

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Want to improve commercial performance? Then learn from professional athletes and use a systemic approach to sales training.

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Quality in sales dialogues and customer interactions is a must for all commercial organisations. Yet, many organisations struggle to keep the quality of dialogues and interactions at a high level. This results in weak links between sales management goals and the behaviour of sales representatives – as well as differences in performance.

To achieve revenue growth, commercial organisations need a systemic approach to customer buying patterns and the behavioural traits of the sales organisation. In other words, an ongoing agenda for continuous improvement of the sales engine.

In fact, commercial organisations could learn a great deal from the world of sports. Here, athletes achieve top results through systematic training, teamwork, feedback, coaching and best practices.

The athlete versus the commercial performer

The athlete spends countless hours in the gym. Soaking in sweat, completing heavy sets of squats and bench presses to

improve strength levels by 1%. The athlete runs mile after mile on muddy tracks in the rain at night to cut off seconds of the final round. The athlete spends late nights and early mornings watching videos of top performers. She is learning from the best and fine-tuning techniques and specific skills.

To the professional athlete, training, practice and fine-tuning details are part of everyday life. Why should it be any different for a commercial performer?

Drivers of top performance and the value of preparation

What turns commercial organisations into top performers? Is it marketing automation, lead nurturing, customer journey mapping or CRM implementation? Product development or streamlining the sales and buying processes? Admittedly, all these areas play a vital role in the success of a modern commercial organisation. But most sales transactions still happen when actual human beings meet to discuss pains and needs and how to solve these in the best way possible.



To quote Gartner: *“To maximize effectiveness during the sales process, suppliers need to adopt a sales enablement approach that is tailored to the specific needs of the various individuals (and roles) that are involved in the sales process.”*

Companies expect suppliers to tailor their approach to specific needs and the people involved in the buying process. To use valuable insight, company-specific value propositions, structured preparation and process control.

Most, if not all, sales people would like to exceed a customer’s expectations in the buying stages. To do so, they need to spend more energy (and time) planning the interaction and process. This especially requires thorough meeting preparation. Sellers must have the business knowledge and the ability to explain how the proposed solutions will add value. Sellers must be able to support the buying process as a trusted adviser.

So what does this mean?

Sellers need to increase the quality work done before interacting with a potential customer. Try to look into these key elements before going into a dialogue:

- How should I prepare for the meeting?
- What key questions should I ask?
- What business knowledge should I demonstrate?
- How can I bring relevant insight?
- How will our solutions add company-specific value?
- What are the company’s buying criteria?
- How can we steer the process to maximise the likelihood of winning?

At Implement, we use different approaches to improve sellers’ meeting preparation and process preparation. Some of the approaches that have proven to create immediate impact are:

- Preparation
- Training and execution
- Feedback
- Evaluation

1. Preparation

Most business-to-business (B2B) sales people prepare before attending client meetings. However, format, information sources, time spent, level of detail and business knowledge vary.

Our experience shows that more than seven out of ten sales reps do not prepare enough for sales calls and meetings. This results in a lot of time lost due to meetings of low quality. They do not do enough research or pre-call planning. They do not have a commonly agreed agenda and a presentation tailored to the prospect.

A simple sheet that structures the information needed before meetings can increase the quality of input and thereby the quality of sales meetings. You develop the tool in collaboration with the commercial organisation, and it can be either digital or paper-based.

You can also use the meeting preparation sheet as a dialogue tool between the sales rep and manager as part of the pre-work. This only increases the impact.

2. Training and execution

Without systematic, ongoing learning and reinforcement, close to 50% of the learning content is lost within five weeks and much less is applied. And within 90 days, 84% of what was learnt is lost.

If done right, role playing and other techniques have demonstrated to have massive impact on meeting quality. Role playing ... really? You will probably have to deal with a great deal of scepticism when you introduce role playing in your sales organisation. But role playing can provide significant impact and improvement, so do not underestimate its value. Use real-life sales opportunities, focus on specific elements of the process, provide background knowledge to all parties involved and apply a proven structure.

Conduct the training in an environment of trust and allow for trial and error if you want people to perform at their very best.

Try using David Maister's trust equation to ensure that all participants are mentally present and focussed on the task at hand, creating quality training with valuable output for everyone involved.

Maister defines trust as an equation consisting of the following variables: **CREDIBILITY** (the words we speak), **RELIABILITY** (the actions we conduct), **INTIMACY** (the safety or security that we feel when entrusting someone with something) and **SELF-ORIENTATION**, which refers to the person's focus.

3. Feedback

Feedback is key to succeeding in competency development. You need to nurture a culture where people give and request feedback. This is a foundation for increased sales quality in commercial organisations.

Effective feedback is beneficial to the giver, the receiver and the organisation. Several studies show that a clear majority of employees, as many as 70%, are not fully engaged at work. In organisations that value open communication and where managers ask questions and people give feedback, employees are more likely to build trust, strong relationships and ask others for help.

When working with a feedback culture, we apply a set of simple rules, i.e. the three Cs: caring, constructive and concrete. If you apply these rules, all parties involved know that the feedback is given with the best intentions. They will know that it is to the point and based on real observations, not hunches or guesses.

4. Evaluation

To the athlete, continuous feedback is paramount to securing progress and continuous improvement. The same principle applies to commercial organisations and individuals. Yet, too many commercial organisations do not prioritise feedback,

and the feedback that is given is of poor quality.

Instead, sales meetings are often evaluated through basic chit-chat questions from the team when they return from a prospect meeting. Do questions such as: "Did you make the sale?", "How much will they buy from us?" and "When will you close the order?" sound familiar?

In addition, the feedback from colleagues who also participated in the sales meeting is often limited to non-value-adding sentences such as "you did good" or "the customer seemed to be a jerk – you will do better next time".

This type of feedback does not add any value whatsoever, and you will have no chance of improving. What we have found to be working better is to develop and put a basic structure in place to evaluate sales meetings. Break down the sales meeting into phases, use open-ended questions and qualitative scores and you will have provided the seller with concrete actions for further improvements.

Practice makes perfect

Improving commercial performance through the sales force is often about small improvements. Just like the professional athlete who is on a never-ending quest for improving. You do not always have to revolutionise the way you sell.

Encourage continuous improvement through structured preparations, continuous evaluation, feedback culture and practical training. That is the foundation for success. Developing and sustaining an improvement culture is mainly about management focus and priority, but you need to involve everyone to move towards the same goal.

A culture of continuous improvement will not only help make the individual seller better. It helps make the teams and the organisations better, and like compound interest, the benefits keep coming.

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