



Stop Winging It To Reduce Your Sales Cycle By 50%, Guaranteed!

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Dimensions of EXCELLENCE™ is based on the four dimensions of performance and organizational excellence. These are the foundation for our development programs oriented to achieving performance and organizational excellence in sales, marketing, and customer service.

These white papers provide concepts and ideas based on the application of these principles of these programs and our work with our clients. We welcome your comments and observations on these topics.

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In the last ten years, we have worked with thousands of sales people as sales executives, consultants, trainers and coaches. One of the most important things we have learned is that most sales people are making as much as 2 times the number of sales calls needed to close a deal. We constantly challenge these sales professionals to reduce their sales cycles by up to 50% by doing a few simple things. When I make this claim to sales executives and sales people, they look at me as though I had three eyes and antenna sprouting from my head. Some start to attack:

“Dave, how can you make a claim like this? Do you know what it would mean to reduce our sales cycle by 50%? Think of the time it would free up.”

“Dave, I’ve been selling for many years, I’ve been the best in our company. How can you tell me that I can reduce my sales cycle by half?”

Selling is not rocket science and we do not subscribe to “get rich quick” schemes of selling. However, after diagnosing thousand’s of sales situations, we find it is very easy for every sales professional to significantly reduce their sales cycles, but it requires going back to a few basics.

What is the sales cycle?

There is timing and tempo to a sales cycle that is driven by the customer buying process. While our suggestions will have some impact on this, our focus is on the time the sales professional spends in making calls on the customer.

When we look at the sales cycle, we are focusing on the number of sales calls the sales professional must make to accomplish the objective of closing the sale. Based on our analysis of sales calls, virtually every sales professional can reduce the number of calls that must be made by up to 50%.

What causes long sales cycles?

Sales people cause long sales cycles, not customers! Think about it, customers don’t want to spend their time listening to sales people, customers want to solve problems and get on with their lives.

Sales people cause long sales cycles. Be honest with yourself, are you winging it in your sales calls? Test yourself with some of these scenarios.

How many times have you been returning to the office after a key sales call and thought: “Oh no! I forgot to ask this!” As simple as it sounds, we have found one of the reasons sales cycles are too long is that sales people forget to execute everything they had planned. Guess what that creates? Yes, you’ve got it, you have to make another sales call!

Imagine, too, how delighted customers are with these extra meetings. They probably think, “Why didn’t this #%?! cover these items in our last meeting? Why is he wasting my time because he wasn’t prepared?”

Why is it that we remember all the things that we wanted to make happen in the sales call after the call, and not before we make the call? Think about the impact of never

forgetting and being prepared for anything that might occur in the call. How many calls could you reduce if you did this?

The second biggest time waster also concerns poor preparation. Think about the number of times that you have spoken with your colleagues or the sales people that report to you and have heard these comments: “We were blind-sided by this issue.” “We were calling on the wrong people.” “We didn’t have the decision-makers in the room.” “We didn’t have the right people with us to answer their questions.” There are many more excuses, but all of these are indicators of not preparing adequately, and not anticipating what might happen in the meeting.

What happens when you are not prepared? In the worst case, you are thrown out, you lose, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, go to Jail.¹ In the best case, guess what, you have more calls that you have to make. Now, think about how many times during the sales cycle this might happen. This creates unnecessary sales calls and puts the relationship with the customer at risk.

The fear of failure or rejection also causes many sales professionals to set low expectations, consequently low goals for many calls. Most sales people want to move the sales opportunity forward, but are concerned with moving too fast. This is more often driven by the fear of failure than out of concern for pushing the customer too hard. Our experience is that many sales people are not aggressive enough in their goals for calls. In most complex sales situations, it is inappropriate to ask for the order on most first calls, or even second calls, but many sales people fail to set aggressive goals, again lengthening the sales cycle.

There are many other factors that cause us to make more calls than necessary. The point, however, is that these calls waste our time and that of our customer. If we could reduce the number of these extra calls we gain the most precious commodity available to us, time.

How do we eliminate unnecessary calls?

Sales people hate this word, but it is critical to maximizing our effectiveness. We eliminate unnecessary calls by *Planning*. Yes, that’s it, we need to develop *Sales Call Plans*. Planning enables us to be prepared in the sales call. It reduces the chance that we will forget something or be surprised. It helps us to anticipate things that might happen or that we should do. It helps us get the most out of every call we make. Most importantly, it maximizes the value of the call to the customer.

At this point in speaking to audiences of sales people, a groan goes up and someone inevitably says, “You don’t understand, we don’t have time to plan!” My response is usually a caustic, “You don’t have time not to plan!”

Time is the most precious commodity any business professional has today. We do not have sufficient time to do all that is expected of us. We absolutely do not have time to do duplicate or redundant work because we have forgotten something, been blind-sided, or otherwise unprepared. Our customers will not tolerate us wasting their precious time, as well.

