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VOLUME 3 - ISSUE 3



The Customer-Focused CEO

theSales Performance Journal

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The Miller Heiman Sales Performance Journal, Volume 3, Issue 3

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It's impossible to ignore the difficulties organizations face in a troubled economy. Everyone is thinking out loud about what leadership strategies will march us past the trouble. One thing that's certain is the strategies that worked in prime market conditions will not work in the current economy.

This edition of the *Sales Performance Journal* challenges one of the most common excuses for why business was not won and asks whether your sales process includes the necessary steps for improved results. Plus, Miller Heiman founder, Bob Miller, points out what all CEOs should know regarding sales.

As we're coming into the final lap of 2008, this issue of the *Sales Performance Journal* presents some compelling food for thought. It's up to you to turn ideas into action and face the challenges we're all up against.

Regards,



Sam Reese
President and CEO, Miller Heiman Inc.

the customer-focused CEO

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Many sales professionals are convinced that price is scaring off customers but the real reason goes deeper. Don't let your sales force misinterpret customer feedback and jeopardize future opportunities. Discover the true culprit behind lost revenue to ensure the client is offered a more valuable solution so you can drop price issues from the equation altogether.



What CEOs Don't Know About Sales

by Bob Miller, Co-Founder, Miller Heiman

CEOs are highly respected in any organization. And for good reason. They take on leadership roles - forging ground into new territories, providing direction for the future of the company and making critical decisions that translate into action. But they don't know everything. Especially about sales.

Managing the company's bottom line is a top priority, but many CEOs do not come from a sales background, which leaves gaps in their understanding of how that bottom line is achieved.

In some organizations, executives may even view sales as a department tasked with a specific job - to churn out revenue because it is the salespeople's duty, what they were hired to perform.

For those CEOs who haven't spent significant time in selling, the sales department can be perceived as an organizational component from which they distance themselves. A minor detail of the organization that should remain left to its own devices.

Frontline sales professionals are the feet on the street, the instigators for action that are generating results and comprising the heart of the company's bottom line. The sales function is the fuel which drives the organization's engine. Not, as some CEOs still perceive a "necessary evil."

Because executives have the position, authority and influence to implement change and affect the direction of a company's future, an understanding of the role of sales is crucial. Are you the CEO that is steeped in the knowledge



of his or her organization's processes, or have you let things operate status quo, content to stay out of the equation?

Below, I have identified four specific areas of skewed perception I have repeatedly observed firsthand over the years. Decide where you sit and then decide whether it's necessary to take action to correct any notions in what you thought you knew.

They Don't Talk To The Customers Often Enough

In a sales organization, communication with the customer is crucial for closing successful sales and for developing long-term relationships. Sales organizations excel by focusing their energy around the customer's needs and determining how your solution can fit them. But C-Suite executives rarely join the conversation.

It's not necessarily an intentional omission, but rather an issue of timing and importance. An executive's time does not come in excess, so it's important to make sure it's allocated within the organization appropriately. At a minimum, C-Suite executives should regularly be involved face-to-face with key strategic customer accounts.

What They're Missing

An executive who doesn't have a channel for communication with his organization's customers lacks an important understanding of buyer habits. They miss out on what the customer truly wants and needs, and what hesitations exist. That critical information may have exposed an important call-out, hot trend, or key learning.

Additionally, communication with clients is the only way to learn how they are conversing with your sales force and, in light of that, how those conversations can be improved. These learnings may be applied to other areas

of the sales organization as well. This isn't to say that all executives should be involved in all or most calls. Those calls require a valid business reason for involving an executive.

It may feel risky for some executives to come down to a more operational level and expose themselves as a vulnerable business entity, as opposed to an untouchable executive, but the payoffs for gaining credibility with the client, additional insight, and a feel for client interactions within your realm of responsibility are immeasurable.

They Listen Only To Anecdotes

A top-performing sales representative joins his company's executive team to deliver a current status report of his largest key account. In the meeting, the executives learn that the sales representative had difficulties selling the solution, faced with the client's hesitation to accept the price. The sales rep recounts to the executive team that, after some difficult price negotiation, he was able to secure the sale, but with a discount. The executive team is left with an impression that perhaps many of the selling organization's sales representatives are discounting regularly.

