tell you what they believe you want to hear. Your friends want to find common ground with you. And your animosity toward the competition provides productive soil to plow. Many of those customers who report on the flaws in the competition to you, are reporting on your flaws to them. Don't view

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everything you hear as 100 percent accurate.

3. Don't ever speak badly about the competition. Disparaging the competition, speaking badly about the company or the individual salespeople—using little innuendos and side comments—all says more about you to your customers than it does about the competitors to whom you refer. It reveals you as small-minded, petty, smug, and more interested in yourself than you are in your customers. I learned this lesson the hard way. I was selling a piece of capital equipment, representing a product line that was 35 percent more expensive than the competition. However, the additional cost was justified in a far superior product. The competition had been experiencing a problem with one component—the batteries easily worked loose and disconnected. They solved that problem by using a rubber band to provide additional tension and keep the batteries from jiggling loose. When I asked my potential customer how comfortable they felt with a product that was held together with a rubber band, she responded, "Do you know what I don't like about you? You are so negative about your competitors." I turned red, stammered an apology, and retreated quickly. That lesson has stuck with me.

If you don't want to speak badly about the competition, how do you present the advantages of you offer? Here are four options:

1. Consider the competition's offer as irrelevant. I believe this approach to be the most effective long term, because it focuses on the customer, not the competitor. If you have done an accurate, detailed job of understanding your customer's situation, and have presented a solution that precisely meets the customer's requirements, what difference does it make who the competition is, or what the competition does? The issue is not the competition; it is your ability to meet the customer's needs. Your mindset is not focused on the competition, but rather is targeted to understanding the customer's requirements. The conversation is not about how you compare to the competition, but rather how you meet the customer's needs.

Obviously, this approach is not for every selling situation. It requires a commitment on your part to spend time with the customer to fully understand his needs. It assumes that you can shape an offer that meets the customer's needs. And, it requires a more professional self-image on your part, seeing yourself as a "consultant" to the customer. If your routine is limited to asking for the technical specifications and then quoting prices, this approach is going to be outside of your reach. In the long run, however, it provides the ultimate response to the competitor's presence in your accounts.

2. Speak in general, not specific, terms. It is more effective and professional to speak in general terms about the class of competitor than it is to speak specifically about a particular company or person. For example, if you want to make the point that you favorably compare to X company (that national competitor), say: "Generally, large national companies are more concerned about their own financial performance than they are the needs of the local customers. Since we're local and family-owned, we highly value every customer, and that translates into more personal and responsive service." You didn't talk about the competitor; rather you talked about "national companies"—a class of competition. Generalizing the references to the competition provides a means of pointing out your distinctiveness without being negative about specific competitors.

3. Use questions, not statements. It's better to put questions in the customers' mind that they should ask about the competition, than to make statements about the competition. Your comments are suspect, because customers know that you have a vested interest in persuading them one way or the other. Their observations, however, have more validity than anything you say. So, this practice seeks to help customers make their own observations by providing the questions that they should ask. For example, don't say, "Y Company is a local company that doesn't have the systems or technology to support you in the long run." Instead, say, "One question you might ask of every vendor is, 'What technology and systems do you have in place to assure that you will be able to support us for the long run?'"

4. Use tables and charts to point out the differences between two offers in a detailed and professional way. Imagine a chart, with the salient features of your offer down the first row, and across the top your company's name, followed by "Option A" and "Option B," with the options being your competitors. Then use a checkmark to indicate the inclusion of that feature in each offering. Since this document is often prepared by your company, not by you personally, you are one step removed from being the source of the information. Still, you are suspect.

The discipline to deal with competition professionally is one hallmark of great salespeople. Select an approach that fits you. SSE

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ACTION: Sharpen your sales skills.

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Executive Excellence Publishing

Advice and Dissent

Culture drives innovation.


by Don Peppers and Martha Rogers

THE PACE OF CHANGE IS ACCELERATING, and that means creativity and innovation are more critical to your company's survival than ever before. No matter how innovative or interesting your product or service is today, tomorrow it will be a commodity. And tomorrow comes faster now.

Changing technology and constant innovation make it difficult for companies to survive and prosper over time, making it difficult to maintain superior economic performances. Outstanding performers don't succeed because they have a long-term competitive advantage, but rather because they string together a series of short-term advantages, constantly re-inventing themselves to adapt to changing technology.

To succeed at innovation, you need to synthesize much information about existing technologies and processes, and then take a different or unusual perspective. Your best and most creative new ideas often come simply by crossing a boundary into a discipline you don't know much about. Creative innovation tends to be more a function of perspective than expertise, which is why the toughest engineering problems are often solved by non-engineers and the best innovations don't come from R&D.

The most interesting connections leading to the most valuable innovations tend to happen by accident—connecting knowledge with other knowledge to create new knowledge. Whether it involves connecting distant synapses in your brain to hatch an interesting new idea, or connecting disparate points of view within your employee or customer base to come up with a product improvement, the key is to combine diverse points of view, jumble them around, and make interesting connections.

Most interesting connections will be useless; but then, by accident, you'll discover that microwave energy can melt a candy bar, or that the drug you originally designed for hypertension actually increases male sexual potency, or that stale wheat berries forced through rollers would not produce the desired long sheet of dough but instead would become "corn flakes." A culture celebrating dissent, diversity, and respectful disagreement will drive innovation and better decision-making.

Diversity and variety. When you consider creativity and innovation at your company, you're no longer thinking just about the creative ideas a single human brain can produce. Your goal is to harness your firm's collective intelligence. You want the creativity and innovativeness that can be found in many different brains, working together. The most interesting, creative and useful ideas produced by a group come when the people bring a variety

of backgrounds and perspectives to connect to the problem.

For instance, when considering a complex technical problem, groups composed partly of experts and partly of non-expert "laymen" tend to make better, more accurate decisions than groups composed entirely of experts. Diverse people bring diverse viewpoints, and the connections drawn by people between previously unrelated ideas often result in new levels of understanding for many group members. A group composed entirely of experts (senior managers making all the major decisions) tends not to make the best decisions because they are less inclined to investigate alternatives. But whenever a group incorporates new members with different perspectives and points of view, its decisions get better—even when the new members are less experienced, less knowledgeable, and of lower rank.

Experts do not know what they do not know, and people are prone to over-estimate their own competence in any area. Experts regularly over-estimate their own expertise and competence. The only defense is to ensure that the groups of people making decisions and coming up with new ideas or solutions to problems are a mixed lot.

If you want creative and innovative decisions, your team should look less like a blue-ribbon panel and more like a patchwork quilt. Throw some juniors onto that high-level task force working on a tough problem. Assign some non-engineers to the engineering team addressing product or manufacturing issues, and mix up the backgrounds of the people assigned to every important committee or work group.

Most information workers are already networked together by new technologies. And they are paid to operate as a group, taking collective action toward a common goal. The trick is to incorporate the most diverse viewpoints possible, while having a robust and objective way to resolve conflicts and agree on outcomes.

If the group making decisions at your company is basically all the same and they agree on everything, you won't get any advantage from taking up the time of a bunch of people. You get better decisions when members of the group bring different realms of knowledge and viewpoints to the table. This implies disagreement. But if you've managed your culture well—if you've been smart about creating a true climate of innovation and trust—then it will be respectful disagreement, leading to productive, genuine progress. If two employees always agree about everything, one of them is redundant.

Today, you have to design your business to come up with a steady stream of new products, new services, new ways to do things, constantly. Success in the short term is easy. All you need is a decent value proposition—good product, customers willing to buy, reasonable cost structure. But if you want your business to live to see tomorrow, you have to generate constant new ideas. And when it comes to creating a climate of innovation, your culture will make all the difference.

The best way to generate new ideas is to cross boundaries, get different perspectives, and cross-pollinate old ideas. If you have a strong culture, with values that celebrate trust, vigorous but respectful disagreement, and a diversity of inputs, you're likely to be more innovative and make better decisions. SSE

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ACTION: Cultivate an innovative culture.

MANAGEMENT/CONFLICT

Resolving Conflict

Try using empathy with others.

by Ronnie Moore

WHERE THERE ARE PEOPLE, there is conflict. Failing to communicate effectively is a leading cause of conflict. If not confronted early and well, conflicts escalate, negatively affecting performance. You can't banish conflict from your life, but you can communicate more effectively by using five tips:

1. Distinguish between true conflicts and false conflicts. Not all conflicts need to be resolved. Before you do or say anything, ask yourself: "Is this a true conflict or a false conflict?" A true conflict has to be resolved—if not, it will get bigger and result in a negative consequence. For example, suppose you and your colleague must write a grant proposal. You disagree about how to write the proposal. So, there is a risk that the proposal will not be the best it can be or be completed on time. This is a true conflict. False conflicts are differences that don't have to be resolved. So, choose your battles. Let go of false conflicts. Refuse to engage in unnecessary arguments.