“But,” you say, “I plan my sales calls, I think about what I want to accomplish, sometimes I even write it down so I don’t forget.” In reviewing many of these “plans,” they represent casual notes and reminders, but most do not represent focused, aggressive thinking about how to maximize the results produced in the call.

When we probe sales people about how and when they do their planning, we tend to find three approaches:

- “In the lobby while I am waiting to see the customer.”
- “In the elevator.” (We’re thankful for skyscrapers in New York!)
- “Behind the windshield as I am driving to the customer.”

Sure, I am being tough, but the reality is many sales people probably cheat themselves, and their customers, by not doing a thoughtful job of preparation. Much of the planning is unfocused, ad hoc, or inconsistent.

We believe that a disciplined approach to planning calls will increase effectiveness and the results produced in every meeting. In developing a high impact sales call plan, you need to think of five fundamental things:

- What is it that we want to accomplish on this call?
- What might impact our ability to accomplish what we want?
- What do we need to learn from the customer in this call?
- What does the customer need to learn from us?
- What is in it for the customer to invest his time in this call?

Let's examine each area:

- *What is it that we want to accomplish?* Most of us have objectives for calls, but in this element think about a stretch goal for the call. Also, be very clear in identifying how you know whether you have accomplished your goal. It should be measurable and time-bound. I like to think of my purpose and the desired outcomes.
- *What might impact our ability to accomplish what we want?* All sales people do some form of SWOT² analysis. Think of this as an analysis focused on the call itself. Here is where you begin to think about potential surprises. You might want to think about whether the right people are participating in the call, on both your side and the customer's. You would not believe the number of "closing calls" I have seen sales people make when the Decisionmaker was not at the meeting. Does this impact the ability to close? Brainstorm everything that might keep you from accomplishing your objective and develop strategies to eliminate or minimize their impact. Likewise, think of everything that might help you and be prepared to use them.
- *What do we need to learn from the customer?* Sales people are good at asking questions, however this is your chance to make sure that you are getting everything you need out of the call. This is the part of the plan that keeps you from forgetting a lot of the reason that we are having the meeting in the first place. Write your questions down, check them off as you ask them.
- *What does the customer need to learn from us?* Much of the time, sales people forget about this, but the customer may have some questions about our company, capabilities, or solutions. Sometimes they express those questions as objections. Spend some time anticipating what they might bring up and be prepared to respond directly. What about the "question from hell?" Customers always have a way of asking that one question that we had hoped and maybe prayed that they would not ask. Rather than praying, spend time anticipating and preparing a response.
- *Finally, what is in it for the customer?* Why should the customer invest time with us in this meeting? As consultative sales professionals, it is critical that we create value for the customer in every encounter. If we cannot answer this final question, then we should cancel the call.

Spending 15 minutes thinking about each of these issues has tremendous power in focusing your call and producing results. For most sales calls, you can develop a strong plan in just 15 minutes. For those tough calls, spend more time, make sure you have a bulletproof approach. Write the plan down. There is something about committing your plan to paper that makes it real and tangible. It also keeps you from forgetting things during the meeting.

Tips for managers!

As sales managers, it is our job to help our people be as effective as possible. We need to coach our people, reinforcing great performance and eliminating bad practices. Try some of the following ideas to help your people maximize the results they produce with each call:

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- Never make a call with one of your sales people without having a written plan that you have reviewed beforehand. If the call is not important enough for a well-prepared plan, then it is not important enough for you to invest your time, and certainly, it is not important enough for the customer.
 - Use the plan as a means to coach your people. Are they accomplishing as much as they can? What if they set more aggressive goals for the call?
 - When your people are making a major closing call or a very difficult call, review their plan before the call. This is your insurance policy. Help them bulletproof the plan. Consider role-playing the call to help them anticipate and be prepared.
 - After you have completed a call with your people, use the plan to debrief them. Did they accomplish their objectives? Could they have accomplished more? What could they have done better or differently? What did they do really well?

Managers are just as time poor as sales professionals, but these few steps will improve the results your people produce, improving your time utilization.

No more winging it!

The best sales professionals never wing it. They are disciplined, focused, and effective. They use their time and that of the customer well, it is a valuable commodity for both. The best sales professionals plan everything they do, they want to avoid surprises and to be certain that they are achieving their goals.

Try this process on your next 10 sales calls. See for yourself the impact planning has on the results you produce. If you do it well, we know it will have a dramatic impact on the results you produce. Based on our experience, you can reduce the number of calls you need to make by up to 50%.

For a free call planning checklist to coach you on making more effective sales calls, email us at callplan@excellenc.com or call us at (949)305-7146.

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¹ Some of our non-US readers may not recognize this reference to the popular board game, Monopoly.

² Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.