



Learning How to Sell Well in the 21st Century

The role and responsibilities of the enterprise-level sales force is changing—and fast. And the new job description is based on innovation, as well as nimble technology-based learning and knowledge.

By Darin Hartley, M.Ed



The role and responsibilities of the enterprise-level sales force is changing—and fast. And the new job description is based on innovation, as well as nimble technology-based learning and knowledge.

In the wake of the recession there are fewer people selling, but the goals, workload and expectations for those who are have grown. So, you need to be busy, or busier than you were in the past. You must scrutinize every deal and attack every opportunity with intellectual gusto, because there are simply fewer deals and opportunities out there right now. Your competition? It's fierce; and, as a result, pricing is under siege. Salespeople must make every effort to escape the gravity of commoditization.

TO PUT IT BLUNTLY: today's sales force must be smarter to win.

More specifically, sales teams that are able to leverage social networks in thoughtful ways have the best chance at coming out ahead of their peers and competitors. Once fully embraced, these new tools will, without question, help sales reps research and target new prospects and leads like never before. Indeed, prior to the social network revolution, sales forces were dependent on Reuters and Hoover's – both expensive and proprietary third-party data sets. Today, these older systems have been replaced – or at least augmented – by LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

One of the tremendous benefits of these social networking systems is their ability to help sales teams make connections through secondary linkages.

For example, a couple of years ago, I had a contact at a big high-tech company. Unfortunately, he was let go. Eventually he landed a new job and saw that I was looking at his online profile. We connected digitally. As a result, we continued doing business together. A

decade ago, I might not have known that he had left his job, that he had moved on to bigger and better things, or that there were opportunities for a new and mutually beneficial business relationship.

Social networks have changed the nature and dynamic of the cold call for sales forces everywhere. While I certainly don't advocate spamming, using social networks in a judicious way can definitely put deals in play, and then move them forward.

No one will deny the disruptive ability of social networks; in many ways, they are having the same kind of sweeping impact in sales that Amazon had (and is having) in the publishing industry. But sales teams must lean forward and really commit to using these new tools – especially because the success of social networking is, in the end, driven by individual decisions and activity.

My biggest concern right now is that sales teams are under-utilizing social networks or using only a fraction of their true business-building power. We've seen this before, when “breakthrough” products like Microsoft Word and Excel entered the market, for instance.



So, my counsel to sales forces everywhere is this: Be pro-active. Get involved ahead of the pack – especially before procurement managers start deploying social networks and begin to box you in.

Taking full advantage of social networking systems today means equipping sales reps with the skills they need to be successful in a 2.0 world. Those skills include:

- Bringing deep technical expertise to the table
- Learning continuously
- Understanding the buyer’s industry, competitors and buying processes thoroughly
- Communicating the problem-solving value of your solution
- Zeroing in on the metrics that matter most to a customer’s business
- Applying practical wisdom and real-world experience to sell smarter
- Collaborating intra-organizationally
- Building rapport and strong relationships
- Grasping global business practices
- Driving a steady stream of relevant, timely and helpful conversations with customers—important, because many complex solution sales take such a long time to close.

In a nutshell, today’s sales force has to add more consultative skill to the products and services it is positioning and selling in this new era of social networking.

Previously, you could get away with providing customers with a list of your offerings, and the purchases would somehow magically take place before the end of the month. But things are very

different, and hardly as cut and dried, in today’s knowledge economy.

Take digital cameras, for example. There are scores of models, features and pricing packages. And you need to understand where and why the customer will use the cameras—how they fit into his or her overall life or business. To make a compelling sale in this market, you need practical wisdom. You’re not going to convince a prospect with a PowerPoint presentation that comes right out of an old-fashioned sales training seminar.

Traditional sales training just isn’t as powerful anymore. Why? Because customers know so much, thanks to the Internet. In fact, it’s probably not overstating things to say that there’s very little that’s not known, or that can’t be found on the Web. Just look at Zillow, Edmunds, or Expedia, for example. There are legions of online sites—like Amazon—that give customers instant feedback and detailed service ratings.

The take-away here is that sales teams have to be wiser than their customers—and that’s not easy in today’s world of rich, abundant, accessible and real-time content, which is constantly flowing on social networks.

Technology can help a sales force learn, though. And it can help companies get their sales messages out there in potent and profound ways, too. Take Mercedes Benz, for example, which has equipped each member of its sales team with an iPad; or SAP, which just bought 2,500 iPads for its sales people. These new digital tablets from Apple are the



front-end of business intelligence, and they allow a sales force to acquire and disseminate real-time knowledge to close a deal—whether it’s a luxury automobile or enterprise software.

iPads aren’t the only mobile devices that offer learning solutions to sales people. Smart phones can also bring the right knowledge to a sales force at the right time in the sales cycle.

And so many elements of gaming can be integrated into this process, as well—particularly because sales teams are so competitive, and will have to become even more aggressive as the current decade unfolds.

The sales winners between now and 2020, then, will be those who courageously make the move and take the leap into social networks, mobile devices, and gaming. These are the new persuasive tools of tomorrow, and they’re rolling out in the marketplace today.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darin Hartley is a 20-year training industry veteran. A published author, Darin’s fourth and most recent book *10 Steps to Successful Social Networking for Business* was published in April 2010 (ASTD Press). Darin frequently keynotes national and international learning and training conferences and is currently a member of the Board of Directors for the ASTD Certification Institute. Presently, he is a Director of Client Management for Intrepid Learning and can be reached by email at dhartley@intrepidls.com.