

Sales Sustainability™ - The 10 most common sales problems

What prevents sales organizations from achieving exceptional performance? We often observe that it comes down to a handful of common mistakes which impair our ability to achieve sales sustainability. Avoiding these common sales problems can be the "magic bullet" for many sales managers; once you recognize and eliminate them, you'll be surprised how rapidly performance improves. Sales sustainability techniques ensure that we avoid these common problems and produce exceptional sales performance.

Problem #1 - Selling to the "non-buyer"

Don't misunderstand, we need to sell at all levels of an organization. However, what a salesperson does need to hear is a definitive Yes or No. How much time is spent trying to attain the slow No, e.g. when a non-buyer has a vested interest in making us believe that he/she is part of the qualifying process. Unfortunately, non-buyers may have influence but they cannot make the purchase decision; and they don't respect the resource drain they're inflicting upon your sales team. Identifying the true buyer ensures that we focus our resource time on qualification and presenting our value proposition. We may need to contact the influencing non-buyer but we avoid allowing them to direct our sales process. *Avoid selling to the non-buyer.*

Problem #2 - A poor qualification process

Why do most organizations believe they have excellent sales teams and yet they often struggle with the closing process? Usually it's because they haven't qualified their prospects. Closing appears to be the issue, but only because the organization isn't selling to well-qualified prospects. A solid sales process uses well-defined prospect profile criteria to diligently qualify prospects. If we don't qualify prospects we cannot understand the drivers of the purchase decision, and therefore can't determine if the prospect understands our value proposition. A poor qualification process wastes time and frustrates the sales team when the prospect was a not a valid candidate for the services provided. *Use a solid qualification process to avoid de-motivating your sales team.*

Problem #3 - Absence of a defined sales process

The role of the sales manager is to act as coach, mentor, referee, and expert. Unfortunately many organizations never take the time to define a consistent sales process with a common sales language. A poorly-defined sales process forces sales people to use their own ad-hoc methods, leading to unnecessary variation, confusion, and haphazard results. Customers notice this inconsistency, and we end up communicating different sales messages, degrading our brand, and limiting our ability to forecast revenue. *Define your sales process, communicate it broadly, and use the process.*

Problem #4 - Communicating price and product details before establishing value

How often does a prospect ask you to quote before you meet? It's a common request enabling the prospect to dismiss your inquiry before you can perform a needs assessment and establish their concept of value. Many sales people find they continue to follow up for months without the prospect ever meeting them. All the persistence in the world will not get this type of prospect to purchase. Why? They don't want to listen to your value proposition. Avoid the polite dismissal and don't waste resources. If a prospect is not willing to allow you to understand their needs, they are not interested in your services. Recognize it and move on to the next real prospect. *Never discuss price before establishing value.*

Problem #5 - A documented sales plan doesn't exist

Every salesperson needs a documented sales plan beyond merely establishing a quota. It should include revenue and margin goals, target accounts, activities and results by customer/prospect. Unfortunately many sales managers provide an overall sales plan but do not require their team to develop individual plans. Strategies, tactics, and results need to be measured and evaluated by account. When each salesperson has a plan, we can adjust their tactics on a monthly or quarterly basis to meet overall objectives. Results become less haphazard and opportunities are evaluated more consistently. *Use individual sales plans to actively assist your team and to forecast results.*

Problem #6 - Failing to leverage existing relationships into future sales

Our best evidence of delivering value is a satisfied group of core accounts, and potential buyers understand the significance of this. When meeting with prospects, do your salespeople communicate the existence of these core accounts in your portfolio of clients? Do they use reference letters to remove any concerns about making a poor purchase decision? Informed prospects value references and recognize the power of association. *Allow your prospects to eliminate their concerns through references.*

Problem #7 - Believing that sophisticated tools are the solution to a poor process

The sales process is a series of activities which must occur in proper sequence. Many sales organizations believe that tools such as activity management systems, automated CRM, and marketing materials will get them around the process. Unfortunately, these efforts do nothing but confuse the customer and complicate the sales process. Tools alone will not provide a solution to a poor sales process. Therefore, identify, document, and communicate the best sales management methodology for your organization before investing in costly tools. *The first investment should be in the sales process itself.*

Problem #8 - Limiting skills by not investing in and reinforcing training

How do your sales people receive new ideas or review elements of your sales process? Many organizations have very inconsistent training and reinforcement programs. What does the frequency of training and new ideas say about your organization's commitment to excellence in selling? We aren't talking about major time or dollar investments, but merely communicating a consistent set of expected behaviors and then reinforcing these behaviors. Spending even an hour a month enhancing skills and then observing competency during the sales calls sends a message of professionalism to the sales team. *Invest in your sales team and expect results from the investment.*

Problem #9 - Failing to document a sales process to facilitate transition

Could you easily use a diagram or list of steps to communicate your sales process to a new hire or another part of your company? If not, what is this saying to new hires about your organization? When we don't have a documented and well communicated process, we are saying our expectations are haphazard and produce inconsistency across the organization and in the implementation of our sales plan. We expect consistent performance, but when we experience turnover or hire new staff we cannot easily transition them to maintain sales momentum. *Document your sales process to rapidly communicate expectations and seamlessly transition through organizational change.*

Problem #10 - Failure to use a sales management process to communicate expectations and manage results

Does your organization understand your process for establishing priorities, managing activities, and reporting results? If not you may see variability that affects performance and leads to poor outcomes. Your sales plan establishes expectations while your sales process is the methodology to get there. We need to clearly communicate how we intend to manage results, adapt to changes, and measure performance in the implementation phase. Our system for performing this function is our Sales Management Process (SMP). If we do not clearly communicate our SMP to the team, they interpret decisions without a context, which often leads to a poor outcome. *Define and communicate your sales management process to ensure a productive and well-aligned sales team.*

Where does this all lead?

Addressing the ten common sales problems leads to exceptional sales performance, through the effective management of sales resources and core processes. Sustainable sales do not occur by accident, they are achieved through organizational development and role clarity. To attain superior sales performance and solidify sales results, we must define our sales program and train our sales force. Otherwise we are acting without consistency of direction and alignment of resources. *Sales Sustainability produces results through excellent leadership and execution of integrated sales and marketing programs.*