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Seven ways to lead your sales team through the recession

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There is an old saying: "Character not tested is no character at all." Well, character and resiliency are certainly being tested in this recession, revealing salespeople who will and can sell in any economic cycle.

The recession is also testing sales managers to see if they can provide environments that keep their team's head up and their hearts engaged.

Leadership has never been more important. How are you showing up in your role as head coach, trainer and leader? Here are seven tips for leading your sales team through the recession.

Look for good news. Bad news sells and, unfortunately, the media is having a fire sale. Despite the doom and gloom, there are companies still spending money and investing in products and services.

A colleague of mine recently connected with her very first boss. His team has opened over 100 new accounts, in a competitive industry, since January. Please note this good news won't be printed in the paper, so it's up to you and your team to seek out the positive. At your next sales meeting, charge each salesperson with finding good news and sharing it with the rest of the team. It's time to start publishing your own news.

Increase your coaching efforts. When is the last time you really listened to your sales team's selling points? Do they sound unique or just like the competition? (We have expertise, good customer service and superior technology.) Have you conducted role-playing exercises to see if your team knows how to quantify the cost of the problem or the gain of the opportunity? This selling skill is *key* in an environment where cost justification is king.

If the team can't establish the short-term and long-term ROI, there is a good chance the salesperson will lose to the new competitor: doing nothing.

Decrease desperation breath. Good economic times often create bad selling habits. During robust economies, many salespeople forget to keep their referral networks alive and nurtured. When tough times hit, there is a dash to make NBFs — new best friends. In their desperation, salespeople don't take the time to build trust, make deposits in the relationship account and practice the law of reciprocity.

Instead, they immediately ask who you know and could you set up an introduction? Even if the person is a good fit for referring, human nature doesn't respond well to pressure and desperation.

Balance something old and something new. The world is full of Twitter, LinkedIn, Plaxo and Facebook, just to name a few. Social media is the new way of networking. Teach your sales team to integrate new social media with old principles of influence and selling skills. You still need to pick up the phone and set up a referral meeting or a prospect meeting. You still need to have strong selling points.

Social media marketing tools may create the opportunity, but selling skills close the opportunity.

Review negotiation skills and concession strategies. Prospects are asking for more discounts. If your sales team has not developed a concession strategy, they could be dropping price without any concession from the prospect. That leads to a transactional sale versus a value sale.

Caving in to price also creates distrust. The prospect is thinking, "If you could lower your price that quickly, why didn't you do it in the first place?"

Inspire and motivate. We all love movies with happy endings. Follow this example as a sales manager and share stories about tough times that have happy endings. These stories can be personal stories of resilience such as George Washington surviving the harsh winter at Valley Forge. Or the story of Federal Express, where CEO Fred Smith flew to Reno and gambled, so he could make payroll.

Never underestimate the power of motivation. Presidents are elected because they can move an audience. Leaders are made famous by their inspirational rhetoric. There is a time to train and coach. There is also a time to inspire and motivate.

Lose self-absorption. I was reminded of this at the recent Association for Corporate Growth conference where Charles Fred, CEO of The Breakaway Group, shared his strategy for motivating his team: “Remind your team of the greater purpose of your organization. Eliminate self-absorption. We can’t control what happens outside the company; however, we can control what happens inside the company.”

Excellent advice. This is a good time to spend quality time with clients and determine what you can do to help them, even if it has nothing to do with your products or services. Invest time in helping your referral partners. Volunteer. If you think you have it bad, stop by a homeless shelter.

Put on your leadership hat. Good leaders are needed more than ever. Now that’s good news.

About the Author

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