

Managing the Sales Ecosystem

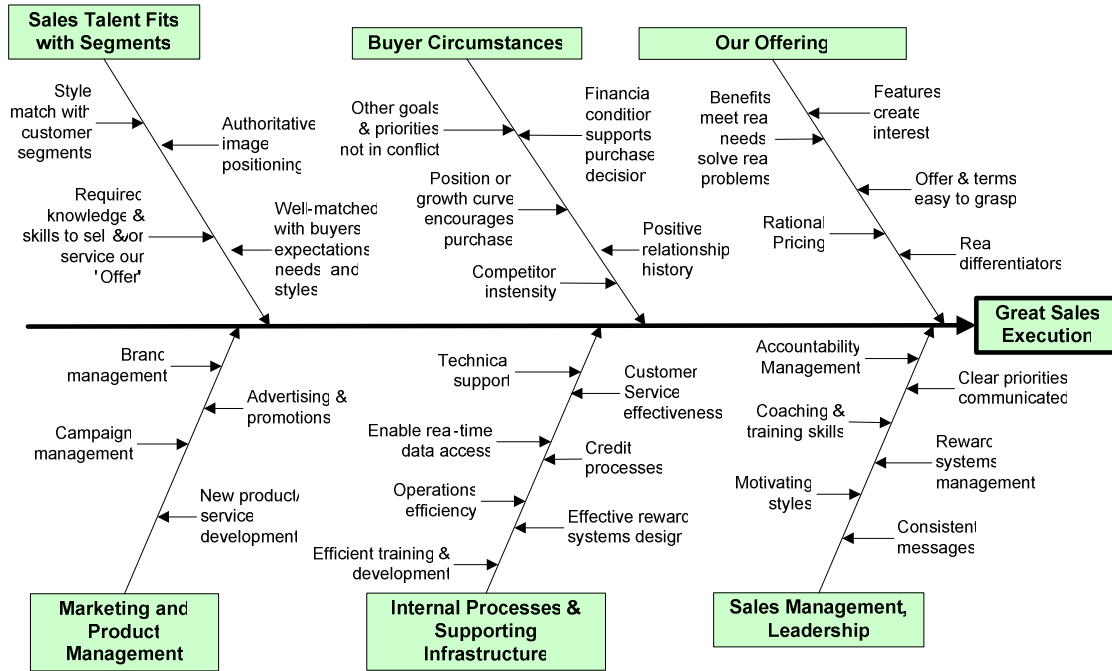
I have a few unshakable conclusions about what's required for consistently superior sales execution. Thirty-eight years' experience with more than forty sales teams from a dozen industries has taught me the value of a high-performing sales ecosystem.

“What ecosystem,” you ask? Picture the glass bubble, the fully enclosed habitat in which organisms are born, develop, and thrive without ever leaving. All that's needed is contained within: a complete ecosystem. For consistent execution leading to high levels of sales performance, sales people at all points along the talent continuum must have a high-functioning, well-developed sales ecosystem around them.

A few years ago I developed a visual aid to help clients be more aware of the impacts and connections in the typical sales world. At the time, I used a fishbone diagram (i.e., “cause-and-effect”) common in quality improvement programs. It depicts what can be thought of as the essential elements of a sales ecosystem (see Figure 1).

As a management consultant, my main interest is in the formulation and effective execution of business strategies. These consulting engagements typically call the sales group into play since that is where execution succeeds or fails – at the point of customer contact. Frequently, I find execution weaknesses to be not with the talent base but with the supporting elements that are supposed to enable the talent to execute effectively. As Douglas McGregor noted, performance is a function of individual and environmental variables; and most commonly I find the environmental variables are what hinder superior sales execution.

Figure 1: The Essential Elements of A Sales Ecosystem



©Jeslen Corporation
 www.jeslen.com
 No reproduction without prior permission

To illustrate McGregor’s point and my own findings, here is just one instance from many years ago with a large industrial chemicals company. In brief, the management complaint was that the sales force was ineffectual generating new accounts. They could sell new and existing products into their current accounts, but signing up new accounts was a real weakness.

Management had settled upon conducting sales training for the entire group. This was to be a series of workshops and all of the hundreds of salespeople would rotate through over several months. The Training and Development Department was happily developing content, evaluating instructors, and planning schedules. The sales people themselves had begun the expected grouching. We had done other work for this client, and

one executive asked that we look over the proposed plan, instructional design, expected outcomes, etc. “Just give me an objective outsider’s view – does this look like we’re on the right track?”

I suggested we take just a week to interview a dozen sales people in the field. “Give me samples along the talent continuum: four top performers, four average, and four at the lower end. We’ll go out to work with them for a half-day each and let’s confirm what’s really happening.”

The results, in brief and paraphrasing what we drew from the interviewees, were these:

- Sales people could make their budgets and bonuses without signing new accounts: neither of these mechanisms was structured to pay off for, or require, new accounts – “so why go through the hassle if I don’t have to?”
- Internal processes were punitive: “I sign a new account and make promises about our service, and then it takes weeks for credit approvals and paperwork. The account is screaming about first shipments, and I look and feel ridiculous. When they fix the internal processes I’ll sign more new accounts.”
- “Have you seen our sales aids and materials? They’re all aimed at existing customers. We don’t have impressive things to use with potential accounts. And demonstrators or samples? Forget it. We’re told they’re too expensive.”

Training hundreds of sales people in “New Account Selling” would have wasted hundreds of thousands of dollars and weeks of valuable time. The answers were elsewhere in the sales ecosystem. That does not mean some salespeople would not have benefited from that training; but the key word there is “some.”

Great execution depends just as heavily upon the variables around the sales individual as it does upon the individual's ability to execute at the point of customer contact. Granted, every sales force, like every group of performers in the world, is distributed along a continuum of talent (whether bell-shaped or skewed one way or the other) The superstars will accomplish more with less support, while those at the back end of the curve may be more reliant upon supporting elements. But regardless of degree, all group members are dependent on the sales ecosystem.

For sales executives, this means paying constant attention to the major and minor elements of their company's sales ecosystem. Talented sales leaders tend to these elements as a regular part of their weekly routine. They continually look for ways to enhance them. The most reliable means to do this is to seek feedback from sales people as to what's working and what isn't, and to solicit specific recommendations for improvements. High performing groups do this continually, both casually (i.e., phone conversations, ride-along's, call reports) and in highly structured formats (i.e., written surveys, formal interviews, consultant evaluations).

Granted, there are elements in any sales ecosystem that cannot be changed at times. Be frank and tell the team that. Provide no false hopes, which only create cynicism. And choose the priorities carefully: they should always be set in terms of which targets will provide the greatest upside leverage, not in terms of which are easiest, fastest, or cheapest to accomplish. A talented team appreciates the difficulty of tackling difficult projects; it disrespects the window dressing of resources put against low-value opportunities.

Three Suggestions

1. I urge you to customize the elements in the fishbone diagram to fit your organization's sales ecosystem. There is no cookie-cutter that works with all sales organizations, and personally, we're not believers in

“packaged programs.” Tailoring is vital because every organization has its own culture, history, style, and priorities.

2. Use the diagram with your group – after you’ve engaged them in helping to flesh it out – as a discussion tool, a vehicle to drive toward a consensus on the highest-value change targets and opportunities for improvement. Make this a regular “fishing trip” for you and your team.
3. Conduct your own annual “audit” of the sales ecosystem. Do it as part of the budgeting process, or the business planning process, to uncover the obstacles to sales success and remove them.