What They're Missing

The Big Picture. Listening to only a few anecdotes about segmented cases doesn't provide an executive with an accurate picture of how the organization is operating. Based on this story, an executive may address his sales force to ensure representatives stop discounting. In reality, this could have been a case where the sales representative failed to understand what the customer truly wanted. Listening to anecdotes can initiate action, which often times doesn't address the actual problem. Stopping price negotiations doesn't get to the real issue – that sales representatives may not be uncovering what the customer truly needs.

They Don't Educate Themselves On Sales Issues

Albert Einstein once said, "The more I learn, the more I realize I don't know." An executive who has achieved a high position doesn't always possess flawless command of issues, challenges, cycles, and trends that apply to the market. The more a CEO learns about customer companies and their moving parts and internal nuances, a greater amount of knowledge to be tackled and mastered will present itself.

I have seen some executives who don't place high priority on keeping current with trends and challenges. Those were the executives who struggled. Understanding the ebb and flow of the market and how well the organization's sales force is equipped to ride out the tide is of paramount importance. Executives cannot afford to be ill-informed on the issues that directly affect their sales.

What They're Missing

The upper hand, the market advantage, and the heads-up. Knowledge is power, right? The reality of the sales world is that markets, while cyclical, often present trends. Though these trends may be fleeting, they may be capitalized on. An executive who doesn't stay current on sales trends may miss opportunities for initiatives or actions that align with his or her organization. It also means executives may not get out of the path of fire in time if they don't react quickly enough to stay ahead of a downturn or negative trend.

Staying uninformed amidst such a wealth of information (especially given the numerous vehicles to get it) leaves executives, and their companies, in the dark. How else will they know when standing by with the status quo is appropriate? How else will an executive recognize when change must occur?

They Don't Recognize Expertise Is Available And Should Be Accessed

Not every CEO makes a point to hold him or herself accountable for their actions. What the CEO says goes, and often at the cost of the entire organization. It's a behavior that perpetuates the notion that, regardless of consequences, their decisions are final. Because they are often the highest tier within an organization, people are constantly looking for their approval, their support, their go-ahead. Again, this only feeds the misconception that executives know all there is to know - but they don't. And they may be aware of it, but rarely take action to remedy this.

It is very important, if not critical, for an executive to understand that expertise must be accessed and incorporated into the structural operation for that sales organization to thrive and grow. Taking ownership of the necessity to do this will provide executives with a better idea of how to improve their organization to increase results, decrease costs, or minimize the effect of whatever challenge they currently face.

What They're missing

New perspective. Bringing an outside point-of-view into any situation can often highlight areas for improvement. It's why individuals in the midst of sticky situations often seek outside opinions from friends or confidants outside of the immediate circumstances. All too often CEOs bring forth their own experiences of similar situations from their past, which may be from five to ten years ago. With the rapidity of change occurring in business today, five years ago is a lifetime and several paradigms ago.

An outsider, because he or she is removed from the company, can often assess a set of events with a different mindset and cognitive process to arrive at refreshing conclusions. A professional consultation can bring a



wealth of experience, examples and case studies that can help an organization develop a stronger presence. Whether the source is internal, external, consultative, or the mere sounding board needed to bounce an idea off of, the benefits to hearing another take can benefit many areas of the organization.

The Customer-Focused CEO

The executive who doesn't talk to customers, takes anecdotal evidence as blanket fact, ignores current trends and stays away from consultation is the executive who can unknowingly steer his organization away from positive results. Executives who encourage growth for their organization by building healthy relationships with clients, uncover all the facts of their sales force operations, stay current with the market trends and conditions, and are not afraid to seek help from other sources are the executives who can truly deliver a lasting, positive affect on the organization. These are the executives who will relay through the strength of the company just how important the customer is. They are the customer-focused CEO. Are you? ■

About Bob Miller

Bob Miller co-founded Miller Heiman Inc. in 1978. Bob developed the initial *Strategic Selling*® program in the early 1970s and has continued to develop new content and relevant sales courses, all of which were incorporated into Miller Heiman, Inc. He continues to work full-time with Miller Heiman today in a consulting and advisory capacity, focusing primarily on product development.



