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I do a lot of sales training and I'm, firmly of the belief that sales is an art form. Yes there are certain procedures that work better than other approaches most of the time but the reality is that most sales situations require a blend of those 'best practice' sales approaches and it's in the blending that the art lies.

Now all of that being said there are some basic steps in sales which if missed or not done sufficiently will simply cripple your chances at being successful. What I find interesting is that top sales professions can be as guilty of committing these sins as rookies. (and frankly all of us in sales have at one time or another committed some if not all of them). The real trick is to ensure that you only make them occasionally and are aware of them when you commit them so you can then do something to fix them.

Or if you manage a sales team the trick is to ensure your sales people are being saints rather than sinners!

(Side note...I principally work with corporate sales people and recruiters so I tend to use the term 'decision maker' to denote the purchasing person. If you sell in the retail world or in some other capacity with private individuals then simply think 'buyer' or 'prospect' as you read the following)

So here they are in no particular order...

Failing to research sufficiently

In today's market the decision makers expect you to know about them and their situation. And it is necessary to prove it. The days of having a set packaged product and simply presenting to a customer are over. A sales person needs to have researched a decision maker's situation and be able to have a conversation with them about it.

Also, and this is a critical point, by researching their situation properly before the first contact, you are able to more specifically and accurately present your products or services. This makes for a powerful opening to the conversation and gives you a much greater chance of developing that conversation in the direction you want it to go.

Failing to prospect enough

This is also known as the 'not picking up the phone' sin. Frankly it doesn't matter how good you are at sales if you never phone or visit anyone. Sales is a contact sport and it needs to be played frequently. In the same way that a professional sport footballer might miss twenty shots at a goal during a match without those twenty misses they will never get to a place where they get one in the back of the net.

The footballer who only takes one or two shots is much less likely to score. A lot of sales people tell me that times are tough (As an aside - "When is it easy in sales?" I could reply but that's a discussion for another blog) and if reading this you are thinking the same then may I caution you to consider your sales activity...

How many first round calls did you make today...or yesterday?

Be honest about your own activity levels first and then consider how you can build them up.

I guarantee that in today's market, (indeed as always) the most active sales person has the greatest chance of success.

Failing to ask for the order

So you've made the call, had the meeting and done your presentation. That's great, and if I can return to the football analogue above that's put you in a prime position to shoot for goal. Now I'm not much of a football fan but I do know that when you have a shot at goal you take it. So why doesn't this always happen in sales? Well the answer is, on one level simple, fear of rejection. Psychologically by not asking for the sale a sales person avoids the potential of rejection. Sadly the consequence is lost orders.

When I talk about this sales sin to non-sales people they are always amazed that it happens but it does; a lot. Learn to embrace that final discussion and that final decision. If they say 'no' you can always talk about it. If you simply leave the ending open there is nothing you can do to influence the win. Grasp the nettle!

Failing to respect targets

I was always trained to respect targets yet more and more in the sales world today I see a relaxed attitude to them. Experienced people allowed to continually be under target which sets a trend for new individuals. I've run so many induction courses for clients where I have had to drum into new sales people the mind set of respecting targets only to have them turn around and point out that the experienced people in a company are under target.

It's like a cancer. Allowed to spread and it will cripple an organisation. Targets should be reasonable challenging and commercially viable with suitable incentives in place once they are exceeded.

The most successful sales and recruitment organisations that I have seen respect their targets and everyone is focused on achieving them. I've said for years that if a sales person doesn't know where they are against annual target then they are not serious about the job.

Failing to plan

Success in sales (or business for that matter) does not happen by chance. A sales person who is serious about being successful will have planned markets, approaches and strategies to increase their sales. This goes from long term strategies down to daily activity. Too few sales professionals optimise their working day or simply plan out what to do at what time. Bubbling through the day is a great way to fail yet it is the chosen route for so many people. A terrible sin.

Failing to practice

Now I'm a corporate trainer (sales, management, LinkedIn amongst other topics) so you might well expect me to list this as a deadly sin. But taking my professional bias out of the equation this is a genuine sin. Too many sales people will, for example, get a new product or service and listen to their manager explain to them what it can do for the clients. The sales person nods and then goes off without much more thought and might (or might not) bring it up in conversation with the next prospect they talk to.

On one hand good but on the other terrible. Where was the perfecting of the pitch? Where was the practise highlighting the features and benefit of the item? No one is brilliant at something new the

first time, rather the opposite. So it stands to reason then that a sales person would do well to practice their approach to market before doing it.

And this holds with everything - from describing their company to presenting their top product.

And no it doesn't just have to be role-plays (in fact I'm not very keen on them as a learning tool) but group discussions, one on one demonstrations, question and answer sessions, brain storming sessions and drafting and redrafting presentation points would benefit all sales professionals.

I know this is a common sin because when I run my sales training sessions delegates continually say things like 'Oh err...I never really thought about it...' tragic words when being asked questions about their main products or their own company.

Failing to learn

If you really want to excel in sales then get out there and make big mistakes...and learn from them. Nothing beats pitching and failing to present real learning moments. It's vital then that sales people are encouraged to review and analyse what happened when things didn't go as they wanted and then apply that learning going forward.

If a sales person can embrace a love of learning from failures then the fear of failure is diminished and making that next pitch will become easier.

If you fail to learn, or if you stop learning because you are 'experienced', then you are possible committing the greatest of all sales sins.

Until next time; be a saint!

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