



Sales Competencies

What are the competencies involved in creating demand in complex selling environments?

What should I be focusing on with skills training?

What skills training should I be doing for my less/more experienced sales and pre-sales support people?

What new behaviors will take my sales force to the next level?

To answer these questions in your own unique situation requires some sense of the competencies that are needed for success in your own complex sales campaigns. With these in hand, you can then conduct a gap analysis – formally or informally – to begin to figure out which gaps present you with potential for the greatest return on your skill development efforts.

Our Sales Competency Model is an attempt to provide you with such a competency framework.

Go through each of the components of the model and see if you view this as a relative strength or a weakness of your own sales team.

First, consider the cornerstones of the model – those at the bottom left and right side of the model triangle.

While not specifically selling competencies, they are included consciously – failing to provide either the enabling leadership support or the enabling marketing support will, at best, limit the impact of your skills development efforts or, at worst, render them temporary and/or largely ineffectual. We'll come back to these two cornerstones later.

Detailed descriptions of each competency are below.



SALES COMPETENCIES

SELF-MANAGEMENT. In the center of the base of the triangle are self-management skills. In this category are those behaviors and processes need to ensure that the sales person's own personal energies remain available to focus on the customer and the competition.

Specifically important here are those needed to maintain a balanced orientation to both the short and the long terms goals, to self-manage energy levels during the inevitable difficult market conditions and the certainty of losing important and energetically pursued sales campaigns.

Also important here are the general skills of managing the stress levels of the long hours, heavy travel, and uncertainty of the outcomes that come along with the job. Given the entrepreneurial nature of many sales roles, personal resiliency is a critical success factor in many, if not most, sales and pre-sales roles.

While many people look to hire this competency as they attract experienced and successful people for this role, it is important to recognize that even the most experienced people burnout, reach career plateaus where they get bored and lose focus, or develop a 'book of business' that requires minimal effort to deliver consistent results.

INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCE. Also found at the base of the model are the interpersonal skills. With all the focus on the technology, the science, the products and services, and the intricacies of the financial analyses and the business value propositions, it is possible to lose sight of a simple fact – this is still a people business.

While the impact of the interpersonal relationship varies across industries and different selling environments, the skills involved in helping people rapidly become comfortable with you are always important. The ability to rapidly assess and understands the individual style preferences of key people in the customer organization will almost always provide advantage to the sales person with the superior skills. The sales person who can rapidly adapt to these preferences will generally be afforded earlier access to information and insights than the competition, as well as access potentially to different people than the competition.

As people, decision-makers are persuaded more readily by people with whom they are comfortable, than they are by those with whom they are not.

The decisions that we are attempting to influence are often guided by financial and factual analysis, and yet are always shaped and shaded by emotions and perceptions that are attached to relationships with the people who present the arguments.

All things being equal, the advantage will always go to those with the more sophisticated interpersonal skills.

COMPANY OFFERING. The third skill set at the base of the competency model is what is perhaps the most common focus of sales training – the product or company offering. In fact, in many environments, this IS the sole subject of sales training.



We see this sole focus on product training as a remnant of a time is one where the sales team was viewed as largely as a *transportation* function – carrying marketing messages and product features and benefits out to the customer, who will most certainly buy once they understand these feature sets and compare them to the competition.

The web has likely forever altered the value of this transportation function of the sales team. The way in which customers acquire product feature, function and application information has clearly changed.

The sales team is no longer the conduit of this basic product data; this role has been taken over by the search engine and browser.

Today, customers often know more about you and your products than you know about them – in the first meeting! Visit your own website – see how true this can be today.

In addition, for virtually any application area of process, there exist hundreds if not thousands of sites, blogs, white papers and forums – places where the motivated can readily access advice, user experience, and even vendor ratings in minutes.

The implication is that the value of the reactive, order-taking sales person playing the traditional basic information provider role is diminishing rapidly, if not gone already, and thus product training needs to evolve as well.

Today, your customer-facing teams' command of the key features and functions of your offering is 'table stakes' – a minimum expectation of the customer.

In order to compete successfully in complex selling, the sales team now needs to have command of the customers environment, of the different business and technical processes that are impacted by the offering, and of the way in which the customer measures the efficiency and effectiveness of these processes.

In order to do this effectively, a sales person also has to have some understanding of the terminology, acronyms, and of the basic technical or scientific processes most relevant to the customer's environment.