Redefining the Sales Process

A Definition for Solid Results

“Close, close, close,” shouts the pounding rhythm of a turbulent economy. Organizations scramble to match the rapid pace of declining opportunities, feeling pressure to close sales and bring life-sustaining revenue to feed their bottom line. As experts speculate from afar on how long these less-than-ideal conditions will last, sales organizations fight to stay alive by attempting to operate leaner and meaner.

But just as the human heart can collapse from over-exertion, so too can sales organizations collapse when they push themselves too hard and too fast after minimizing operational resources.

Because those in leadership positions must protect and grow the health of an organization, they need to understand

that, where sales comprise the heart of a company, the sales process is the body through which the process and protocol must run. Without a sales process equipped to endure excellent, mediocre, or tumultuous economic conditions, an organization has little recourse but to fall short and risk crippling injury.

“In challenging market conditions, new business opportunities have a tendency to take a nose dive,” says Nattalie Hoch, Miller Heiman’s director of small to mid-market sales. “But quotas never fall.”

What type of economic condition is your sales process in tune for? What does your organization’s sales process look like? Is it clunky? Out of shape? Winded at the end of a short sprint? Or is it operating with the ability to adapt to



whatever condition the market throws at it – a finely tuned specimen ready for the inevitable hurdles, potholes or detours?

“Redefining the sales process carries two implications,” says Clark Owen, sales vice president for Miller Heiman. “The first is that it necessitates a deviation from the old definition. Originally, the process started with a clearly defined opportunity. Now it should begin with efforts to create opportunities. The second is that we must understand and incorporate people within the organization who should participate in well-defined upstream activities, regardless of department. For this to work, selling must be an organizational imperative, not just a sales force responsibility.”

It may feel counter-intuitive in the face of short-term pressure for revenue and operational belt-tightening to change the process in times of economic instability, but it is becoming a necessity. The notion that the sales process is defined by customer demand is a deceptive standard because it works in good economic conditions. But in weak economic times, it can be disastrous.

The human body has a profound ability to show symptoms of disorders within. The sales process also exhibits tell-tale signs of inadequacy, mostly reflected by the health of the sales funnel.

An inadequate number of opportunities within the funnel or numerous opportunities that don't come to fruition can clue sales leadership into this condition “In tough economic times, the sales funnel is either the bane of the sales organization or its strongest asset,” Owen continues. “It depends on how the funnel is used. Often, sales organizations define a healthy funnel as an X factor of the revenue goal. Three times, four times, etc. During good economic conditions, when demand is higher, companies accurately calculate funnel productivity, which validates this

concept, and then direct sales activities to maintain the size of the funnel. In market downturns, size no longer matters and this practice can lead to a sense of false security with respect to forecasting and revenue predictability.”

All symptoms logically point to a powerful diagnosis: the sales process, taken for years as the operating standard, is in need of new definition. Organizations that have found themselves in less-than-ideal circumstances are realizing there is too much time spent on sales that never come to fruition. But acknowledging this won't accomplish change. Organizations must take corrective steps to cut down unhealthy sales activities.

Owen comments that these symptoms can often be overlooked because of standard operating procedure, dismissed as rigid customer behavior and swept under the rug. “In tough times, sales organizations often get desperate and move away from the discipline and best practices that lead to higher wins,” Owen says. “The more we need the sales in the funnel to close, the less scrutiny is applied to determine whether they are winnable. The perception is that when we're involved in a regimented, competitive sale, it is somehow ‘the way it is.’ In reality, the opportunity wasn't a good fit in the first place.”

Owen believes that when something akin to an opportunity presents itself, the signs that point to whether it is winnable or not are often ignored. “The desire to win the deal and secure revenue to make quotas can cloud thinking. Sales professionals can fall into bad habits, shying away from assessing the criteria for ideal opportunities and simply gorging on what comes their way. They neglect to consider the value they can add to their customer's decision-making process and just react to what they ask for.”