2. When dealing with a true conflict, you need to communicate. Often, you don't want to confront; you want to avoid. But true conflict can't be avoided. You struggle with confrontation primarily because you confuse it with fighting, anger, and unpleasantness. The word *confrontation* comes from Latin, meaning *to face* an issue instead of avoiding it. Yet, you may use the word *confrontational* in a negative way and avoid conflict that should be confronted; but the longer you wait, the harder it is to resolve it.

3. Gain objectivity. If you've lost your objectivity about someone, try to get it back before you communicate. There are two parts to any conflict: the issue and the persons attached to the issue. Often, when conflict goes on without being confronted, you start disliking the other person, losing your objectivity. When you can't be objective, you can't effectively communicate. How do you regain objectivity about the person? Observe him or her. Note competencies and positive attributes. Is he a good father? Does she donate time to charity? Try to get a more balanced view. If you can only think negative thoughts about the person, such thinking will guide your communication.

4. Start on a foundation of sameness. Instead of starting with the conflict and while you're angry, start with something about which you agree or with something you share. "We both have worked here a long time." "We both love our children." "Our friendship has helped us both through some difficult times." Then move to the issue causing the conflict. By talking about common interests and goals (such as wanting to resolve this conflict), you stay away from how you feel about the other person. When you start communicating with a negative, you may ignite defensiveness. Start on a foundation of sameness, collaboration, and sincere desire to resolve the issue.

5. Beat up issues, not the people attached to the issues. If your goal is to resolve a conflict and change another's behavior (what a person does or doesn't do) for the better, your communication has to address the behaviors. When you attack others, they'll either attack back or retreat out of a perceived lack of power. Either way, the real issue will not be resolved. Telling that person what he or she said or did that needs changing is the only chance you have to change that behavior. If your goal is to change behavior, communicate in behaviors.

Confront true conflicts only, choose your battles, and focus on the behaviors that need changing, not on the people attached to those behaviors. **SSE**

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ACTION: Practice resolving conflicts.

MANAGEMENT/TABOOS

Three Taboos

Gain some influence skills.

by Jeff Wolf

TO BECOME A MORE EFFECTIVE manager or leader, address three taboos:

1. Taboos of persuasion. Reaching your goals requires influence and persuasion skills. Influence—once largely a function of position, power, authority, manipulation, and coercion—happens when you use your credibility to make an impact on people and their working conditions. Followers are influenced to the extent they view you as credible, and credibility is achieved through six elements: 1) *conviction*: The passion and commitment you show toward the vision; 2) *character*: consistent show of integrity, honesty, respect and trust; 3) *care*: concern for others' well-being; 4) *courage*: stand up for your beliefs, challenge others, admit mistakes, and change your behavior when necessary; 5) *composure*: display appropriate emotional reactions, particularly in tough or crisis situations; and 6) *competence*: proficiency in hard skills (technical, functional, content expertise) and soft skills (interpersonal relationships, communication, teamwork, organizational skills).

2. Taboos of position. In the knowledge economy, we theorize about dissolving the barriers and about *servant leadership* and ask our leaders to be more humble, collaborative, and communicative. And yet, we adorn our leaders with the status and trappings of power and position to inspire awe. While we assert that leaders should be more collaborative and collegial, we continue to want more direction, guidance and influence. Productive, competitive organizations are often characterized by strong, confident leadership. We expect leaders to act as though they know where they are going. Also, organizations are supposed to be meritocracies, yet favoritism often rules. Why do so many leaders put more emphasis on comfort and familiarity with associates than on talent and performance?

3. Taboos of the person. Few of us know what it's like to be in the top position. We don't know the responsibilities or pressures, and we can't imagine the rewards and costs. Leaders struggle to find work-life balance—yet we expect them to be role models and servants, putting aside their needs for the greater good. How-ever, leaders often demonstrate narcissistic, ego-driven, or selfish behavior, since they're often motivated to reach the top to satisfy their urges for power, status, and money. Leaders tend to act and achieve, *not* reflect. Recognize the risk-reward ratio before you judge your leaders or decide to become one of them. **SSE**

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ACTION: Build your credibility.

Wrong People

Six ways to avoid disaster.

by Melinda Carlisle

WHEN I COACH LEADERS about the ways that they can distinguish themselves in the marketplace, I am surprised at how infrequently the subject of hiring enters the dialogue. In fact, while leaders often articulate compelling reasons for making a good hire, they often seem unaware that it is far more critical to avoid making a bad one. Given the huge hard and soft costs of hiring even one unsuccessful employee—as much as $150,000 in some instances—getting this right may ultimately result in the most significant financial savings a company can realize consistently.

When evaluating their success, many executives focus on tangible criteria such as revenue, sales, and other metrics. Competency in hiring, specifically eliminating "bad" hiring, rarely makes the short list. Hiring is generally mystifying to many managers. It feels intangible and soft. No wonder, since applicants manipulate their performance and their answers in interviews; adjust their response style to match the communication style of the interviewer; over-promote their past successes; and try to influence the interviewer.

It's slippery terrain at best, and executives rarely know how to navigate it. One executive said, "When I meet with an applicant, I already feel like I am out-maneuvered. They want the job, and I need someone—yesterday. They know I want to like them, and so they work hard to be likable."

Every leader needs to take a hard look at the impact of hiring the wrong people and calculate the cost of the turnover that results from it. Frankly, it hurts to think about well-meaning hiring managers making offers to people who won't be successful on the job but who had a great resume, great references, and a terrific interview. Even with cutting-edge hiring systems, even HR managers are left largely to guess about the right candidate. An applicant's work experience may indicate what they *can* do, but there is no guarantee that they *will actually do it*.

Managers rarely speak of making hiring *mistakes*! Instead, they often point to something more nebulous—such as problems within the culture, lack of engagement, or turnover. At the root of these issues, however, lies a dark, unpopular reality: Asking candidates to describe themselves in resumes, self-report assessments, and in interviews during which they are likely "performing" is not a reliable way to hire good people. And it is likely the single biggest factor in hiring the *wrong* people.

How to Avoid Making Bad Hires

Here are three steps you can take to avoid making bad hires:

Step 1: Benchmark your talent. Your best source of data is the talent already employed because you can evaluate it within the context of your company's unique environment. Benchmarking begins with identifying who the successful people are in your company within a specific job. These individuals already have some of the characteristics you are looking for; however, the best solution is never to simply clone your top performers. Instead, leaders must also identify who their poor performers are. You need to know who isn't working out and *why*. Differences will become apparent, and themes will emerge.

Step 2: Choose an objective measurement. To ensure that the resulting data is accurate, measure as objectively as possible. Benchmarking can be done subjectively to be sure, and many leadership teams engage in such a process to thoroughly understand their employee talent. They tell me that the process of investigating their "hiring reality" is critical to their awareness of their own blind spots when interviewing. A subjective process might include selection of criteria for successful job performance and then ranking and rating employees against those criteria.

This method isn't without its problems, however, namely, bias. Instead, it is preferable to use an assessment process that isn't subjective, that is *not* self-report, and which measures competency objectively and scientifically without asking employees to describe themselves in any way. It is wise to look for an assessment that is empirically validated to measure an employee's ability and attitude scientifically in order to eliminate the bias that can accompany more subjective methodology.

One quick way to research and evaluate assessment options is to ask your testing source if the assessment you are considering asks the respondent questions about themselves. If it does, the assessment is self-report and measuring the respondent's perception of themselves rather than the respondents actual competency or ability. 360-degree assessments operate similarly by asking for the perceptions of others. Such perception always carries the risk of bias.

Step 3: Create a screening process. Once you have identified the differentiating characteristics between your top and bottom performers, you should take steps to create a screening tool for potential new hires. This screening tool should be designed to wave a big red flag for hiring managers over applicant results that don't pass the screen. In other words, it should clearly identify who *not* to hire.

A person with great talent and attitude will be a low-risk employee, even under pressure or terrible leadership. However, even the low-risk employees will have difficulty at work if their child is seriously sick or there is a death in the family. These people aren't the problem. What you want to identify clearly and quickly are the people whose competency is impacted by poor attitude or bias to such a degree that they'll consistently have problems. These individuals cost companies millions of dollars each year in training, development, and turnover, and every company should stop hiring them.

The *wrong people* you hire are costing you money now, not the people who you wish would be great instead of just good. The wrong people are the people you need to keep out! It's easy to get starry-eyed and misty when imagining the ideal person who will make your company great. It is however, far more practical and fiscally responsible to prevent the wrong people from getting hired in the first place. SSE

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ACTION: Hire the right people.

