Tracking A Territory

Last month, I wrote about the wisdom of assigning a territory to every salesperson. The reason you do that, I wrote, is to help the salesperson to stay organized. I promised to continue the discussion in this month's column, and I want to start that with a question: If you had to choose between two candidates for your sales position, one with strong convincing skills but weak organizational skills, and the other with the opposite profile, which one would you choose?

That's a question I always ask in sales management seminars, and the responses almost always favor convincing skills. I'm not sure, though, that you wouldn't be better off with the better organized candidate, and here's my rationale. Convincing skills can be taught, but organizational skills seem to require a fundamental personality bias. The "gift of gab" seems to be far more prevalent among printing salespeople than the ability to make and follow a plan. I have had limited success teaching "scattered" salespeople to be better organized, but pretty good success teaching well-organized salespeople to be more effective closers.

Still, there are a lot of those "scattered" salespeople out there. So it's important to recognize that when you have something that's difficult to teach—like organizational skills!—you have to reinforce the lessons to make them stick. In other words, management and accountability are critical!

Territory List

Here's another question: How many customers can one salesperson handle? There's probably no hard and fast answer to that question, but I hope you'll agree that there's a limit to the number of customers one salesperson can handle *effectively*. I hope you'll also remember that I draw a distinction between *customers, suspects* and *prospects,* and as I wrote last month, a salesperson's territory should include all three categories of opportunity—active *customers*, fully qualified *prospects* and *suspects* under evaluation.

With most of my Sales Coaching clients, I start the organizational process by asking them to establish a territory list of 100 companies. With a raw rookie, that probably means 100 suspect companies, although there could be some assigned actual customers in the mix. With a veteran, I sometimes have a fight on my hands to limit the list to 100. "I have over 300 customers," a salesperson with about 3 years on the job told recently me. "Oh yeah?" I countered, "how many of them have actually bought anything over the last 12 months?" It turned out that some of them hadn't bought anything for more than 12 *years*, but they were still coded as her customers. It also turned out that she had contacted barely half of them.

Another one of my coaching clients sent me a list of 34 customers, 10 prospects and 56 suspects. After some discussion, we decided that only 6 of those prospects were really *fully qualified*, but beyond that, this was exactly the sort of territory list I was looking for. We then started a conversation about *maximizing* the 34 customers, *converting* the 6 prospects into customers, and *evaluating* the 60 suspects to determine which ones were worth following up with.

Toward the end of that conversation, she said: "Those 60 suspects mostly came from a list my boss bought, and the list has more than 600 companies on it. What are we going to do with the rest of them?"

"We're going to add them as replacements," I answered, "for any suspects who don't qualify as real prospects. But we're still only going to focus on 100 companies at a time."

Focus is the key, and *organization* leads to *focus*. I'd much rather have a salesperson do a good job on 100 opportunities than a poor job on 600.

Organizational Tools

Here's one more question. Which is more important, organizational *skills* or organizational *tools*? The point I hope to make is that people with limited *skills* can be made effective with superior *tools*. The two most important organizational tools for a printing salesperson are ACT and the 100 Foot Tracking Spreadsheet.

I have written about ACT several times in the past. It's a leading contact management software, and the best way to describe it might be a combination of database and tickler file. ACT gives a salesperson a place to store contact information, notes and history, *and* to schedule activities. I've been using ACT for nearly 20 years, and I often say I couldn't run my life without it, let alone my business. I tell ACT what I want to do next and when, with any of my own suspects, prospects, customers, suppliers, friends, relatives, etc., and it reminds me. I start just about every day with my ACT "task list," prioritizing the various tasks and setting my schedule for the day.

The 100 Foot Tracking Spreadsheet is my own invention, and it's used primarily with suspects and prospects to track the progress of building relationships. The basic idea is that the distance between *suspect* and *customer* is 100 feet, and each 10 foot increment has a specific definition. For example, 0 is a raw suspect, 30 feet means a suspect for whom initial research has been completed, 40 feet means that an introductory letter or package has been sent, 50 feet means that a first meeting has been held, and 70 feet means a fully qualified prospect. I use smaller increments to track progress within the larger benchmarks; for example, 45 feet means that a suspect has agreed to a meeting, but a date hasn't yet been set. This tracking tool, which is meant to be updated weekly, provides "snapshot" visibility into the new customer development aspect of a territory. (If you're interested, you'll find a sample spreadsheet along with an instructions document on the "downloads" page at www.davefellman.com.)

Putting It All Together

Here's how you put all of this together to manage a salesperson more effectively. First, establish a territory list, limiting your salesperson's activities to a reasonable number of customers, prospects and suspects. Second, make sure that there's a plan for each for each individual target, to *maximize* the customers, *convert* the prospects and *evaluate* the suspects. Use ACT as the organizational tool for all of these plans, where notes are kept, history is maintained, and follow-up activities are scheduled.

Third, review your salesperson's ACT "task list" every morning, and don't be shy about telling them if you think they're not putting forth enough effort, or if you question their priorities. Fourth, review the 100 Foot Tracking Spreadsheet every week, and help them to recognize when they're stalled with a suspect or prospect—and when that happens, suggest either strategies to get to the next level, or that it's time to remove the stalled suspect from the territory list and replace them.

A defined territory will help a salesperson to be better organized, and therefore more effective—especially when management and accountability are part of the program too!

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