Here is where the new definition of the sales process becomes most critical. Top-performing sales professionals don't react to customers, they are proactive. A redefined

sales process should include the steps that take both sales representative and customer to an outcome that is a mutual win. Incorporating a sales process that encompasses prospecting as its first activity can provide the foundation and discipline necessary to whittle the true excess away: wasted activity.

“Belt tightening impacts the resources used in the selling process to influence the sale,” says Owen. “Organizations insist their sales force immediately try to close business, and because it is so premature, the business doesn’t close. They’ve wasted resources that didn’t generate desired results.”

Why should companies let their lifeline diminish when the real culprit is a poorly defined sales process? With a process that begins much earlier than commonly perceived, an organization can put proper effort into choosing the prospects that warrant time and energy. Simply put, redefining the conventional sales process can improve opportunities to win.

Defining the Proper Sales Process

A sales process generates results. An efficient sales process, one that includes all the steps necessary to secure wins, generates consistently improving results. Because this redefinition requires a look at people involved in addition to process activities, sales leaders must understand who can contribute to a sale’s advancement. Owen believes that there are a number of people who can uncover opportunities who are not from traditional sales roles. “Employees from marketing, client services, engineering and product development can add great value to the sales process, and are often overlooked in its definition. These also include people who have contact with the client and can bring their own understanding of client needs to the table.”

Owen notes that those people, resources for account

information, are often taken away when organizations try to operate on less, leading to poor lead and funnel development. “Poor economic conditions cause companies to view funnel development, and the supporting sales process, as an expense not an investment, and try to contain costs in areas that may lead to a weaker funnel instead of gaining competitive advantage.”

A greater number of quality leads can decrease the often heavy dependency on sheer volume and take the stress of wasted resources out of the equation. “As long as you’re deliberate and define your sales process well, you can actually add steps that increase the probability of winning. It can also help to ensure a full understanding of the nature of client requests safe-guarding against the tendency to project a solution based on an assumptive interpretation instead of working collaboratively with the prospect.” Owen reiterates that shortening the sales process can be counter-productive, allowing critical steps to be overlooked, and recommends incorporating the following actions into the definition of the sales process:

- Define the characteristics of your ideal customer.
- Focus consistent prospecting efforts on ideal customer prospects early on.
- Thorough collection of information to determine winnable opportunities.
- Create solution concepts with customers rather than assume a problem exists for your product or service.
- Connect with marketing to ensure alignment and a compelling value proposition.
- Consistent and objective opportunity and account reviews.
- Regular contact with qualified prospects and current customers to stay in touch with their needs.

Sales leaders serious about implementing change for results should target the focus of front line efforts on those



opportunities that suggest high probability for success. Appropriate groundwork around qualifying opportunities may take greater energy initially, but it generates sales that take less time to close.

“The best thing to do is to look at the number of opportunities and apply really objective criteria around not only whether you want them, but whether they’re winnable.” Owen says. “Does the objective information suggest it’s where sales professionals should be spending time or not?”

Hoch also stresses prioritization as key. “Be very specific about the winnable opportunities and make sure to do everything possible, and everything in addition to what your competition is doing,” she says.

Owen says that inadequate funnels are often created by pursuing inquiries and requests before determining if they are warranted instead of creating opportunities that will provide winnable sales. “Redefining the sales process to incorporate more steps associated with discovery and concept creation helps define the actions in the prospecting phase,” he says. “Sales don’t begin when leads are qualified, sales begin when an opportunities are assessed for development possibility.” ■

Contributors

Clark Owen

Clark Owen’s sales career includes having built four highly successful consultative sales organizations and developing business with Global 1000 companies. He turned around two stagnant organizations with ongoing revenue losses into record breaking earners in the second year and earned a reputation for leading several cultural turnarounds and creating highly competitive, winning organizations. Clark is known for his ability to attract, develop, and inspire high performing senior-level people.