MANAGEMENT/PEOPLE

Down, But Not Out

Make your business memorable.

by Monica Wofford

LESLIE PAID ATTENTION TO the trends in the market. At one time she could easily make her sales quota. Now she now had to work much harder and longer. Many organizations were feeling this trend, and the morale, attitude, and action of employees reflected the downturn. Everywhere she went, people complained; sellers were fearful of trying to sell; buyers were fearful of making a big buy; and employees were hearing it from consumers daily. Yet, all management focused on was the numbers. There was nothing being done about the extra hours she had put in or the extra follow-through she had to do, or the struggle she faced.

The economy has shifted. And when your salespeople start to feel the crunch and believe that things are bad or that their jobs are on the line, some may stop caring what your business looks like. Employees surrounded by negative customers or rejection daily may believe all they hear and pass it on.

You can change the morale from "It's all going down" to "we can turn things around." Your efforts may be the most important thing you do to keep your employees from leaving.

Five Steps

If your team has fallen (and doesn't know how to get up), try these steps:

1. Rally the troops. Much of what starts as grapevine fodder is a function of miscommunication. One look or one memo can create an avalanche of damage control and attitude issues. Rally the troops and openly discuss what is going on. What are the trends? What is affecting your sales? Why are you changing a product line or lowering or raising prices? If people are a part of the process and have all the information they need to know, they are less likely to create their own answers to avoid feeling in the dark.

2. Refocus training. Train people to keep up with new skills and advancements and address the problem. For example, time management training will not help people overcome the fear of continued rejection, which may be the reason they are not meeting their sales quota. Refocused training that begins with an analysis of the problems may cost more up front, but leave you with lasting results far after the downtimes have gone.

3. Get to know who they really are. Under financial stress, people will reach for and use abnormal traits and behaviors. If an employee shows an attitude problem when the stress is high and change is frequent, raised awareness may alleviate the problem. Awareness of what employees do under stress will help you and them to be more productive, at all times.

4. Bring in an outside source. The voices of familiar faces lose their value over time. When an outside source comes in and shares similar information in a different way, their credibility is greater. Bring in a consultant, advisor, or trainer that you trust to diagnose and deliver a solution to the problems that you are facing in these times.

5. Re-motivate middle management. When times are tough, middle managers get it from senior managers in asking for more numbers and better results—and from employees in complaints, attrition, or personal issues. Give your middle managers a few kudos, team spirit, and a pat on the back for holding it all together.

Whether you believe times to be tough or fine, the perception of those you work with is the reality they face daily. What you do in downtimes shows your character and the strength of your beliefs. You build character when you make it through tough stuff. SSE

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ACTION: Rally your troops.

SERVICE/SURVEYS

Best Service

What is it for your customers?

by Ernest F. Oriente

BEST SERVICE, ESPECIALLY IN the sales or service industry, can be deceiving, as the needs and expectations of your customers change rapidly. Also, your customers compare your company to the competition and to the best service in any company, product, or service they experience.

You can develop a system so your customers can tell you exactly what *best service* means to them!

Developing customer surveys. Gather your team and discuss the current level of service. Ask for feedback or suggestions they have heard or received from customers. Next, prepare a survey that includes these questions: *Tell us about the best service you've received while working with any company. Tell us about the best service you've received from any individual and why was this the best. Tell us how we can improve your experience with our company.* Ask your team for suggestions on how to present these surveys.

To experience best service, visit a high-end business like Nordstrom, a Ritz-Carlton hotel, or Tiffany's. When visiting, observe how they greet you, the words they select when assisting you, the types and variety of products or services they provide, the colors and fabrics they use, and the quality of their printed materials. Any employee of a Ritz-Carlton can fix a customer service problem instantly, for up to $2,000!

Implementing customer surveys. Once you have received the responses, you can now set your service standards to exceed your customer' expectations. Summarize the survey results and look for any repeated suggestions or recommendations. Then design an action-plan with your team based on the suggestions they'll implement in the next 60 days. Have your team share a summary of what they will do with customer responses, and how the company will evolve as a reflection of their expectations.

Learning from your customers. From these surveys, you will gain new ideas for products and services. Many responses include requests to receive something faster, easier to use, easier to understand, or less frustrating. Look for ways to satisfy these requests and to earn income from the suggestions. For example, you might start using your Internet websites to enhance customer relationships and generate income.

Make it easy to listen and learn from your customers because their suggestions and recommendations will uncover great new ideas and various ways to set your sales/service company well ahead of the rest. Are you ready to raise service to world-class levels? SSE

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ACTION: Learn what best service means.

Customer Focus

7 keys to creating the culture.

by Jeff Mowatt

IF YOUR EMPLOYEES ARE JUST working there until *something better comes along*, imagine the negative impact on teamwork, productivity, and customer loyalty.

As a manager or owner, you are committed to satisfying customers. But what are you doing about employees who see their jobs merely as fillers? You need to create a culture that motivates employees to *want* to take care of customers. Conventional methods to create a customer-focused culture through mission statements fall short.

Many managers seem to think that if companies just have a mission statement, all of their customer service and teamwork problems will be magically solved. These mission statements always tout the "commitment to satisfying customers." If only it were that simple. A mission statement is a good idea, provided there is real-world *implementation* of the principles.

Managers need a fresh approach to ensure customers are satisfied and employees are committed. To breathe new life into your mission, engage in CAST meetings (Customer Service Team Meetings). At CAST meetings, managers and employees gather for two hours once a month to focus on enhancing customer satisfaction. Staff meetings focus on *workers'* needs and *managers'* needs—not *customers'* needs. Everyone attending CAST—front-line employees, support staff, and managers of all levels—focus on the *customer*.

When introducing CAST meetings, we include these seven key elements.

1. Spread your customers' words. At CAST meetings, everyone learns the latest results of your customer surveys, letters, and comments. One great way to collect customer feedback is to ensure employees ask customers a magic question, "What can we do to improve our service?" Asking this question and bringing the responses to CAST provides valuable information and reminds front-line employees of their valuable role of being the eyes and ears of the company.

2. Get people thinking. Before the first CAST meeting, train your management and staff on ways to enhance customer satisfaction without working harder. Brainstorm ways to boost customer satisfaction at each point of perception. List ways you might enhance customers' experience at every point where they form an impression of the company—on the website, phone, parking lot, lobby, or reception. Bring those ideas to CAST Meetings. Employees share ideas that are often realistic, innovative and create tremendous value for customers. As Sam Walton said, "Listen to everyone in your company, especially the ones who actually talk to customers. They really know what's going on." And, since front-line employees are coming up with the ideas, they're more committed to implementing them.

3. Sift to find the nuggets. At CAST meetings, sift through the feedback generated by customers and employees

to evaluate which ideas you can or should act on. Evaluate suggestions using two tools: 1) a feedback grid that reveals how your customers rate the services you provide and how important those services are to them; and 2) ask all CAST participants to come up with as many pros and cons of the idea as possible. When everyone assesses the suggestion, everyone knows why certain ideas won't be acted upon, eliminating the "them vs. us" attitude between managers and front-line staff.

4. Implement now, perfect later: pilot, pilot, pilot. When you identify an idea that has merit, launch a preliminary test run or "pilot." So, let's say for a 30-day trial you'll give several front-line employees in one area the authority to make a decision that typically requires management approval. Those same employees volunteer to try the program, monitor the results, and report their findings at the next CAST meeting. If they indicate that the pilot went well, then at the CAST it can be fine-tuned and expanded to other areas. Those participants who agree to test a pilot project suddenly have a deadline to present their findings. Reporting what they've done serves as an incentive to get something done—without pleading or nagging.

5. Replace policies with parables. During "story time" in CAST meetings, managers call upon selected front-line employees, who recently provided exceptional service, to share a specific on-the-job incident, and explain why they did what they did. These stories become parables—living examples of your beliefs. Parables are used to teach history and values. They endure because they are interesting, teach us lessons, and are easily remembered. These stories become your code—the way you do business. They not only reflect your mission, vision and values, they become its living embodiment.

6. Coach instead of fighting fires. One role of the manager is to act as a mentor or coach. Yet managers get so busy that the only time they "coach" people is when a subordinate fouls-up. Worse, only one person at a time learns from the mistake. That's not our idea of being a mentor. An effective coach is more proactive. At CAST meetings, one role of the manager is to take one service idea and reinforce its application. That way, simple vital service tips are repeated, remembered, and applied.

7. Celebrate service, not seniority. The top motivator of employees is recognition—knowing that they are appreciated. CAST meetings give managers a forum to provide recognition not based on seniority but on exemplary customer service. And the recognition doesn't just come from management—it comes from peers. You're creating a shift in culture at the grass roots. Add to that a few words of praise from the senior manager to the team, and everyone feels like they are part of a greater good.

It's easy for leaders to pay lip service to the importance of customers, but employees need to know that you as a leader mean what you say—and that you're willing to back statements with action. If such integrity is missing, employees become de-motivated.

