

train

your sales team

As Seen In
SellingPower[®]
Magazine



Based on
an interview
with
Sharon Daniels



Sharon Daniels is the president and CEO of AchieveGlobal, which delivers leadership, sales, and service programs. With over 25 years of experience in general management and sales leadership roles, she is the former president and CEO of Communispond, a leading corporate communications company. She can be reached at AchieveGlobal Headquarters, 8875 Hidden River Parkway, Suite 400, Tampa, Florida 33637. Tel: 800/566-0630. Web: www.achievegloabl.com

Prioritize Your Way to Success

Few business concepts are given more lip service – and less elbow grease — than prioritization. In many firms, prioritizing is nothing more than a catch-as-catch-can reaction to the latest crisis du jour. That's unfortunate, because priorities in general, and sales priorities in particular, should be the touchstone for day-to-day activity that helps a company achieve sales goals.

Prioritization means deciding what you're going to do first as well as what you're going to do last, if ever. This process of sorting activities according to their importance, however, is impossible without some type of objective criteria by which to make that decision. At the lowest levels of activity, decision-making criteria are often obvious. For example, returning a call from a big client is almost always higher priority than mailing a brochure to a marginal

prospect. However, the decision making becomes more complicated when it involves larger issues, such as selecting which industry is likely to prove to be the most profitable customer base for your firm.

The key concept in prioritization is "alignment." The day-to-day activities of the sales reps must align with the expectations of sales management, which in turn must align with the strategic direction of the firm as set by top management. At all three levels – top management, sales management, and sales staff – activities must be prioritized to create and reinforce that alignment.

This process of alignment and prioritization is increasingly important. A decade ago, it was relatively easy to set priorities because companies changed strategies rarely, allowing organizations the time to evolve effective pri-





Use the space below to make your own notes on prioritization.

rities. (“This is how it’s done here...”) Today, however, global markets move so quickly and corporations must adapt so frequently that it’s no longer practical to wait for a de facto alignment of priorities to evolve on its own. Companies must now work at all levels to create that alignment as quickly as possible.

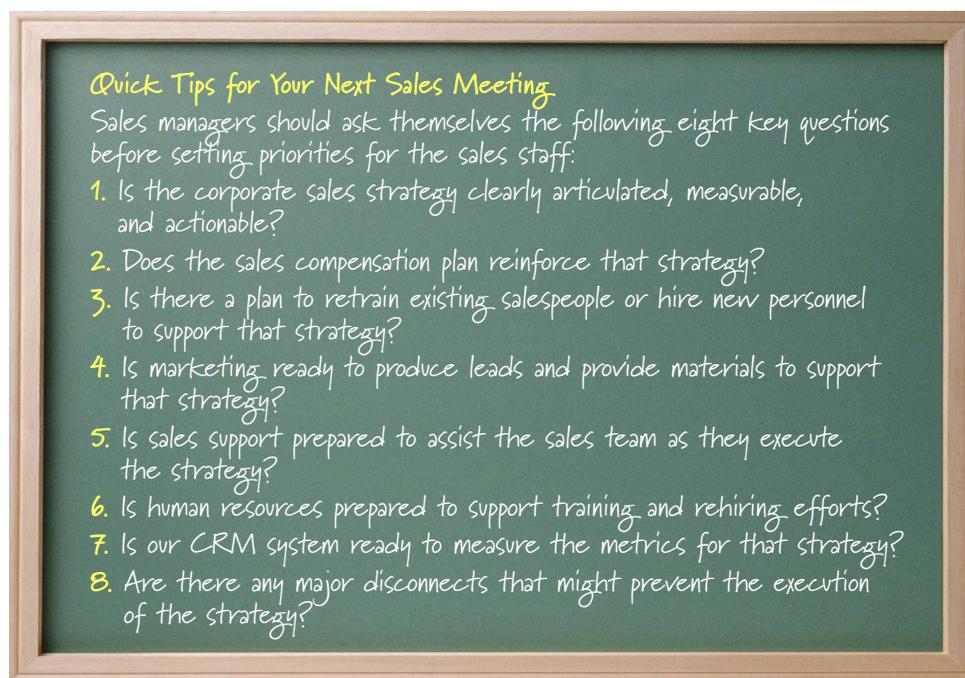
Setting Sales Priorities at the Top Management Level

Most corporations have a corporate sales strategy that ripples down into sales activities. This strategy typically involves the segmentation of the sales force, targeted markets, balance of new versus existing business, vital customers and markets, and so forth. The corporate sales

sales rep who must choose between calling on a current customer in industry A and calling on a hot prospect in industry B.