Nattalie Hoch

Nattalie joined Miller Heiman in 2001 as a sales representative and quickly accelerated to roles of increased responsibility. Since joining Miller Heiman, she worked as sales representative, client associate liaison, client services manager, products manager, and her current role, director of small-mid market sales. As products manager, Nattalie was instrumental in the launch of various Miller Heiman offerings, including *Predictive Sales PerformanceSM*, *Sales Excellence AssessmentSM* and *Strategic Selling[®] Government*.



The Real Culprit Behind Lost Sales

Reining in a Rampant Misconception

Sales representatives, sales managers, sales executives - all have heard their fair share of reasons customers did not commit to a sale. The budget got rescinded, the leadership changed, a reorganization occurred. Any variety of reasons could crop up at any time during the sales process. But one of the most prevalent explanations given when a sale is lost is that the customer couldn't work with the price.

Sales representatives hear it at the front line, where it gets reported back to managers and sales leaders, then finally translated in the form of anecdote or metric to the CEO.

Hearing from customers repeatedly that price is a hard stop, coupled with the pressure to perform under a stressful market, can convince representatives that price

is the main cause. But price isn't the only reason a sale is lost - it tracks back to how, at some point, there was a failure to differentiate the solution from its competition.

For some salespeople, push back from a customer on the price can break a sale. For others, it is just another step in their process, a point at which they discount.

"Attempting to close below the cost of sale can damage the company's bottom line," says Nattalie Hoch, director of small to mid-market sales for Miller Heiman. "Discounting merely to win the deal takes energy and resources away from other potentially more profitable sales. Plus, in the long run, it may mean that the discount you give now is a price you have to live with for the lifetime of that customer."



What sales representatives often forget is that the price is tied to a value – and if the value of the solution is not tied directly to what customers need to accomplish, price will remain the point of contention.

“People choose to buy more expensive items everyday when there are cheaper solutions readily available,” says Hoch. “But when they buy the more expensive solution, it’s because it fit their needs best. Price became the second, third or fourth criteria for that purchasing decision.

“Historically, it’s an easy out for some salespeople to say that the customer didn’t want the product because the price was too high, though you’ll almost never hear this from your top-producer,” says Hoch. “Most managers don’t go back and validate, either. A very select few may even justify it as a reason for missing quotas.”

Salespeople can be readily willing to accept the façade presented by customers. If the customer didn’t want to buy because the price was too high then it shouldn’t have anything to do with my skill as a salesperson. Managers, executives, and CEOs alike should understand that this may not be the case, though the initial effort to correct this mindset typically falls on a managerial level. The reality is that salespeople who constantly attribute lost sales to price are not uncovering the customer’s needs well enough to offer a solution the customer can’t live without.

Hoch mentions that sales management must approach this concept with caution. “Telling a salesperson that they didn’t lose based on the price is a no-win situation for all parties: sales rep, sales manager, sales executive and the overall sales organization. They will become defensive, which doesn’t open up any dialogue.” She says that managers need to better understand what the rep did and did not know about the opportunity in order to find the holes in his or her sales strategy.

“If you look back to the last major purchase you made, you’ll probably find it was an exercise in decision making,” says Miller Heiman’s executive vice president of sales and marketing operations, Leigh Hooker. “The larger the purchase, the greater the amount and weight of factors that went into that decision-making process. Differentiation is how we deal with several options to pick the choice that best suits our purposes.”

Hooker mentions that when there isn’t a solid understanding of the customer’s concept, the sales rep is unable to pinpoint accurately what aspects of the solution will resonate best with the client. Therefore, when it comes down to deciding between two options that look the same, a client will often differentiate based on price.

“Intelligent buyers will sort through many choices before arriving at a decision,” says Hoch. “Seeking distinctive features and capabilities helps narrow those options. If a rep is unable to connect with clients to determine the solution they’re after, if he or she is unable to make customers see a distinction, then the customers will often create their own distinctions.”

Allowing customers to differentiate for themselves gives them entire control over your company’s solution and breadth of offerings and experience. Taking this control out of your court means the customer has greater opportunity to make a choice that takes the sale away from you.