In CAST meetings, employees discover that the company practices what it preaches. That trust translates into improved performance and morale, fewer customer complaints, and a culture where all stakeholders benefit. SSE

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ACTION: Create a customer-focused culture.

SALES/REJECTION

Please, Reject Me!

Your no invites me to grow.

by Simon T. Bailey

I RECENTLY SUBMITTED ONE OF my success guides to a company for distribution. A few weeks later, a "Dear John" letter arrived in my mailbox: "After careful review, we have decided not to accept your success guide." The letter closed, "All the best wishes for your success!"

Soon I received another rejection: "Simon, we won't be carrying your success book. Thank you for sharing it with us. Continued success!"

Why was my book rejected? Apparently because my material wasn't a fit with their product lines. Or perhaps they had more than their share of success guides. Yet, ironically, in their closing salutations, they wished me *success*!

In the past, I would have crumbled. I might have given up and thought, "All that work down the drain!" Instead, I answered the rejection with this: "This is brilliant news! I am so excited. Wow! Stay Brilliant. Simon T Bailey."

I wasn't being sarcastic; I was being sincere. I celebrate rejection. I take the energy of rejection and flip it, reframe it, and see it as a gift, a blessing in disguise. My rejecters do me a favor—they save me time, energy, and money.

How can I be positive and passionate about rejection? I've experienced rejection—and success—firsthand. In fact, I have an advanced degree in *Rejectionology*—the art of bouncing back from setbacks. The word *reject* means "to cast out, dismiss, refuse to recognize." It can be traced to a Latin word meaning "to throw back." All of my life, I've felt like a throw-back, a cast- out—dismissed from the inner circle. And yet, I've learned to bounce back.

I've learned that ***every rejection is one step closer to an acceptance.*** Since I self-published my book *Release Your Brilliance*, I've presented it to agents, publishers and distributors, and experienced mostly rejection. But I learned that ***it only takes one*** person or organization to believe, to catch the vision. Every time I'm rejected, I'm closer to finding the one who will accept it. Several clients have ordered hundreds of copies, and at a recent convention where I spoke on success, the bookstore sold out of it. This is *Rejectionology* at its best: focusing on the *yes*, rejecting the *no*. That's right—***I reject the rejecters***!

In their book *Think Big and Kick Ass*, Donald Trump and Bill Zanker write: "If you want to be a success, you have to get used to hearing the word ***no*** and ignoring it. Since 98 percent of adults are conditioned to stop when they hear the word ***no***, if you want to be in the top 2 percent, you can't let somebody's arbitrary ***no*** stop you." Find a creative way to sidestep the ***no*** and keep looking for the *yes*.

If you work in sales, you likely have an advanced degree in *Rejectionology*. You may feel that you've been thrown away, thrown back, cast off and written off or that things haven't worked out the way you expected. You're discouraged, dismayed, and dejected because you've been rejected. Know that not everyone is going to "get" you. Many people won't see or recognize your brilliance. They will reject you and ignore your potential, love or wisdom. Get your *no*'s out of the way and find your one *yes*!

Step out on faith. Move forward with your proposal. Request the raise or the promotion you deserve. Ask someone to lunch. Try to sell your invention. Pitch your new idea. Discover for yourself the sweetness of acceptance after rejection: Dare to be rejected, own your rejection, reframe it, and look for ways to sidestep the *no*'s.

Now, when I put myself out there, I think, "Reject me, baby! Tell me *No*. Cast me off. I relish it! I'll be back." SSE

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ACTION: See rejection as an invitation to grow.

MARKETING/GROWTH

Plan for Growth

Dialogue about marketing.

by Liza Cirlot Looser

WHERE ARE WE NOW AS A company? Where do we want to be? How can we get there? If your company is ready for growth, you need to answer these questions and outline your strategy for growth in a marketing plan.

Marketing is a dialogue between a business and its prospective client or customer. When correctly developed, a marketing plan constructs an overarching vision that can separate a business from its competitors. By developing new initiatives, a marketing plan helps set a few goals that everyone understands, supports, and works toward.

A marketing plan forces you to look at external issues to understand the market in which you operate, reflect on past mistakes with marketing decisions, and set attainable goals.

A well-developed marketing plan helps keep your brand top-of-mind. Your "brand" is not just a logo, or marketing materials, or even products or services. It's a sum of all these things. Your brand is also the emotional and intellectual attachment that your customers and prospects have toward your products or services, resulting from their experiences and perceptions with your products or services. And it can make the difference between business success or failure. Branding is creating and nurturing a relationship with customers and prospects to reap exceptional benefits.

When developing a marketing plan, invite feedback from all departments—manufacturing, finance, personnel, marketing, etc. The key is to be clear about the objectives and goals you want to achieve. Gaining insight from the people who know the company best makes those goals realistic, giving the company a vision for the future that every employee can share.

Marketing plans lay out the clear, measurable and realistic goals that can be achieved by setting deadlines, creating a budget, and delegating responsibilities. A marketing plan establishes a sense of accountability and consistency. Companies trying to do everything on their own find it difficult to stay on course. The structured outline of a marketing plan will help keep the company on course and on schedule.

Since many managers wear multiple hats, we created a multi-disciplined educational CD *Your Ad Department* to help you develop and launch a marketing plan to brand and position your company. You should evaluate your plans quarterly and make any necessary adjustments due to changing circumstances or market developments. SSE

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ACTION: Improve your marketing plan.

Get Accountable

Stop curling up like a porcupine.

by Roger Hall

IN ORGANIZATIONS THAT LACK accountability, we hear: *"That's not my job." "Sorry, I can't help you. That's the marketing department's problem." "I don't know anything about that."* These are a few phrases of "the blame game," "skirting responsibility," or even "CYA." But, the results are the same: Since no one wants to be accountable, the company isn't sharp and doesn't respond quickly enough to market shifts or customer demands. Opportunities are missed, and profits gradually decline.

Lacking accountability can include seemingly small and trivial things, such as being late for meetings or not returning phone calls in a timely manner, or it can encompass gross errors in judgment, such as not telling the customer service department about a new product launch or ignoring budgetary restraints and spending wildly. The lack of accountability quickly sends a message to others—namely that you don't care and can't be counted on. Eventually the attitude spreads to others, and before long customers, vendors, and other outsiders also perceive the company's lack of accountability.

In some respects, people who lack accountability are a lot like the porcupine—those prickly creatures that live in the wild. The porcupine defends itself by curling up in a ball and protects itself with 30,000 outwardly pointed quills. Predators cannot penetrate this defense mechanism. This typifies many employees' attitudes and actions. So when people are not accountable, they symbolically curl up like a porcupine, leaving lots of quills on the floor of halls and meeting rooms.

While many people associate a lack of accountability with bureaucracy, the fact is that companies of all sizes suffer from this malaise. Fortunately, you can take steps to bring accountability back to your organization and end the blame game once and for all. These three guidelines will help.

1. Take the first step. Many people believe that accountability must start with the CEO and trickle down. While it certainly helps if the CEO can model the appropriate behavior, the fact is that anyone—even you—can begin instilling accountability in your organization (or at least your department). Therefore, be the person who goes the extra mile. Find the answer to people's questions, even if it really isn't your job. Rather than complain about low numbers, pitch in and do your part to bring the numbers up. Volunteer. Join committees. Keep your appointments. Do what you say you'll do, when you say you'll do it.

Keep your actions visible so others see the behavior you're modeling. Help people understand that being accountable is not a bad thing—that it's simply part of being a team. Make sure others see that you're not just focusing on self-preservation and that you're looking out for the best interests of the entire department or company. Yes, this will require you to step out of your comfort zone and work a little harder. However, as your actions rub off on others, you'll be on your way to creating an environment that fosters communication and helpfulness—two qualities of a winning organization.

2. Be sensitive to others. If one of your peers approaches you (someone at the same professional level as you in the company) and asks for an update on a project that's going on somewhere in your department, don't say, "I don't know. You'll have to ask Mary. That's not my job." Such an answer affects how the other person perceives you. At best, you become known as someone unreliable, uninformed, and uncaring. At worst, people believe you to be simply incompetent. Instead, see any questions from the other person's perspective. If they're coming to you for information, then they honestly believe you can help, so do so.

Part of being sensitive to others also means being bold. Take a risk. Reach out to others. Reconnect with colleagues and customers. Solicit feedback. The ancient Egyptians had a saying: "Hear like a porcupine," meaning that you need a highly acute sense of hearing. So really hear what people want, and then deliver. Don't just wait for management to mandate something or for your boss to ask you to deliver information. Instead, take the initiative to start something on your own. When you do, others will take notice and will appreciate your actions.