To be competitive today, the sales team needs to have a deep understanding of the differentiated impact of their offering on the customer's business and processes – topics often beyond the scope of the more common "product training" agenda.

CUSTOMER ECOSYSTEM. We often challenge sales people to differentiate themselves by who they are, what they know, and by how they do business. This is a differentiation strategy that will insulate them from the inevitable variance in price, product, and market superiority that the professional sales person experiences over quarters, and across the product line.

An understanding – even a cursory understanding – of the ecosystem in which a customer operates their business is, in many cases, one of the best ways to differentiate oneself.



By “ecosystem” we mean an understanding of the client’s key customers and their demand drivers, and of the critical factors for success in their specific place and time in the market.

Understanding the ecosystem also means having a conversational understanding of the customers’ key competitors and their unique advantages and disadvantages, as well as of the alternative technologies and approaches with which they compete for customer share.

In many markets, this also means an understanding of the regulatory environment in which they and their customers operate, and in others, a sense of the pricing and availability issues associated with the key input materials from which the customers build their products and services.

The sales person who has the superior understanding of the customer’s ecosystem will always be in a better position to be viewed as a source of value-add by the customer.

CONSULTATIVE SKILLS. At the core of the demand creation process will always be found the skills and processes needed to discover, create, and communicate value – the consultative skills.

Selling value requires engaging with both people and with problems and opportunities. Sales and pre-sales people need to work both efficiently and consciously to create relationships where they are trusted to discover value.

The ability to do the discovery needed to understand what will be perceived as true value is a function of credibility and the trust-level attained with a particular buying influence.

Experience has taught us that the Discovery competency is the most important competency of all to create demand and sell value. And while there are sales people who are naturally gifted at developing relationships, Discovery is clearly a learned competency.

Discovery has both strategic and tactical elements. Strategically, selling value requires Discovery that goes beyond the comfortable area of product. Tactically, exploring these areas means asking different kinds of questions of different people about different kinds of issues than many sales people are accustomed to asking.

Selling value requires the sales team to target their Discovery across the various Domains that drive decision-making – not just the product-oriented, technical domain, but also the business, personal and political domains that may eventually turn out to be equally important – if not more important – decision drivers.

In addition to the Discovery domains, there are a number of elements of the customer perspective that need to be explored in order to understand the full scope of the customer’s decision-making environment, as *they* see it. Beyond the simple discussion of the situational issues, it is important for the sales person to understand what happens if no decision is made or action taken. Without such insight, qualifying a potential opportunity from a business perspective is nearly impossible. If you cannot identify the negative consequences for maintaining the status quo – there is likely no real motivation for the kinds of changes to their business in which you are interested.



Successfully selling value also requires a focus as well on 3 other points of customer perspective – obstacles, preferences, and expected results. By focusing Discovery in these points of customer perspective, sales people gain insight into wants and needs across all four domains – insights that should help shape how to configure and position the offering.

With such a comprehensive, mutual Discovery in place, the sales team is then in the advantageous position of being able to make an extremely relevant recommendation – one that relates not just to what the customer should by, but beyond that to what the customer should do to address their issues.

In addition, with this comprehensive Discovery, the sales team again finds itself in a position of advantage when it comes to negotiating the committed decision – a deep understanding of what is considered “Value” in this specific customer situation. Such understanding can have a profound impact on the sales teams’ ability to develop a mutually satisfactory agreement while marginally improving the value you derive back from the customer.

STRATEGIC PROCESSES. A set of sound, coherent strategic processes will amplify or muffle the effect of a highly skilled sales team. Disciplined and streamlined processes free up the sales team for more customer-facing, demand creation time while at the same time replicating more of the best practices that the organization knows to be associated with success.

At the front end of any demand creation process is the acquisition of customers. Organizations with well managed customer acquisition processes feed their sales teams – both direct and indirect – with warm, quality prospects for whom the relationship development investment will have a high return.

These leads and prospects will often be pre-qualified, and often with sufficient initial discovery information that the field can smoothly continue and elevate the discovery, rather than beginning the conversation with blank text fields.

Deal, or opportunity management process is, for many, the core of their competitive advantage. Organizations with disciplined opportunity management process spend focused energy ensuring clear and organized thinking about developing and exploiting advantage in their key competitive pursuits – and about walking away from those pursuits where their advantage cannot be found or developed.

The active disengagement from pursuits where there is no advantage is not a common occurrence in the typical sales organization.

