

The word on the street is that we are in the middle of a tough economy. Some even say that we are involved in a recession and that sales are tougher to come by now than they have been in many years. With fuel prices soaring, commodity pricing all over the board, the financial markets in upheaval, and the real estate markets still reeling, many companies, in a lot of different industries, are trying to *recover from slumping sales*.

If your sales organization is trying to “right the ship” and get sales production back on track, here are FIVE key areas on which to turn your attention:

1-Attitude and Belief

“When fear and uncertainty are more commonplace in the customer’s mind, as they are in tougher economic times, it is imperative that the sales professional counters this with a strong level of confidence and credibility.”

Is it harder to sell today than it was two years ago? Most salespeople today would undoubtedly say yes! (I don’t necessarily agree---unless you are selling the same way you were last year!) Prospects and customers are facing challenges that force their thinking to be more reserved and risk averse. There seems to be less money available and more focus on pricing than in recent years. Salespeople are getting kicked in the teeth every day with pricing demands and *perceived commoditization*! There seems to be fewer buyers and more stress from management to increase sales!! In fact, today it is very easy to become a VICTIM of the “perfect storm” many of us face.

The number one area of focus for salespeople (and thus, those who lead them) must be on ATTITUDE. In tougher economic times, the attitude and belief of our sales team needs to move up a notch to counter the negativity and challenges that they face. Attitude tends to drive the sales skills that are necessary for success. Attitude usually defines both quality and quantity of activity—both VERY important in slower times.

Here are a few ideas to give your people a “shot in the arm” and to drive that attitude and belief up:

- No VICTIMS!—Make it a policy to only discuss solutions and NOT problems. Those who feel underwater (overwhelmed) typically are not far from drowning.
- READ—Your people need to *feed their minds* with the right stuff to counter all of the doomsday things that they hear and experience in the media and the marketplace every day. Start a sales book of the month club and stick to it.
- SHARE SUCCESSES—Don’t allow your team to get too mired down in the problems of the day. Talk about WINS twice as much as you discuss losses. Learn from all of them.
- TRAIN TO GAIN—Don’t fall into the trap of pulling back investment during slow times—that’s what their customers are doing. Get your people off-site and get their focus back on themes such as “WE CAN!” Consider retaining an outside speaker/trainer (I might know a good one) to facilitate and drive the message!

2-People and Performance

It is a reality that a more challenging sales environment separates the winners from the losers. That may not be a politically correct statement but it is true! I find that when times get tougher, there are many (MANY) salespeople who roll up the proverbial sidewalks and hope to “weather the storm.” There are a few, however, that take full

advantage of this fact and use the tougher times to get closer to their top customers AND their top prospects by working harder and adding significant VALUE! That is the type of ACTION that you need to have on your team now.

It is easy to hide when sales are going well. I am of the belief that many industries (real estate, mortgage, financial services) are coming off of several years of irrational well-being which allowed for many salespeople to “pick the low hanging fruit” from the tree. If this recent *shift* in our markets finds your salespeople *fruitless*, you may need to take a good look at them. The fruit is still in the tree, we simply need to climb a little higher to get to it. Are your people willing to do so?

If things are not getting done today, there are only two reasons: Either they CAN'T do it or they WON'T do it! In either case, you need to address the issue:

CAN'T = Re-training opportunity. Define a clearer track for your people to run on. Be clear with your expectations and performance standards. Define the “*how to do*” and “*why to do*” as much as you tell them “*what to do!*” Once the training is clear, it is up to the individual to perform. If they continue to be *unable* to accomplish minimums, you have a duty to do something about it. Tough times are no time to hold onto those who cannot!

WON'T = Attitude problem. These people (attitudes) need to be dealt with very decisively. Turning your head and hesitating to cut bad attitudes from the team in tough times is a kiss of death. Go back and re-read the above paragraphs on the importance of belief and attitude that increase in tighter economic times. Usher the bad attitudes and victims off your team ASAP!

Remember the old saying that states:

“If you can't, I'll TEACH ya—if you won't, I'll BEAT ya!”