3. Use accountability to differentiate. In companies that don't play the blame game and that actually have accountability in place, you can see a true sense of differentiation. When you need to purchase clothing or furniture, you know there are many different stores to choose from. And while price is often a factor for consideration, you likely choose to patronize the store that offers a certain level of customer service that you expect. If it's a small purchase, like a T-shirt and some shorts, then any store may do. But if it's a large purchase, such as a wedding gown or a business suit, then you'll likely choose the store where you feel a sense of accountability among the employees.

In many companies, the executives sit in the boardroom for days trying to figure out how to differentiate their products. After all, a shirt is a shirt, and a phone is a phone. Often, what really makes the difference to customers are the employees. So suppose you have 500 employees on the payroll. You're already are paying these people. You likely don't need to increase your ad budget if you can make a difference with your employees. That is, you need to train them to be responsive not just to you, but to your customers, to your organization, and to your distributors. That can be your difference right there. As they say, "People make the company." It's true.

Tame the Beast Within

In the wild, porcupines are naturally destructive creatures. They eat aluminum signs, treated lumber, ax handles, tires, and automobile brake hoses. People, too, can be destructive if they don't have the proper guidance or motivation. That's when a lack of accountability reigns. So, take the steps to bring a sense of accountability into your company and end the blame game. When you do, your company will experience greater rewards and profits, with fewer prickly headaches. SSE

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ACTION: Bring accountability into your company.

PR/AUTHENTICITY

PR's Secret Affliction

Authenticity deficit disorder.

by Matthew Cossolotto

MANY SPEAKERS SUFFER from *Authenticity Deficit Disorder*. This is unfortunate for speakers and audiences because audiences crave a high degree of authenticity. By *authenticity* I mean *not false or copied, genuine, real*. As a speaker, how do you know whether you are being authentic? I believe the best test is what I call the "best friend" test: Are you the same person in front of the audience as you are when talking to your best friend?

Find your authentic voice before crafting compelling content or catchy message points. Audiences detect phoniness and empty rhetoric.

Five Mindset Shifts

Here are five mindset shifts to help you overcome your ADD, unleash your authentic podium power, and make sure the real you shows up to give the speech (or interview):

1. There's no such thing as public speaking. Speaking with ease and comfort to friends, colleagues, and loved ones comes naturally to most people. Only when you treat a certain kind of speaking as public speaking do the anxiety butterflies start flapping their wings. Repeat these magic seven words to yourself: "There's no such thing as 'public' speaking." This mantra or affirmation will help put you in the right frame of mind.

2. You can only speak to one person at a time. It's impossible to speak to more than one person at a time. Follow your eyes, and you'll see that you can only engage with one person at a time. While you're talking to one person, looking directly into the eyes, others can listen in. But you're really only talking to that one person. Speak to that person for a moment, then do the same thing with many others in the audience. Inevitably, you'll be connecting with only one person at any point in time.

3. Don't be content with content! This shift opens the door to whole-brain speaking. The key idea is to go the extra mile, go beyond a singular focus on the information you want to share. Far too many presentations are left-brain focused. I advocate tapping into the right. That's where you'll find imagination, intuition, enthusiasm, passion, emotion. Yes, the content of your presentation is very important. It's a necessary, but insufficient. The poet Samuel Coleridge said, "What comes from the heart goes to the heart." As a speaker, you should try to engage the right brain—your own and that of the audience.

4. The audience supports you. This shift moves you from any nagging feelings of self-consciousness to support-consciousness. You recognize that the audience actually supports you. You must truly believe and internalize this reality: The audience wants you to do well, to succeed, to be engaging, informative and motivating. Most of all, the audience wants you to be comfortable being yourself.

5. Make sure the real you shows up. Authentic speaking ultimately means making sure the real you shows up. Your goal should be to let the natural, authentic, comfortable "you" give the presentation, not a self-conscious, overly scripted, programmed, stressed-out version of yourself (or your client, for that matter). The real, authentic you is the person you know yourself to be when you're talking with your best friend. Be sure to bring that person to the podium to give your presentation.

Make these five mindset shifts and you'll overcome the ADD problem and experience the joy of speaking. Public success is first an inside job. SSE

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ACTION: Be authentic in your presentations.

SALES/SKILLS

Sales Skills

Address client problems.

by Kevin Kearns

SALES PERFORMANCE improvement is changing. The sales performance industry was born from a few smart people (gurus) who authored books, developed intellectual property, and commercialized it to train salespeople. However, of the companies that bought into the idea that people can be trained to sell more effectively, some did well and some did not. And, customers are changing the definitions of what they need in terms of sales training.

Customer Requirements

Companies now demand proof that a sales process or program will work *before* an engagement. They want a sales improvement solution that produces positive, demonstrable results and fits with the culture, leadership structure, and business metrics. Six of 10 sales executives try to determine the effectiveness of their sales training. American companies will spend $7 billion on sales training this year, and yet 90 percent of sales training does not increase sales. Half of it is spent on increasing product knowledge, which has no correlation with sales increases. Customers don't care about a salesperson's product knowledge. They care about: management skills and ability to understand their business; effectiveness at customer advocacy to protect their interests within the vendor company; ability to diagnose and design applications; accessibility and responsiveness; problem-solving and innovativeness. Sales training needs to be *right*. It needs to focus on new customer concerns, produce quantifiable and predictable results, and have measurable impact.

Sales training still matters for two compelling reasons:

1. Few colleges and universities offer a degree in Sales, or even a sales-specific curriculum—and yet over 50 percent of graduates become salespeople on day one of their employment. Salespeople have a 40 percent failure rate and the highest turnover rate of any profession. More money is spent on sales training than any other training.

2. The factor that most impacts sales success and differentiates companies is sales skills. Sales leaders are responsible for producing results that are desirable but not inevitable. Branding strategy, pricing, product positioning, and the competition all contribute to sales results. But the brass ring goes to sellers who differentiate themselves in the sales process. Sales success has more to do with ***how*** you sell than ***what*** you sell. Sales skills are the primary engine of differentiation, value creation, and profit margin growth. SSE

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ACTION: Improve your sales training.

Sales-Credit Connection

Credit is the second oldest profession.

by Abe Walking Bear Sanchez

OUR SALES GUYS WILL GIVE *away the store if I don't watch them*, said one senior credit manager who believed that his main job was being a cop and keeping an eye on the enemy—the sales guys.

Credit managers will tell you that Satan was the first salesman and that by creating a need or desire for a product or service, in Eve's case an apple, he made the first sale. They will tell you that credit is the second oldest profession, since once a sale is made, someone has to collect on it (sales guys don't get a check with the order).

Profitable Sales

Every function must have a clear purpose that fits with the strategy and answers the question "Why incur the costs that go with this function?"

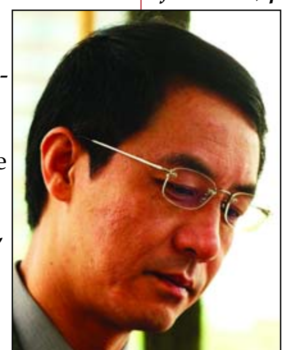
The best sale is a win-win deal. When both buyer and seller walk away happy, you have fertile ground for future business. The purpose of sales is to obtain and retain profitable customers. The only reason for any business to incur the costs that go with extending credit (additional expense, cost of time and money, bad debt) is to get a profitable sale that would otherwise be lost. The credit function should seek ways of saying *yes* (while remaining confident of payment) to profitable sales, and to keep credit customers current on payments so they keep buying.

Sales and Credit both are in the profitable sale business. There are cash sales and credit sales. With cash sales the only step after taking the order is making a bank deposit. With credit sales, getting the order is only the beginning. "How would you like to pay?" asks the sales guy. If the customer answers, "on 30-, 60- or 90-day terms" you're in the credit business; so do things right, the first time.

Four Components

In most credit operations there are four major components:

1. Credit approval. You first need to set a goal-driven guideline for credit approval (a policy). If you consider the costs (investment made) in getting to the point where a customer wants to buy, the goal of credit approval is to look for ways to accommodate profitable sales while remaining confident of payment. To maximize sales and minimize risks, credit approval begins with the salespeople obtaining needed information from the customer relating to who the customer is (time in business, type of business, corporate status) and how the customer does business (PO system, A/P cut-off date, necessary documentation, billing requirements). Good salespeople know who the customer has done business with in the past (trade references).



Most companies get information on who the customer is, but a poor job finding out how the customer does business. Maybe it's not understood that credit approval must factor in things like the customers' A/P cycles in determining whether or not a credit sale is, in fact, profitable.

For billing to do their job right the first time, they need to know what constitutes complete billing to the customer. Do they require logs, tear sheets, or proof of delivery as part of the bill?

The job of credit approval is to take the information obtained by sales and verify it. A customer's profile, past performance, and the seller's "product value" at the time of the sale are then factored in, and a way of saying *yes* via terms and conditions found; while remaining confident of payment.

