

Sales strategies in times of change



A conversation
with
**Dr. Michael
Ahearne**

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As the nation, and world, faces the most disruptive health and economic challenges most of us have ever seen, there is no shortage of speculation. How will my personal life change? How will the world change? What about my family? My friends? My job?

If you are a salesperson, or you support the sales effort in your organization, the only thing to be sure of is that things will be changing for you starting right now. In fact, they've already changed. No speculation required.

The tricky part is trying to anticipate the future. What will change in your industry? How best can you put yourself or a sales team in a position to bring the most value to your customers as the situation evolves?

To gain some insights into this challenge, Walter Ruckes, Vice President of Life Sciences at BI WORLDWIDE, spoke with Dr. Ahearne, a respected thought leader in the area of sales excellence and innovation. He is currently researching this topic with Dr. Jeff Johnson from the University of Missouri - Kansas City.

W. Ruckes:

Let's start with the current situation.

Any advice for selling in this unpredictable environment?

Dr. Ahearne: My advice is to know when to sell and when not to. Sales managers should be highly engaged with each salesperson's account strategy and targets. Salespeople need to be very sensitive to their customers' needs and be in sync with their customers right now. It can mean the difference between a long-term relationship and no relationship at all.

The research would show that sales organizations that held their sales teams together during hard times came out stronger. Holding your team together will allow you to react quickly as things change, such as the competitive landscape or the products and solutions that are needed by your customers and prospects.

It's even more important to retain your top salespeople, the stars. Your top performers, as leaders in the company, are very tied to your mission as an organization. Communication is vital. Why is the organization making decisions? What is our vision? What is the short- and long-term plan?

We also see many organizations using slow periods or downtime to sharpen skills, gain knowledge and prepare for the future. Ultimately these sales organizations should emerge with a strategic advantage over their competition.

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W. Ruckes:

In regard to future planning, what suggestions do you have for organizations formulating their plans right now?

Dr. Ahearne: The biggest thing is that leaders need to continue to revisit where they can best bring value to customers and communicate that to their sales teams. During the last economic downturn, almost three out of four salespeople reported a lack of an updated explicit value proposition in light of new environmental conditions. Either organizations didn't do it – or didn't share it with their sales teams.

Continuing to understand what is important to customers is always vital to a salesperson's success but it's even more important when things are changing so quickly. During unpredictable times, tactics like managing current relationships and ensuring successful delivery take center stage. Longer term, customers are likely to expect additional innovation and problem solving. So you can see the value proposition could continue to change rapidly over the coming 12-18 months.

“Continuously revisit where you can best bring value to customers and communicate that to your sales teams.”

W. Ruckes:

What else do you see changing?

Dr. Ahearne: If you do any kind of face-to-face selling, your world has already changed. Virtual meetings are vital to staying connected. Sales managers will need to continue to coach their teams on how to be successful in this environment. Reps will have to continually up their game when it comes to technology and the content they are sharing. It's vital to stay professional and connected in the months ahead.

Roles within the sales organization will also need to be re-evaluated. For instance, the role of inside sales could become much more important when your field sales force is unable to meet directly with customers. Sales enablement and operations functions are also key right now, ensuring reps have the latest and most actionable information. And even people not traditionally thought of as part of the sales process might become your best source of gathering information. For instance, an installer or delivery team member may be able to provide vital inventory information or customer feedback. They may even be able to generate leads or make add-on sales in the process.

Tracking and measurement will also become more important as we respond to the changing landscape. One successful approach to this is the concept of “Win the Week,” where you take bigger sales goals

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and break them into more manageable chunks. Or you could focus on activities that can be accomplished this week by the rep, building to longer-term success. This requires an engaged sales manager who is willing to work one-on-one with reps. Overall this can drive improvement across your organization, especially with core, or average, performers.

“ Take bigger sales goals and break them into more manageable chunks. ”

W. Ruckes:

Thinking beyond the sales function, any thoughts on other changes for organizations to consider?

Dr. Ahearne: It will be some time before companies are comfortable bringing a lot of people together in one place so staying connected will remain a challenge. Salespeople are natural connectors in an organization, spanning across multiple disciplines and boundaries. It's vital to keep them engaged to understand what's happening with customers and how the marketplace is changing. Communications need to be two-way: sharing information with the sales organization and gathering valuable information from them can give organizations a strategic edge in times of uncertainty.

Economic challenges can also lead to innovation so we encourage organizations to keep an open mind and really listen to the marketplace right now. Instead of hoping to return to “normal” we would suggest implementing changes to your structure, your products and your processes that work best with the new reality you are facing.

We are in for a lot of changes in the coming months. Organizations that make thoughtful adjustments to the way they gain and support customers are most likely to be successful in the long-term.

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