

Are Relationships the Only Key to Building Sustainable Sales Success?

BY TODD M. ZIELINSKI AND LISA BENSON

If your organization is like most, you have an annual goal for sales growth, and your sales team is given goals and objectives based on the company's overall strategic plan. However, what most organizations fail to develop is a repeatable process for their sales team to reach those goals.

For years, developing customer relationships has been touted as the panacea for all sales woes, and they are often depended upon as the method employed to grow sales. Of course, building relationships is meaningful, but in today's competitive environment, relationships are not enough to help you *keep* your share of the market, let alone grow it. However, coupling your relationship-building efforts with a structured sales process has been proven to increase and sustain revenue growth for companies long-term.

A study done by the *Harvard Business Review* shows, on average, B2B companies that have an effective pipeline process and have trained their salespeople to manage it see 28 percent higher revenue growth over those with ineffective pipeline management.

Often, to meet their goals, many will chase any target, even when it isn't a great fit for the company. Salespeople are tasked with other duties that often get priority, such as taking care of current customers. Properly hunting for appropriate targets often gets pushed to a back burner, and then salespeople do it haphazardly through no real fault of their own.

Sometimes they can get lucky and generate viable leads by relying on

relationships or product or service features and capabilities, but as the Harvard study demonstrates, the most successful salespeople operate under a structured process and create their luck.

Even if you have a loose process that you generally use, formalizing the process can make you more productive and help you meet your sales goals, which is a benefit to both you and your organization.

Below are some tips that we have found useful in developing a front-end sales process.

Organize and Plan

How will you stay on track? A calendar will be one of your best tools. It can be used to block out repeating time slots to actively work on hunting (execution and analysis), setting reminders for follow-ups, and of course, scheduling meetings. It is crucial that you take a disciplined approach and aren't putting actions off or letting them drop off your radar.

Tracking and metrics are critical to ensuring your plan is working. It doesn't matter whether you use a database or a spreadsheet, just as long as you do it and update the data consistently. Analyzing the number of prospects contacted, where they are in the sales funnel, potential sales spend, and whatever else is part of your overall plan will help you determine whether you are on track to meet your annual goal.

How many prospects will you need? Looking at the full year's goal can be daunting, so breaking it into weekly, monthly, and quarterly goals will make it easier to digest. Divide your desired

annual growth by the value of your average sale to determine how many closures you will need. By using conversion rates at key stages of your sales cycle (e.g., close, proposal, qualification, initial contact), you should be able to determine how many prospects you need to go after monthly or weekly.

Who should the prospects be? Talking to the right prospect is a crucial aspect of success. Look at your current customer list and create a profile. Use the internet, online databases, or other resources to find similar companies and contacts.

Weekly Activities

This is where you will execute the bulk of the plan. You determined during your planning stage how many prospects you need to call. If a prospect says to call back at a later date, immediately put it in your calendar as a reminder. Prioritize your prospects.

If they don't have a current need but may in the future, create a calendar reminder to check back in with them in six months or whatever time frame may be appropriate. In addition, work with your marketing department to put them on a monthly email list to engage that prospect in a consistent stream of relevant communication to nurture them through the sales process. When they have a need, you want to be top of mind.

Monthly Activities

On a monthly basis, you want to schedule the time to think about and analyze your data. What worked this past month, and what didn't? Are you hitting your weekly goals?

Quarterly Activities

Once a quarter, you should analyze your data to determine how you are tracking against your annual goals. Are your monthly goals for prospects moving through the pipeline as expected? For example, if your activities are producing only 10 percent of the number of meetings you expected each month, you might have something wrong in your qualification stage. Are you targeting the right prospects? Is seasonality a factor? What adjustments can you make going forward?

Key Takeaways

- A repeatable sales process will increase sales productivity and generate sales revenue.
- An effective front-end sales process should include planning, execution, analysis, and process improvement.
- Scheduling activities and sticking to the schedule are critical.
- Collecting and analyzing data are necessary evils.
- Not every prospect is a good prospect.
- Your plan should be fluid and change as needed to meet your goals. ■



Todd M. Zielinski is managing director and CEO at Athena SWC LLC. He can be reached at 716-250-5547 or tzielinski@athenaswc.com.



Lisa Benson is senior marketing content consultant at Athena SWC LLC. She can be reached at lbenson@athenaswc.com.