2. Billing. The goal of billing is to facilitate payment, to make it easy and simple for customers to pay. The key to successful billing is the TACU approach: *Timely*: The clock for payment doesn't start until the bill is sent. *Accurate*: Any errors and the customer won't pay, and you've driven up your cost and the customer's cost of doing business. *Complete*: According to customers' way of doing things. *Understandable*: If you can't make sense of your billing, what are the odds your customers will understand?

3. Past due A/R management (not collections). A survey of over 8,000 companies in a wide range of industries found that while on average close to 25 percent of A/R are past due (one day plus beyond terms) at any given time, less than 1 percent are ever written off as a loss. Most past-due customers are not trying to avoid payment. There are good reasons why they don't pay within terms. Past due A/R management is not about "enforcing payment," that is what collection agents and collection attorneys do. Past due A/R management is all about "completing the sale." The goals being 1) to keep credit customers current and buying; often the most profitable sale is the repeat and 2) identify the small percentage of past due customers that represent a potential for loss, early on, and control bad debt. Whether they know it or not, salespeople make the best collectors (past due A/R managers).

4. Internal Communications (reports, feedback, performance measurements). "Employees respect what managers inspect, not what they expect," notes Don Rice at Texas A&M. Talk about how credit is a sales function until you're blue in the face and then measure performance based on *Days Sales Outstanding* (average turn time on A/R) and percent bad debt and you might as well have saved your breath. Measure for risk and what you'll get is a credit function driven by risk management and not profitable sales.

System Improvements

One of the greatest pay-backs from credit is the ability to track the source of things that go wrong. When something goes wrong and credit is involved, customers won't pay until the problem is fixed. In fixing "systems" problems, areas of opportunity for improvement can be identified and the process fixed so not to create the same problem again. Keep improving on how things are done and you'll drive down costs (yours and the customers) and raise customer service levels. It's like compound interest.

How do you measure performance for your credit function? Do your sales and credit function cooperate, or are they counter-productive and at cross purposes? SSE

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ACTION: Tighten your sales-credit connection.

Selling to Executives

Get in and earn keys to the elevator.

by Jeff Thull

SALESPEOPLE SAY, "EXECUTIVES are indifferent and won't take the time to see us." Executives say, "Salespeople all sound the same. They're well-versed about their products, but don't understand my business. I'll see anyone who can show me a solid business case. They shouldn't whine if I won't waste my time to learn about their solutions."

The result of this disconnect is that too many executives never connect valuable solutions that can make a measurable impact on their companies' profitable growth and carry out their best positioned strategy—and the sellers end up with poor results. So what's preventing executives from getting the information they need? It certainly isn't a lack of innovative and exceptional products and solutions, and it doesn't seem to be the executive's lack of issues to be addressed.

In selling to executives, you need to establish relevancy, credibility, and trust—leading to access. I refer to it as earning the keys to the elevator.

To build a solid business case at the executive level, you need to get access to people who can give you the critical information you need to refine the case.

So how do you connect and get the keys to the elevator? Consider that there are two agendas for the executive conversation—yours and the executive's.

Your agenda includes three objectives: 1) establish relevancy and be seen as a valued business resource; 2) test the executive's beliefs about the absence of value, and if it matches, create and increase the sense of urgency around the issue; and 3) gain sponsorship for a diagnosis at lower levels and keep the executive involved.

The executive's agenda includes: 1) getting ideas and resources to execute their strategy; 2) getting help in aligning their internal resources with their strategy; and 3) getting help in improving a key performance indicator.

Creating executive relevancy requires diligent preparation. Spontaneous relevancy is not an option. The effectiveness of your initial contact with the executive depends on the facts you've developed in the discovery process.

Discovery conversations prepare your hypothesis. They are not about selling. They help you learn about the customer's reality, identify evidence of the issues or challenges they are experiencing, and the potential consequences. You need to focus on the symptoms that result from the absence of your value. Be open, honest and straightforward—discover conversations are not covert missions. Like a doctor, you want to identify the symptoms and if they exist, develop a prognosis on the potential risk your prospect is experiencing without your solution.

These conversations are to be with those closest to the action, those who work where the absence of your solution's value manifests itself. There are three resource pools to draw from: their employees, vendors, and customers.

The information you gather will provide the relevancy and credibility you need to begin the conversation and connect the symptoms with the executive's job responsibilities and performance indicators on the executive's dashboard.

Your goal is to create a hypothesis that will achieve conceptual buy-in on the value you offer. The executive will value your input from the beginning and look forward to working with you on this and other projects. You will differentiate yourself early by how you sell, more so than what you are selling. So, get and use the keys to the elevator. SSE

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ACTION: Sell at higher levels.

Corporate Personality

How do you define yours?

by Larry Oakner

WHEN YOU LOOK AROUND your office, what personalities do you see? The go-getter, clown, bright-eyed optimist, grump, or worker-bee? You may have dozens or thousands of individuals, each with his or her own personality. But does your company have its own distinctive personality?

Perhaps your company is shaped by a visionary like Apple's Steve Jobs or an iconoclast like Virgin's Richard Branson? Or do you work where people are hidden behind a strong brand, like P&G or American Airlines? There are also companies whose leaders may change while the corporate brand remains the same. Caterpillar has had several CEOs since the early 1990s, but the brand's personality remains constant.

Whatever your corporate brand personality, being able to describe it is a vital element in communicating what makes your company a place where people want to work. A clear brand personality can guide your recruitment effort and clarify for new employees what your culture is all about.

Branding consultants often characterize a company's brand personality using humanistic words to describe the brand's recognizable and distinctive traits. These tend to be adjectives, like "bold" or "responsive," or platitudinous nouns like "integrity," "teamwork," or "trust." Some branding consultants combine the words into descriptors like "innovative partner," "influential advocate" or "passionate enabler."

However, brand strategists and creative people often concede to their client's conservativism and propose words that describe a brand personality as a *Scout Oath*: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, honest, caring, strong, or responsible.

The goal is to find those words that uniquely capture what makes your organization different. *Innovative* can be replaced with a more powerful synonym such as *inventive* or *ingenious*. And *leading* can become *influential*. *Positive* might become *life affirming*. Words like *plucky* rather than *determined*, *stalwart* instead of *dependable*, or *frank* in place of *honest* are unique.

The best personality traits can be demonstrated easily and translated into actions. A company that describes its brand as *responsive* might require its employees to return phone calls within 10 minutes. An *empathic* brand might ensure that type on all documents is easy to read. One company that has a *genuine* and *gritty* personality shows its construction equipment covered in mud—proving their real-world durability.

A well-conceived brand personality will inform and shape actions like recruiting and performance evaluations—helping you find and keep the right personalities to work for you. SSE

Larry Oakner is a Brand Director at CoreBrand, a branding consultancy. Visit www.CoreBrand.com.

ACTION: Cultivate a brand personality.

Success by Design

Beware of the best practices.


by Jimmy Vee and Travis Miller

SUCCESS DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT. It has nothing to do with luck. It's not a magic pill someone swallows or a wand someone waves that manifests a revolutionary change in status and bank balance. Success requires strategic planning, action, and commitment.

Success also takes an additional ingredient most people overlook; the ability to thumb your nose at conventional wisdom and so-called "best practices" about achieving success. You've heard the lines; "It's luck" or, "You have to be in the right place at the right time" or, "It's all about who you know" and the big one, "It's about how hard you work." Those lines just aren't true.

These statements make up much of the conventional wisdom about success. However, conventional wisdom is not always the best wisdom. The word *conventional* means "conforming to accepted standards" or "ordinary, not different or original." *Accepted standard? Ordinary?* Do those sound like the building blocks of success to you?

No one would describe successful people by those definitions, because they don't conform and they aren't ordinary.

From the minute people are born, they start to conform. They do what everyone else is doing, the way everyone else is doing it. They are taught to stand in line and work to "fit in." They follow the masses and all get the same results—average results.

Extraordinary results come from doing something different—from challenging the status quo and shaking things up. So what can you do to get on a path to innovation, extraordinary progress and extreme success?

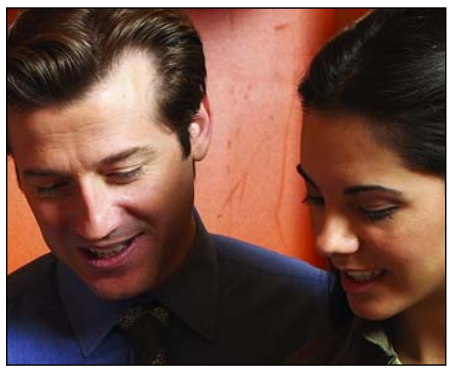
Five Suggestions

Here are five things the ultra successful do differently that you can do now:

1. Exploit your uniqueness. The ultra successful companies and entrepreneurs know what makes them different and use it to their full advantage. Most businesses try to be all things to all people, trying to please everyone. They are afraid that being polar will alienate their market. The truth is, real success comes from being "for" a specific group of people and "not for" others. Specialization and customization win the day, garner more attention and ultimately attract the most success.