In cases such as this, when a corporate sales strategy does not communicate priorities, the rep will nearly always take whatever action seems more familiar. A rep who has many contacts inside industry A will simply continue to sell to industry A. Similarly, a new-hire rep with experience in industry B will neglect important “cash-cow” customers in industry A.

Ideally, a corporate sales strategy should set measurable priorities that make it easy to decide which sales activities are now important and which are no longer important. For example, rather than promulgating the vague



strategy is thus itself a criterion for prioritization because the strategy defines what’s important and what’s not.

Simply having a corporate sales strategy, however, is not enough. It is also necessary for top management to communicate that strategy to sales management and to the sales staff in way that makes it possible for them to prioritize their own activities. Without a clear strategy, communicated clearly, it is virtually impossible for the sales management and reps alike to set their appropriate priorities.

For example, suppose a corporate sales strategy identifies “maximizing current revenue from industry A” and “developing new customers in industry B” as being equally important. While both strategies sound like good ideas, as stated they provide no guidance to a

example above (“maximize revenues from industry A” and “develop new customers in industry B”) a more effective corporate sales strategy might be to “achieve 50 percent of our sales revenue from industry B within four quarters” or alternatively “develop at least 200 new customers in industry B, without adversely impacting revenue from industry A.” Note that these revised strategies actually provide the criteria for the prioritization of day-to-day activity among the sales staff.

Setting Sales Priorities at the Sales Management Level

Sales management is responsible for the execution of the corporate sales strategy at the corporate level. Doing this is not just a matter

► CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

SALES MANAGER'S TRAINING GUIDE

At Your Next Sales Meeting

The following are 12 practical steps that you can take at a sales meeting to lay the groundwork for the ongoing prioritization of day-to-day activity among the sales team. Note that in most cases, you'll be using this meeting guide after your company has changed its corporate sales strategy. However, this meeting guide is also useful if your sales team does not understand the current strategy or is having trouble aligning priorities to match. This meeting should take about an hour.

1. Well prior to the meeting, ask yourself the eight key questions listed under "Quick Tips for Your Next Sales Meeting (page 46)." If you cannot answer all of those questions in the affirmative, then setting priorities will be difficult or impossible. We strongly recommend that you not attempt this training module until you are certain that you have achieved the alignment of strategy that makes effective prioritization possible.
2. Immediately prior to the meeting, prepare four slides. The first slide describes the corporate sales strategy and the compensation elements that support that strategy. The second describes the infrastructure that is (or will be) in place to support that strategy. The third slide describes the sales process by which reps will be expected to deliver on that strategy. The fourth slide lists the eight key questions provided under "Quick Tips for Your Next Training Session."
3. Open the meeting with a statement that you're going to provide the groundwork for setting sales priorities. Explain that their ability to "own" and execute the strategy will be critical to their future success in the company.
4. Review the first slide and answer any questions that come up. It is very important that the sales team understands the direct connection between their compensation and the execution of the corporate strategy.
5. Review the second slide and answer any questions that come up. The sales team should feel confident that they are not alone and that the rest of the corporation is aligned to help them execute the strategy.
6. Review the third slide and answer any questions that come up. The sales team should have a clear picture of what actions they'll need to take in order to execute the strategy and receive the targeted compensation.
7. Ask the team to take out writing materials. Show the fourth slide and ask them to privately answer all eight questions. Allow at least 15 minutes for this part of the exercise. Encourage team members to internally "brainstorm" in order to flush out anything that could help or impede execution of the strategy.
8. Open the floor for questions and comments. During the discussion, note the reaction of various team members in order to identify potential problems.
9. Ask team members to write out rough ideas for a personal development plan that will help them develop the skills and knowledge they'll need to execute the corporate strategy.
10. Open the floor for questions. Ask for volunteers to share their plans and solicit comments from other team members to help hone the plan.
11. Make a public commitment to meet with each team member privately to help prioritize activities, identify resources, and develop skills and knowledge that will lead to the successful execution of the corporate sales strategy.
12. Thank the team members for their participation and close the meeting.