In defiance of logic, and where there exists no disciplined process, the vast majority of sales teams will persistently invest scarce resources in pursuits where even they cannot articulate their advantage – frequently then bemoaning the scarcity of time, money, people, and resources to pursue other deals.

In the best practice organizations, the opportunity management discipline is the standard way of doing important deals – an asset of the organization – much like the Chart of Accounts in the finance organization – a company process, not a sales person’s decision.



Once a deal meets the process requirements or exceeds a certain threshold, the organization's expectation for the quality and clarity of thinking and activity rise, and in some, the expectations includes both the documentation and sharing of the pursuit strategy with others for feedback and support.

In many ways the most strategic of processes is the account management process – strategic in the sense that both the engagement investment required and the engagement return potential are considerable. The time, money, and energy to acquire, develop, and then maintain and grow a large strategic account relationship – always in the face of continuous and sustained competitive pressure – would seem to demand a commensurate level of disciplined strategy and planning.

Instead, one often finds either periodic 'account review' sessions that consist largely of a backward looking history lesson, charts and graphics that quantify that history, and then a wide ranging and colorful story told by the ever-hopeful account managers, highlighted by the results that could be achieved with a different set of product capabilities and more resources.

In best practice organizations, the account relationship itself is considered a corporate asset, with the sales team as the current stewards of that asset. The account planning process itself involves – at a minimum – developing a deep insight into the business plans, priorities, and processes in the account, an understanding of the account organization as a political decision-making entity, a careful mapping of your complete offering over the different parts of the account organization, and a coordinated effort to map people in your own organization.

Lastly, there is no such thing as a *successful* unmanaged sales process. Best practices organizations manage and metric these processes in order to implement continuous improvement.

EXECUTIVE ENGAGEMENT. The customer decision about whether to invest in our solution or some competitive alternative is made, in many of our sales campaigns, several levels higher in the customer organization than our traditional calling patterns have us situated.

In these campaigns, we need to carry our value propositions directly into those decision-makers, or remain vulnerable to a competitor who is doing so.

We need to meet and communicate directly with the executive decision-makers. And yet, these are the very meetings that cause the most anxiousness in the vast majority of sales teams.

It is almost axiomatic that sales people are creatures of comfort, and generally will avoid conversations that are uncomfortable.

Conversational comfort with executives requires an understanding of the language of executives – finance.

There is no escaping the fact that finance is the universal language of business. The reason that Lou Gerstner could go from running a credit card company – AMEX – to running a cookie company – RJR Nabisco – to running IBM is that he understood deeply the universal language of business.

As sales people, we need not have an MBA in order to understand the relevant numbers that are used to drive the customer's business and help us identify issues, priorities and potential areas of concern. While one can argue that business acumen builds over time, the basic finance language needed for a sales person to sell value to executives can be learned in a relatively short amount of time. And should be.

Once some conversational comfort with the financial language has been reached, people still need to develop the skills and processes to gain access to the executives – without alienating their existing contacts to whom they'll need to return to implement.

In addition, sales people quickly realize the need for vastly different preparation for the executive conversation – their due diligence process needs to change dramatically in order for that first conversation to be rewarded with return access.

Some say that these executive engagement skills and processes are relevant only to their top major account managers.

This thinking may cause a missed opportunity in the mid-market, where competitive pressure is often a bit less and margins often a bit higher. In your smaller, mid market accounts, the likelihood that your sales team will interact with a customer executive is actually higher – they are more readily accessible – and the need for these skills in these teams is real.

ENABLING LEADERSHIP AND MARKETING. Earlier, we described sales leadership and marketing support as the cornerstones of the skills development effort in complex selling environments.

The first and second level sales management is the critical success path to any rapid, successful skills development effort. To borrow from Lou Gerstner "you must inspect what you expect". While senior management can set expectations, sales management must have the skills and incentive to inspect the right day-to-day behavior, 'catch people doing something right', and have the tools to recognize and reward the right behavior on the spot. They must also have the courage to identify those who simply cannot scale to this type of selling, and manage them into new positions or out of the business.

Almost ubiquitous in technology businesses, the output of the marketing organization is largely about product features, functionality, and benefits, necessarily in a one-to-many fashion. It is rare to find marketing output that supports the sales teams' search for relevant problems and issues, the industry and domain expertise needed to understand those problems, and the articulation of the technical, operational, and business impact of solving those problems.

Best practice marketing organizations accelerate the skills development effort by providing the informational support needed for the new skills, saving the sales team's time and making the learning curve steeper.



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