Every consumer believes his or her situation or problem is somehow different and unique, and they believe there's a custom solution needed to fix it. They don't want a one-size-fits-all "canned" solution; rather a customized solution from an expert person or company that specializes in helping people in their circumstances, understands exactly what they are going through, and relates directly to them.

2. Ask better questions. Many people think the super successful have all the answers. That may be true, but they don't get them from divine intervention or random guessing. They get them by asking better questions of themselves, employees, customers, peers and family.



Most people shy away from asking the tough questions because they fear the answers they might get. Successful people face new challenges head-on, ask the tough questions, and tackle them regardless of the answers.

3. Read. The successful continue their education. School's never out for them. About 80 percent of U.S. families did not buy or read a book last year, and 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after school. Successful people devour information, read books constantly, listen to tapes, audio programs and attend seminars regularly. They are addicted to information, positive thinking and improvement.

Jim Rohn sums this point up brilliantly, saying, "Poor people have big TVs, rich people have big libraries."

4. Take risks. Successful people know that with risk comes reward and they are willing to take chances. But they hedge their bets with quality information and research. They put the work and time necessary to plan for and research the viability of a risky decision. It's still a risk, but a calculated one.

They also understand with every failure comes a learning experience. They gain valuable information from their mistakes and failures, analyzing situations and extracting as many lessons as possible from disasters. They synthesize this information and create better plans for moving forward.

5. Fight. The average person tries to avoid confrontation at all costs. People hate to cause trouble, make a scene or get in someone's face, even to the point of missing out on something they are entitled to. They're happier practicing avoidance than strength. The overachievers, on the other hand, don't follow that thinking. They engage in battle to get what they want, deserve, or are passionate about, and are not afraid to hurt feelings by being open, honest, and blunt about their passions.

6. Leverage time. We all have the same amount of time in a day. Some people just do more with it than others. The "Trumps" of the world know the value of time, and how to leverage it to get more accomplished. The average person thinks about time as a renewable resource, not a precious raw material to success. They measure their success in terms of money collected per hour or per year, and think of time as something you exchange for money—an even swap. This thinking delivers standard returns and mediocre wages.

The successful leverage time and stop trading it for dollars. They don't buy into a tit-for-tat mentality when it comes to exchanging time for money; rather, they create systems that work for eternity. They seek out and get involved in opportunities that deliver returns for long periods of time.

When you follow the crowd and best practices, you tend to get mediocre or average results. The norm isn't extraordinary. If it were, most people would be wealthy, happy, and have mind-blowing experiences daily. Instead, a *normal* day usually consists of frustration from businesses and people who are just getting by, limping along and trying to keep it together. That's what conventional thinking and "best practices" deliver. SSE

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ACTION: Implement one of these suggestions.

First Impression

Read your prospect's handshake.

by Gregory Stebbins

MORE THAN JUST PHYSICAL contact, a handshake conveys a wealth of psychological information. We walk away from a handshake saying things like, "You know, I just felt real comfortable with her" or "I don't know why, but I simply don't trust that guy."

As a sales professional, you can gain by examining this experience.

Top 10 Handshake Types

Here are the top 10 handshake types and what they reveal:

1. Sweaty palms. When a person is nervous, their sympathetic nervous system often becomes overactive, resulting in sweaty palms. Do what you can to put this individual at ease.

2. Dead fish. Indifferent handshakes often indicate a passive or reserved personality. Individuals with this clasp are not people-focused. Knowing this, you can tailor your presentation to focus more on the mechanical or thing-focused benefits.

3. Brush off. This handshake is a grasp and then a release that feels like your hand being shoved aside. This handshake states, "It's my turf and agenda that matters, not yours." Listen to what the person wants before talking about your ideas for them.

4. Controller. People who pull your hand toward them or strongly guide it in a different direction are controllers. They want to dominate. If your goals are different than theirs, expect challenges. Do more listening than talking and find common ground so these individuals can "control" the situation toward your desired objective.

5. Politician. Your hand is firmly grasped as normal; however, their other hand may cover yours or be placed on your forearm or shoulder. This is often a form of false sincerity. After receiving this handshake, be cautious about relying on this person's word.

6. Finger vise. When someone grabs your fingers (not your entire hand), it is meant to keep you at a distance. These people are often insecure. If they also crush your fingers, they are adding a show of personal power, designed to keep you at a distance or create some fear of challenging them. Don't become submissive, however. Be somewhat deferential to them.

7. Bone crusher. Squeezing your hand until you cringe is meant to intimidate you. You don't have to pretend to be a wimp with them; in fact, they may respond positively to you if you present yourself with strength. Don't get into a hand-squeezing contest, as then it becomes a competition.

8. Lobster claw. Like the claw of a lobster, the other person's thumb and fingers touch the palm of your hand. The person doing this fears connecting at a deep level and building relationships. Take your time. Allow them to open up at their own pace. As they become more comfortable with you their handshake may change, and they they may become a client for life.

9. Hand wrestler. Your hand is taken normally and then twisted under the other person's hand. This is usually done aggressively. Be careful in your own presentation as this person is committed to being on top, regardless of what they say they want.

10. Teacup. This handshake feels normal except that there is no palm-to-palm contact. The other person's palm is cupped, like a teacup. This handshake indicates that the person is shy or hiding something from you. Always check for missing information.

In sales, the more you know about your prospects and clients, the better you can communicate with them. Then making a good impression is truly in your hands. SSE

Gregory Stebbins is CEO of Stebbins Consulting Group, helping people improve negotiation skills and close more sales. He's the author of PeopleSavvy for Sales Professionals, *Visit www.peoplesavvy.com.*

ACTION: Make a good first impression.

Strategic Alliances

Black-holes or lightening-rods?

by Adrian Carol Ott and Ann E. Trampas

BY FORMING STRATEGIC ALLIANCES, YOU might gain visibility to new product concepts, develop new technology and customer solutions, or penetrate new markets. Yet, many companies treat alliances as a narrow sales, marketing, or R&D function, and the value of strategic alliances is described through the services or sales it delivers for that function.

Five indicators signal you are not getting much value from your alliances:

1. Siloed organization: If alliances reside within a functional area such as sales, it is siloed. It only supports objectives for part of the organization.

2. Drive-by alliances: Are there sufficient resources in place to manage the alliance? Too often, no resources are in place to execute the plan.

3. Tactical executive mindset: If executives view alliances as strategic, they will invest in it. If they do not, they will cut alliance budgets.

4. History of success: If alliances have been part of a distribution channel, they're thought of as part of sales. Partners are capable of more.

5. Short-term compensation plan: How are alliance successes rewarded? If bonuses are tied to quarterly revenues, results will be short-term, tactical, opportunistic. Alliance managers will seek partners who have the near-term deal. If executive bonuses are not tied to alliance performance, they won't be involved or supportive.

Alliance management needs to become a horizontal, broad-based competency embedded in all employees.

Eight Strategic Benefits

Alliances deliver value in eight ways:

1. They serve as experts for structuring relationships.

2. They are considered a strategic function. They work with M&A and strategy groups, generating growth by identifying opportunities.

3. They provide training and materials that enable the organization to partner effectively.

4. They provide governance and policy pertaining to partnering.

5. They measure and reward work across functions instead of in a silo.

6. They manage a portfolio of partner investments. They determine which partners deserve investment.

7. They manage and negotiate relationships that cross business units and are considered strategic.

8. They manage volume partner programs, enabling critical mass on platforms.

Start creating more effective strategic alliances and partnerships. SSE

Adrian Carol Ott is CEO of Exponential Edge. Visit www.exponentialedge.com. Ann E. Trampas, is Adjunct Professor of Marketing at the Keller Graduate School of Business. Email anntr@comcast.net.

ACTION: Strengthen your alliances.

C-Suite Presentations

Master them to move up and sell more.

by Sally Williamson

AS AN EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION coach, I'm often asked about the people I coach. While the profiles of executives are too diverse to stereotype, the timing of coaching is something many executives have in common.

One of the most common times for coaching is when a seasoned manager or executive is promoted to the C-Suite. And, the reason is that while communication was an important skill for the manager, it quickly becomes a critical skill in the C-Suite. Even the most confident executives are a little unnerved as the audiences get bigger, the messages get broader, and the expectations seem to soar.

The shift in expectation may seem unfair, but it is very real and has lasting implications. My initial conversations with C-Suite executives often focus on understanding that the role as a communicator has shifted from one who outlines next steps to one who sets overall direction. Content shifts from clear details to broader ideas and vision.

