

A Five-Step Sales Strategy to Combat the Recession

By Justin Roff-Marsh

As the economy continues to struggle, it's likely that your firm's order flow might slow, too. It doesn't need to, though. If you can improve the performance of your sales function to the point where you can secure enough new accounts to compensate for your drop in sales, without increasing your market share to unrealistic levels, then it will be possible for you to cope with these tough economic times.

To get started, develop an action plan that includes the following:

Step one: Estimate how many appointments (in aggregate) you believe it is possible to generate for your sales team each week. Remember, the number of appointments you can generate is primarily a function of the appeal of your market proposition.

Step two: Determine the optimal size of your sales team. This is the number of appointments you can generate each week, divided by 20 (each salesperson's future capacity).

Step three: Figure out how to remove all activities from your salesperson's responsibilities other than field-based, face-to-face, business development appointments. Activities that must be retained elsewhere include opportunity generation (promotions), appointment setting and calendar management, sales/demos and proposal generation, customer service, and all fulfillment-related tasks.

Step four: Reconfigure your resourcing model. You'll likely discover that you need far fewer salespeople and more sales-support personnel than you currently have. My approach to resourcing is to provide each salesperson with a dedicated sales coordinator (who manages opportunities and plans his or her calendar) and then route all other activities to a promotions person,

customer-service personnel, and technical experts who provide salespeople with field support. In most cases it is possible to accomplish this reconfiguration with a negligible, if any, increase in operating expenses.

Step five: Eliminate bonuses and commissions. If you've been waiting for an opportunity to eliminate this chaotic practice, this down economy is the time. While performance pay makes sense in environments where salespeople are truly autonomous, these environments are few and far between. As organizations transition to make-to-order environments, the requirement for tight integration between sales and fulfillment becomes critical. Tight integration necessitates teamwork—performance pay for individuals destroys the integrity of teams.

Typically, when these five steps are implemented in an organization, a considerable increase is realized in each salesperson's activity. And in most cases there is a reduction in the size of the sales team. A typical net result would be twice the volume of true business-development appointments, with minimal change in operating expenses.

If your current market share provides you with room for growth, this is a strategy worth considering in these slower times.

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Average Is a Dead-End

Remember average?

It's the brand marketer at a packaged-goods company refusing to sell whole-wheat bread, because the average person doesn't like it. Or the dietitian at the airline who says it should serve only peanuts, because the average person won't eat a corn chip.

Average made America great. Average was the mass market, the sweet spot, the high-volume, high-profit, churn-'em-out-and-move-on middle.

Average is dead.

America's best-selling beer isn't Budweiser or Miller. It's other. Sales now outside ketchup. There are so many alternatives, so many distribution channels and so many different kinds of consumers that average just isn't interesting anymore.

Are You Average?

Is your company average? Are you an average person doing an above-average job for an average company selling an average product to the average consumer?

Uh-oh.

This is the hard part. In crazy times, the animals with the greatest chance to survive are the outliers—the super-fat cheetah or the mammoth with the extra-thick wooly

coat. Of course, being an outlier is risky. If the world gets warm fast, that mammoth will be awfully unhappy.

All your life you've been trained to keep your head down, fit in, stick with it, and be quiet. And in stable times, that's a fine—though boring—strategy.

But now the rules have changed. Change is the new normal. Anything could happen; instability is a constant. And the best strategy is not to bunker down and fit in. It's to stand up and stand out.

How can you make your company's products more exceptional? How can you take astounding risks with your career? With your cover letter? With your resume?

You Can't Have It Both Ways

You cannot simultaneously be invisible and stand out. If you're invisible, one thing is certain: You're going to become extinct. Maybe not instantly and maybe not violently, but there's less and less room for someone who doesn't make a difference. In my humble opinion, it's a lot safer and a lot more interesting to make a point.

Start slow, that's fine. But start. Take some risks. Be exceptional. Be safe, not ketchup. ☐

The Discovery Cycle A Model for Career Development/Change

To a large extent, moving forward in your career and life is about learning from your experiences and overcoming the obstacles so you can strive to create the future you want.

The good news is you can learn these skills. One model you can use is called the Discovery Cycle, an assessment tool created by Deemster. It is based on the premise that human beings must go through a personal learning or discovery process to create the future they want.

There are four distinct steps in this process of discovery:

Step 1: Projecting a Vision

It is often best to start this process with a description of the future you want to create—something you can picture, like a movie projected on a screen. It should be very meaningful to you and become a source of energy and commitment. Even if you aren't sure what you really want, making your best guess enables you to begin exploring it more. Refining that vision over time is how you can create the future you really want. Without a stake in the ground, you will never get closer to your vision.

Step 2: Taking Action

Executing a plan is how you can move closer to turning your vision into reality. Like an actor in a movie, it is turning a good script into a great performance. Executing a plan is all about taking specific, concrete steps toward your vision. Good plans are realistic, specific and always focused on moving forward. Since visions are usually longer term and can seem almost too big to achieve, executing a plan lets you break a long journey into shorter trips.

Step 3: Experiencing Results

Evaluating results is how you get feedback from the world around you, so you know how close you are to achieving your vision. It's the fueling actors get when the audience applauds or the critics pan their performance. Evaluating results is sifting through this sea of sensory input to find evidence that your actions are working. Being as objective as possible is important, since even bad news can offer tremendous learning and insight.

Step 4: Reflecting on Lessons

This is sometimes the most difficult and essential part of the Discovery Cycle. It can turn bad news into great insights—about the world and about yourself. The truth is, as long as you are willing to learn, you can create the future you want. The more clearly you see yourself and the world around you, the sooner you will realize your vision. In fact, the lessons you learn will help you clarify your vision and make it stronger.

You may already do these things to some extent, but most of us are hardwired on one side or another. Ideally, your Discovery Cycle should be balanced. Like the tires on your car, the more balanced and fully inflated your cycle, the smoother the ride and the more likely you'll get to where you really want to go. ☐

Here & There...Cont.

Some employees are seeing a nasty side effect of recession: Violence. Current and laid-off workers are increasingly turning their anger against their bosses. In France, workers at 3M, Caterpillar and Sony plants have taken excess hostages. In Britain, vendors bid the home of the Royal Bank of Scotland's former CEO. The U.S. isn't immune, and midlevel management is at the same risk as top-level officers.

Firms will need to revisit security plans. Hiring corporate security guards or off-duty police officers for the workplace may not be enough to head off problems. Coordinating security with HR can identify individuals liable to cause trouble. Making on-site counseling available for those downsized can reduce tension. But attacks are just as likely outside the office, so keep local police in the loop. ☐

HUMOR

Most people do not enjoy making decisions. They're like the confused young man who went to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist empathetically listened to his patient and then offered his insight. "It appears to me you have trouble making decisions. Would you agree?" The young man pondered for a moment, and then responded, "Well, yes and no."

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