Quick Tips for Your Next Training Session

Sales reps must be able to answer the following eight questions in the affirmative prior to setting priorities for day-to-day sales activities:

- What else do I need to know about the corporate sales strategy?
- What resources do I personally need to execute that strategy?
- What sales skills will I need to execute that strategy?
- What customer knowledge will I need to execute that strategy?
- What will I have to do differently in order to execute that strategy?
- How will I measure my activities that can be gauged against that strategy?
- What are any concerns that would keep me from executing that strategy?
- How will my day-to-day activities help support that strategy?

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

of helping sales reps prioritize their day-to-day activities (although this is a part of sales management's role). The larger challenge is to determine what needs to take place inside the rest of the corporation in order to achieve the goals of the corporate sales strategy.

In an ideal world, a clearly articulated corporate sales strategy would immediately cause all the different organizations within a corporation to change priorities and execute that strategy. In reality, however, that almost never happens because inevitably at least one (and usually more) of the internal groups don't know what they need to do differently or are paralyzed by corporate inertia ("We've always done it this way..."). Because sales management is "on the hook" to make the strategy work – and will be blamed if it fails – sales management must help other groups prioritize appropriately.

For example, suppose a company's sales

strategy entails moving from selling commodity products to selling customized solutions. For this transition, sales management will need to determine what kind of training programs and staffing programs will be required, what changes in sales support will be needed, what types of leads the marketing department now needs to generate, and so forth. Sales management must work with multiple groups to help set priorities, so that the corporation provides the infrastructure that will make the transition possible. For example, this might entail meeting with HR to secure training resources, meeting with sales support to establish appropriate staffing levels, and/or providing marketing with a profile of the customers who are likely to buy solutions rather than products.

Only after the infrastructure is in place (or scheduled to be in place) does it make sense for sales management to have individual sales reps prioritize their daily activity.

Setting Sales Priorities at the Sales Rep Level

Sales reps are responsible for the execution of the corporate sales strategy at the individual level. This means deciding, on a day-to-day basis, what activities are most likely to achieve the goals of that strategy.

Needless to say, this will never happen unless the sales compensation plan is adjusted to match the strategic direction. The sales rep must not just know what's expected but also know that he or she will be appropriately rewarded for doing what's expected. It's surprising how often this rather obvious point is neglected. There are thousands of examples of companies who have tried to prioritize "hunting" new customers while simultaneously maintaining a sales compensation plan that disproportionately rewards the "farming" of existing customers.

Assuming that compensation is in alignment with the strategy, sales management must work with individual sales reps to ensure that they have the resources, both personal and corporate, that they'll need to actually execute that strategy. For example, a rep with experience in selling "products" inside a company moving to selling "solutions" might need additional sales training and technical training. He or she might also need instant access to an engineer with expertise in solution customization.

In short, sales management must work with individual sales reps to prioritize activities so that it becomes possible for each rep to contribute to making the corporate sales strategy successful in the marketplace.

– GEOFFREY JAMES

Reps' Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What if top management continues to set conflicting corporate sales strategy priorities?

A: You need to work with them to clarify what strategic goals are truly strategic and then communicate those goals to the rest of the company and to the sales staff.

Q: What role does CRM play in the prioritization process?

A: The purpose of CRM is to make it easier to measure how activities are actually helping to execute the strategy and to provide information that might help tune priorities so that activities better achieve those goals.

Q: What if a sales rep simply does not have the skills to execute the corporate sales strategy, regardless of how his or her activities are prioritized?

A: You need to decide whether the sales reps would be better off with a different job or, alternatively, provide remedial sales training and technical training to bring that rep up to speed.