Personal style skills are placed under close observation. Audiences form quick impressions of all of us when we stand up to speak. For a C-Suite executive, initial impressions are lasting ones. When a middle manager speaks at a company-wide meeting, he may lack energy or focus as he delivers his thoughts. While it doesn't do much to motivate the audience, he still has the opportunity to sit down with his group and reinforce his ideas in a smaller setting. For the C-Suite executive, it's more of a one-shot approach. When he lacks energy or focus, the audience holds onto that impression for six months to a year until they see him again in the same setting.

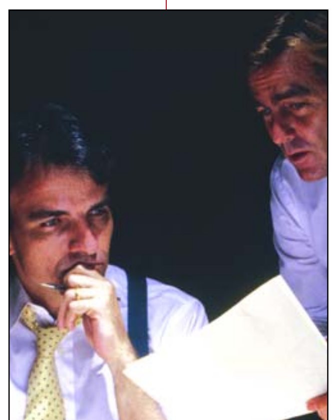
Six Pitfalls

Here are six of the most common pitfalls made in C-Suite presentations and ideas for avoiding them:

1. Developing a support team. One advantage of working in the C-Suite is that you'll never have to develop your own presentation. The challenge is learning to work with a support team in a manner that makes efficient use of everyone's time and ideas.

Most executives work better with one speech resource, rather than several. So instead of enlisting someone from a different department with each new audience or topic, the executive should develop a good relationship with one person who can coordinate content from various departments.

2. Setting the message and direction. Many executives give up control of a presentation too quickly. I'm often called in to help when an executive is frustrated with a script. The writer has continued to edit and revise the script but can't seem to please the executive. The challenge is that the executive is looking for an overall message, and the writer is already on the details. The executive should stay involved in the concept long enough to frame a message and an overall direction for the presentation. Then, the writer has a much better blueprint to follow.



3. Personalizing stories and examples: Audiences remember stories and examples. Executives miss the mark by adding stories for personal touch when they haven't actually been personally touched by the story. Examples used should be individualized to the speaker, even if it takes a little extra effort to pull it off. When I coach executives who share stories of sales victories or business challenges, I always ask: Have you spoken to the individuals involved? Do you really understand the context of this story? I'm surprised how often the answer is no. Executives should get stories and examples first hand. This eliminates any potential to get the story wrong, it insures the executive can tell the story in his own words, and it builds rapport with those in the audience who will know the details first hand.

4. Minimizing use of visuals/support materials. C-Suite presentations are more about direction than detail. And, visuals support details. So, while PowerPoint may still have a place in the board room, the use of visuals should be significantly reduced. C-Suite executives should be shifting from high content to high contact. I also encourage executives to find one visual way of presenting a concept and use it over and over again. Executives become synonymous with their messages, and visuals should be the same. If an audience sees plans for future growth represented on a timeline one month and on a pie chart three months later, the audience assumes the concepts are totally different. Repetition helps an executive build consistency.

5. Seeking feedback. It seems everyone stops talking to you when you reach the C-Suite. There are just too many risks associated with being honest with the boss. Executives need feedback, especially new executives, to be sure they're connecting with audiences. Some executives bring trusted advisors with them to the C-Suite. Others find coaches who can help provide insight and perspective on senior level communication.

6. Prioritizing involvement. As a speech coach, I wouldn't tell an executive to stop speaking. But, I do advise some executives to limit the amount of speaking. And, the reason is that when they become overcommitted, speaking is an afterthought and the presentations are just not good. A positive impression can create great benefits for a company, but a negative impression can take months to overcome.

Balance is the answer. Every C-Suite executive has several speaking commitments that are critical each year—from shareholder meetings, investor presentations, all company meetings, client conferences and media interviews. Define a number of public presentations, such as trade events and community groups, that you feel you can handle. Develop one core presentation that can easily be tailored for different audiences.

While the timing of coaching often coincides with the move to the C-Suite, it's turns out to be a great time for an executive to develop new habits and gain confidence in the ability to connect with larger audiences, define broader messages, and exceed expectations in front of any group. SSE

Sally Williamson is an executive coach with expertise in effective business presentations and sales communication strategies.

ACTION: Master C-suite presentations.

SALES/ADVISOR

Are You Still Relevant?

Goodbye vendor, hello advisor.

by Ross Shafer

ARE YOU STILL RELEVANT enough to keep growing your market share? I'm not talking about your new web store and your client back office dashboards. I'm talking about *how* you do business with the people who give you money for your goods and services.

Leaving voice mails, sending email, and blasting text messages is fast, rejection safe, and *killing your business*. Pedestrian electronic messaging "to stay in touch" reduces you and your company to a commodity. You've become a vendor, a resource, a supplier. You are vulnerable to allowing trusted advisers to steal your business—unless you become a trusted advisor by creating an emotional, face-to-face relationship.

Some executives get it. Ramani Ayer, CEO of The Hartford, told me, "We've built outstanding electronic tools to manage clients' accounts, but I want our people to initiate 60 percent more face-time to grow our market share."

Electronic communications cause a disconnect of humanity from the transaction. Now, that's okay if you're an ATM. But, if you want to grow market share, you need to be present and friendly to your customers and clients.

Sad Consequences

I once met a stockbroker who told me about one of his biggest blunders: "I had this client who owned a print shop. His portfolio with me was about $700,000—nice but not one of my bigger fish. One day I hear from a friend that he sold his print shop to a major chain for $16 million. I had no idea his shop was worth that money. So I call the guy to talk about investing. He says, 'I don't know what I'll do yet. It's almost Christmas, and I may splurge and buy something fun for myself.' So, I backed off. In January, I call again and find out from his wife that the man died just after Christmas. I explained to his wife that I was their stockbroker. She said, 'I don't know you. I've never met you. You've never been to our house. I'm going to let our son handle our finances.'"

This broker admits that he blew it. He should have valued the account enough to create a genuinely emotional relationship with the man and his family. He focused on volume and servicing the portfolio when he could have become the family's trusted advisor. The axiom is: "When people love you, they give you more of their wallet." If he had adopted that maxim, he would have been positioned to maintain and grow the account. He might have been referred to the widow's friends. Instead, he was shut out because he didn't see the value in knowing his client beyond the account balance.

Advantage: Women

A woman would not have made that mistake. Women tend to be better relationship builders and networkers. To be relevant, we need to cater to the female demographics and focus most of our marketing efforts toward women. Not only do women account for 83 percent of all consumer purchasing, they have most of money.

Women know that emotions bind a relationship in ways electronic media cannot. To women, business is personal, and personal is business. And since the only proven factor for repeat business is a strong emotional connection between people, women are more likely to create ongoing loyalty.

The best sales tactic is *not* to "sell" but rather to become a trusted advisor. Human relationships are always a relevant way to grow your business. SSE

Ross Shafer is an expert on growth and author of Remaining Relevant, Nobody Moved Your Cheese *and* The Customer Shouts Back. *Visit www.RossShafer.com.*

ACTION: Become a trusted advisor.

SERVICE/STRATEGY

Service Strategy

It's the key to more sales.

by John Tschohl

COMPANIES USE THE WORDS *customer service* to entice customers to patronize their businesses. Yet, few companies have developed a customer service strategy.

A service strategy can dramatically increase your market share and revenues and build a more powerful brand. Service leaders know that they are not in manufacturing, retail, or banking—they are in the customer service business, and service is integrated into every facet of the business. At the core of a service culture is the belief that no transaction is complete unless the service motivates customers to return.

Many companies try to attract customers and increase sales by advertising, renovating, or lowering prices— strategies your competitors will copy. The only strategy they can't copy is a service strategy. Institute one, and you'll have a 10-year lead on the competition. And it will cost one-tenth of what you'd spend on advertising.

Service leaders focus on six principles:

1. They understand that service is a strategy. Customers want awesome service every day. In a service culture, no transaction is complete unless customers receive service that motivates them to return—service that is so exceptional that they wouldn't think of doing business with anyone else.

2. They look for policies and procedures that get in the way of customer service—and then eliminate them. Companies like Southwest Airlines know they're a service business that just happens to be an airline. You have to know your core business, but then look at systems, polices, and procedures that alienate customers. Make it easy for people to do business with you.

3. They hire the right people—and treat them well. Treat your employees as you would like them to treat your customers. When you treat your employees like royalty, they will treat your customers like royalty—and those customers will be loyal for life.

4. They empower their employees to make decisions to serve their customers. Give your people the authority to do whatever it takes to immediately take care of the customer to the customer's satisfaction.

5. They train people in customer service, using a new program every six months. Teach your people the basics of customer service, and reinforce them. Use a fresh training program to ensure that your employees remain excited about providing the best service possible.

6. They measure the impact and results of customer service efforts. And the payoffs are significant.

You can't succeed if you focus solely on price and product. Service is the distinguishing factor. So, focus on doing whatever it takes to satisfy customers. SSE

John Tschohl is author of Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service. *Visit www.customer-service.com, call 952-884-3311 or e-mail quality@servicequality.com.*

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