3-Pricing Strategy vs. Value Strategy

Too often, I see many companies making concessions in their pricing models during tougher economic times. Due to the fact that our prospects and customers are more price sensitive, we often see price drops, term extensions and other similar negotiation dysfunctions. Although it is very natural for most people (ourselves *and* our customers) to believe that they *got a better deal* by paying less, we KNOW that instead of offering lower prices, we should be doing MORE for our customers! (Value-Add)

If your customers are anything like mine, most of them didn't wake up this morning excited to BUY or OWN your product or service. They do, however, have a desire to USE your product or service to accomplish *something!* What is THAT? More importantly, what is THAT *today?* Here are a couple of questions that you might ask yourself today?

- What do we do for our customers to help them succeed with our product or service?
- What do we do (or can we do) for our customers that our competition can't or won't?
- Are we adding value *in the minds of the customer?* Really?
- What is the *experience* that we deliver when a customer buys? How can we improve that in every area of the company?

- Where are the areas in our business that the customer is NOT getting taken care of or NOT feeling appreciated or important?
- If we lower price and cut margins today, how will we ever get them back tomorrow?
- P.R.I.D.E. = Profit is Relected in Daily Effort! Does our company (at every touch) exude that PRIDE that earns our margins?
- Do our customers feel more important when we drop price or when we help them succeed?

Don't lower price---instead, sell better, add value, and build customer loyalty!

4-Communication and Visibility

Many of the customers that we serve today are “battening down the hatches” and going into *defense mode* due to the economy. Many of our competitors are following suit; slowing things down, cutting back, visiting customers less, and trying to “watch the pennies” until these difficult times subside. It’s almost as if they are waiting for the next shoe to drop or counting the days until death. What an opportunity this affords us! Now is the time to OVER-communicate in your company—to let everyone know that we have the competition “on the run” and that we need to be sharp and more customer focused than EVER!

In addition, now is the time to truly “move the dial” on your (value-add) interaction with your customers. Now is the time to be more visible, more consultative, more focused on your customer than you have been in the past. Many of your customers are second-guessing every relationship, every vendor, and every decision made. Here are a few good questions to discuss within your team:

- How can we increase mind-share AND heart-share with our customers today?
- What do our customers VALUE most of all today? (Don't say low price!)
- What do our customers want to avoid more than anything today?
- How can we assist in this area? (Even if it has nothing to do with our products?)
- How can we become a part of the customer's culture this week?
- What *indecision, doubts, and fears* are my people experiencing today and how can we address & overcome them through communication?

When the going gets tough, the tough get going—but don't go invisible!

5-Activity and ACTION

Just as mentioned above, uncertainty in the marketplace can often lead to a wait and see approach to decision making. Too often, this can lead to Call Reluctance, hesitance, and indecision on the part of the salesperson. This results in even lower sales due to less opportunity because of fewer calls and prospect/customer interaction. Although this relates pretty heavily to the topic above, (communication and visibility) the willingness and ability to bust through your issues, your fears, and your indecision during tough times is absolutely imperative!

Many times, tough times bring about a SLUMP in sales. I define a SLUMP in an acronym:

S---Saying Negative Things—This occurs when you or your people spend too much time focusing on what is NOT happening rather than the *efforts necessary to change it*. This is a ticket directly to LOSERVILLE!

L---Laziness of Purpose---This is a loss of focus on “What you intend to be” that causes too much “what if” thinking and, thus results in no ACTION!

U---Undecided---Indecision is one of THE WORST things that results from a tougher economy (especially for a leader). There are three types of decisions: right decisions, wrong decisions, and NO decisions. Indecision KILLS a sales culture and a book of business. Make a decision and take ACTION---even if it is the wrong one, the decision to ACT *is* the right one!

M---Misdirected---When we are negative, unsure, and undecided, we have a major tendency to work on the *wrong* things. Although we remain *busy*, the fact is that *busy-ness doesn't translate to business!* Always stay focused on your highest and best use—especially during tougher times!

“Poor-Me” Attitude---Finally, the worst thing that a tough market can do to you or your people is to get you into the role of a VICTIM! This is a very difficult place to come home from so be steadfast in your focus to “catch yourself” and to “catch others” from going into the pity closet.

Pay attention to lack of activity, lack of focus, lack of attitude, and lack of belief within yourself and your team during these more challenging times. Each of these issues can (and often will) dig a deep hole from which it is tough to escape. Don't make issues worse by getting SOFT during this “recession.” Get clear, get focused, and get BUSY!