

HOW TO

BY DOUG PACKARD

Decide whether it's time to rev up your sales engine

Many companies I have been introduced to have a common challenge: they excel at providing products and services, but do not have a successful and/or cost-effective sales model. In some cases, they are not winning as much business as they want. For others, their cost of sales is too high, and sometimes, both situations exist. If these conditions occur at your business, the current sales model might not properly match the business model.

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Some business leaders hire sales staff and send them out into the market, assuming that's their only alternative. But the people they hire often don't possess the necessary sales skills. Many candidates who apply for sales positions are not wired to handle rejection. They often haven't been trained to create a case for change in a professional manner and with a sense of urgency. Many sales people also rely too heavily on marketing support, such as saying they must have a new brochure to sell. This, in itself, should be a telltale warning sign.

Other sales options

When sales team performance suffers, business leaders can seize the opportunity to consider the methods in which their customers and prospects prefer to buy. The analysis could present other sales channel options.

For example, instead of relying on a sales team, a business could leverage

existing customers and partners to generate referrals. Start by identifying influencers who interact with your prospects at the time they are likely to make a buying decision. If you sell heating oil, for instance, why not partner with Realtors who often receive inquiries for home services when they complete the sale of a home?

Another approach is leveraging company product experts or project managers to assume a sales role. They often already have industry connections and credibility. They are also often directly involved in product/service delivery, so why not have them identify customer needs, create the proposal and then lead the implementation of the solution? It's a great way to eliminate the cross-functional finger-pointing that goes on too often in too many businesses. Customers also tend to be more trusting of people who do not have traditional sales job titles.

Another alternative is the rented sales force, turning all or some of your sales processes over to a third party. You could hire a firm to manage just one component, such as cold calling or trade show staffing, to generate leads. The third-party firm takes care of the advance legwork and refers warm prospects to you as well as complex inquiries. For businesses wishing to turn over the entire sales process, they may decide to choose a distributor or franchising strategy. You might also be able to find independent sales reps that represent other companies and already have an established presence in your target markets.

Checklist for change

As you analyze whether to convert from a sales team model to any of the above alternatives, consider these key questions:

- How will customer satisfaction be affected?
- Is there a low-risk way to test the change?

Some businesses will discover their existing sales team model is still the best way to go, and that's OK. The important thing is to periodically analyze your sales engine to see if it just needs a tuneup, or if it needs to be totally overhauled.



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