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BUILDING A RESILIENT SALES FORCE

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Everyone appreciates a durable product. We like it when we buy a quality item, and it lasts for a long time and if applicable, provides us with excellent service. On a much larger scale, investors appreciate durable businesses that provide long-term, sustainable returns on their investment. Moreover, as an investor, you know that discovering durable companies has become increasingly difficult over recent years.



In that same vein, finding long-term employees has also become a more significant issue in recent years. It seems like as fast as you find a qualified new hire, they are gone. Employee turnover is a burning issue today. Most companies make a significant investment in training and providing other resources for new employees, and obviously, the longer an employee stays with the business, successfully performing the job, the better. This is especially true when it comes to the sales team. Unfortunately, when a salesperson leaves, it creates a disruption within the company, since the former salesperson most likely had special relationships with current customers, prospects, and referral sources. Yes, sales personnel turnover continues to be a real problem for many companies.

So even if a current member of the sales team is successful for a while, the question is, will they continue to produce

results month after month, quarter after quarter, year after year? Unfortunately, in many cases, the answer is "No." A salesperson may stop producing results after a relatively short time - they are not durable. They are a "flash in the pan," so to speak - a spark in the beginning, but any success is short-lived. Some say a "flash in the pan" refers to a gold prospector's pan, however, this saying originally was about a flintlock musket which had a small pan that held charges of gunpowder. An attempt to fire the musket, where the gunpowder flared up, yet no ball (or "bullet") fired, was a "flash in the pan." Yes, many salespeople are like a flash of gun powder - puff they're gone.

What is a durable salesperson? It's someone with long-term staying power, producing excellent results for a company, not just for a year or so, but for many years, perhaps decades. Yes,

even for an entire career.

Why is it so hard for someone to have a long-term career in a sales position with just one company? In a word, burnout. A salesperson starts a job with a company, reaches a measure of success, is meeting the company's performance standards, and over time he fizzles out.

So, what causes this burnout and what can organizations do to improve the resilience of their sales force?

One reason for burnout among salespeople is "battle fatigue," which is caused when multiple obstacles come at the salesperson simultaneously. Let's face it - sales, like many other jobs, has repetitiveness as well as an unpredictable schedule at times, and eventually this effects the salesperson's mental well-being. Since some products remain virtually unchanged, the presentation never

varies. The salesperson delivers the same presentation over and over, to the point that he often imagines himself saying it in his sleep. Another factor adding to this stress is sales quotas. Having a quota is completely necessary, and some industries are stricter in this area than others, but the pressure of hitting sales performance numbers can eventually weaken a salesperson and contribute to this decline. In many cases, the pressure to reach one's sales goals causes the salesperson to work endless hours. Yes, another problem is the failure to have the right business/work-life balance.

After a brief consideration of these points, you probably would agree that they are some of the primary reasons for sales personnel burnout and contribute to the decline in durability.

What then, are some practical solutions to this complex issue? At times, companies will use motivational presentations to keep their team primed. Like many others, I think that motivational information can be encouraging, and I love to hear a great inspirational speaker. Over the years, I have listened to dozens of presentations - from the late John Wooden of UCLA basketball fame to Mark Victor Hansen and a few years ago, I had the privilege of listening to a speech by Mark Speckman, currently the Assistant Head Coach for the UC Davis Aggies football team at the University of California - Davis. He gives an insightful presentation on using one's potential. You see, Mark was born without hands and not only did he grow up playing football, he later became a football coach. Understandably, his presentation is awe-inspiring. Even though these types of presentations can be very moving, they will not necessarily prevent a salesperson from suffering burnout and leaving a job. Why? Because motivation soon wears off and the individual reverts to the previous deep-seated feelings of exhaustion.

Like many other adversities, there is not just one single answer, but rather it requires a combination of strategies to combat the problem. Most likely, the issues that caused the burnout and sales fatigue were rooted in improper thinking and had little or nothing to do with physical stamina. So, solving the

problem requires an awareness of and support towards the mental attitude of the individual members of your sales team.

THE SCIENCE AND ART OF SALES

If someone has a habit of never learning anything new, it may lead to stagnation in any profession and not surprisingly, occupational burnout. In my years of experience, I know how important it is for organizations to keep their salespeople stimulated with intellectual growth opportunities. One way to challenge your salespeople is to emphasize the sales process as well as the understanding of the practical activity encompassing the systematic structure of selling and the expression of and creative imagination of how to perform the job, in other words, the science and art of sales. Since sales is the "influencing people" business and people are complicated, there is always a lot to learn when it comes to the sales process. Providing resources that focus on the science and art of sales will buoy a salesperson when they are undergoing adversity and provide the proper tools to hone their skills as it relates to the mindset of a potential customer whereas emotional motivation may only be a short, feel-good moment in time.

OUTCOMES

Another strategy for creating long-term salespeople is to give attention to how the salesperson is helping each customer achieve their goals as it relates to the use of the product or service they are selling. Stressing the positive outcomes of current customers, and perhaps even how they improve a customer's life, yes, focusing on the benefits of this aspect of the job is an effective strategy which may keep a salesperson passionate and on the job for many years. Think about it - if a salesperson focuses on how he helps his customer, then this influences his motives. This approach transforms the "I sold someone else" ho-hum mentality to "I just helped another person solve a problem with my solution." Self-satisfaction has a significant impact on the durability of the sales team.

MOTIVATION

Now, back to the subject of motivation. I agree that motivation needs to be offered periodically to sustain

salespeople. However, the best motivation is the method that includes moral suasion - providing essential reasons for one to continue to do their job. Some industries lend themselves to this better than others and can bring moral motivations to their salespeople. If your organization can use motivation along with moral suasion, you will strengthen your salespeople.

THE SALES PIPELINE

In addition to the above points, managing the sales delivery process is a top priority. I wrote the article "Managing Your Sales Pipeline," which drills down on this subject, explaining how to accomplish it. A salesperson cannot work behind schedule all the time. They must learn how to work the sales pipeline properly, so they are not always chasing sales quotas. Chasing quotas only adds to the stress.

BALANCE

The goal is to be as productive as possible, but the right work-life balance is a necessity. This is a problem in general for many people, but by its nature, the sales profession is very intense, especially if someone is performing with a lot of passion. If an individual is not balanced, they will ultimately burn out. If we think that an employee should be available at the snap of the fingers, or on-call, or work long periods without breaks, we are most likely going to be continually hiring new salespeople. Yes, successful people have an appropriate work-life balance, which includes spending time with friends and family, relaxation, hobbies, and various other interests. In the article "The Importance of Achieving Work-Life Balance and How to Do It" by Susan M. Heathfield, she states that "happy employees, whose needs for work-life balance are achieved, tend to stay with their employer and are more productive."

So, after considering some of the issues that lead to occupational burnout or transitory employment and solutions to combat it, I think you can see that this is not a simple matter with one easy answer. It takes a coordinated effort to counteract this problem. However, with proper planning, you can nurture a resilient sales team.