Spurring CEO Involvement

“It’s not just sales professionals on the front line who consider price as the reason for lost revenue,” says president and CEO of Miller Heiman Sam Reese. “I’ve heard notable CEOs talk about losing sales because of price. Such a misconception can infiltrate all levels, derailing opportunity for improvement within the sales organization.”

Reese advocates that, to truly hold the customer's best interest in mind, there must be a greater push to become proactive instead of reactive. But, he says, it is challenging, as executives cannot be in front of the action all the time and often only have secondhand knowledge to reference many issues.

"It is unfortunate that a more distanced executive may not be in the position to see such implications right away," says Reese. "Finding that something is a problem so long after the fact when it affects the company at such a critical level makes it harder to address. Taking a detailed approach on the front end of operations cuts the headache away from the back end."

Correcting the Mentality

Chief Executives

Of all individuals within the organization, CEOs should not be strangers to how their organization is selling. Asking such questions at every level of leadership within the organization can unearth problems so you can better address them.

CEOs can request their organizations regularly review the anatomy of lost sales to gather some quick learnings. Questions that delve under issues of loss can bring to surface some actions that can correct behaviors. It's all a large part of being an organization that operates with the customer at its center. Shifting focus from price and doing a better job of differentiating your company's unique offerings can help organizations improve results.

Executives must ask themselves:

- Do I know why my sales force is not winning sales?
- What are managers reporting to me?
- Am I accurate in my expectations for communication?
- Does my organization know what information preferences I have – what I need and what is mere excess?

Establishing clear means of communication will ensure that similar problems are avoided. The clearer the conversations between CEOs and their direct reports, the better operations can run.

Managers

Managers also have a great opportunity to stress the importance of differentiation, lest price becomes a tie-breaking factor in a customer's decision process. It requires a devout consciousness of communicating to the team directly and communicating up to the executive level.

Managers must ask themselves:

- Am I hearing a consistent message that price is the culprit behind such losses?
- How am I communicating the realities behind lost sales upward in the organization?
- Am I consistently reviewing my team's actions within their sales?
- Am I aware that what I relay may translate into action?

Reinforcing the need to adopt better practices and to dispel the price excuse, Hoch advocates companies put in place a process to review each lost deal with the sales force. She recommends a loss-review strategy that can determine what you did well, what you missed, and what you could improve in future opportunities.

"There are solid opportunities for sales organizations here," says Hooker. "First, there is an open opportunity for sales managers to coach their team to improve the process, stressing the importance of uncovering all details in a sale, especially as they pertain to the customer. Secondly, executive leadership must instill the importance of a sales organization that focuses first on the customer's needs." ■



Contributors

Sam Reese

Sam Reese has led Miller Heiman to its position as the foremost thought leader and innovator in the strategy, process and training that drives sales performance. Since he joined the company in 2000, Sam has grown Miller Heiman's revenue by more than 150 percent, expanded product offerings and e-learning initiatives and amassed a partner network of world-class sales consultants. His passion for achieving results has inspired individual team members to strive for top performance, and has contributed to a culture based on ethics and integrity.

Prior to joining Miller Heiman, Sam held executive leadership positions at British Telecom, Kinko's and Corporate Express. His experience and success in sports, business, technology and leadership give him a unique perspective on what it takes to win in today's competitive business environment.

Leigh Hooker

As executive vice president of sales and marketing operations, Leigh is responsible for the overall direction, planning and leadership for national sales and marketing operations. Leigh has been with Miller Heiman since 2003 as director of Business Development and Sales.

Leigh jumpstarted her sales and marketing career with Shell Oil Company. During her tenure with Shell, she held roles of increasing responsibility including territory sales, sales management, strategic planning and head of business development. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Political Science & a Minor in Economic Theory from Texas A&M University.

Nattalie Hoch

Nattalie joined Miller Heiman in 2001 as a sales representative and quickly accelerated to roles of increased responsibility. Since joining Miller Heiman, she worked as sales representative, client associate liaison, client services manager, products manager, and her current role, director of small-mid market sales. As products manager, Nattalie was instrumental in the launch of various Miller Heiman offerings, including Predictive Sales Performance, Sales Excellence Assessment and Strategic Selling® Government.