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Knowing What to Strategize

Years ago, upon complaining to a sales manager about how tough selling was, the response was “Would you rather go back to working for a living?” The nature of sales success has placed selling in a special business category with myth, luck, talent and bravado. Professionalizing sales (decreasing the mystery of sales success) is not just about dress and demeanor but about creating a knowledge-based process that delivers more sales execution efficiency and forecast accuracy.

Our natural instinct is to plan when we know very little about our destination, and to take action with familiar goals. The “unknown” causes us to consider what might go wrong with those activities we imagine are needed. The “known” allows us to go with our gut feelings. New sales professionals operate the former way and experienced professionals the latter, and sales success stays a mystery. Companies have no experiential database for propagating success.

When laid out, the two conditions - unknown and known - seem at opposite ends of a spectrum. Our responses seem well spread out as well: cautious, deliberate, mental activity to consider possibilities and how to adapt the process to the goal. At the other end of the spectrum, the intuitive sense exists that I’ve-been-thought-this-before-and-planning-restricts-my-flexibility.

All reps struggle with the “unknown” in the sales process. The experience of others in the similar situations could be guidance with possible activities and sequence. We could pass on the experienced-based success, but it is not being done now in any formal way. Companies have not figured out how to package the successful sales experience to share inside their sales organizations. Sales training attempts to capture the basics of dress, demeanor, goal-setting, qualifying, objection handling, etc. but generally is far behind the mainstream of sales success. The delay is the same for sales training as it is for the reps in the field: successes must be documented by someone in a form that conveys the valuable attributes of the success. What normally gets passed on is generalized information applicable to generalized selling.

The key to making specific progress in sales is what to do next in specific situations. That requires constant strategizing: every call, no; only major events, no. Careful consideration is necessary to define the important turning points where campaigns can go off track. For starters, any prospect interaction that can lead to dissatisfaction should be considered. How many types of interactions are there? Many, and their individual characteristics depend on the account’s disposition. If we consider that there are many kinds of campaigns, then the range of activities that characterizes them expands.

A golf outing with an existing customer interested in upgrading products or services is a much different activity than a golf outing with a prospect with whom time would be so competitively precious. The sequence of events will also vary. That upgrade golf meeting could occur much earlier in the campaign than with a new prospect, if ever. This is where providing assistance to the rep would be useful to strategize: previous experience offered for guidance, specific to the campaign at hand. The key is how to do it. The selling process is dynamic and normal planning tools will not work.

With more thinking invested in the campaign, good ideas will emerge that shorten sales cycles, expand revenue, and win sales. The net value will be to make the forecast more accurate because the representative is strategizing constantly.

Author:

John McGlinn

Principal, GATEtoGOALS.com

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