

Decisions, Decisions

Selling involves decisions on several levels. In your sales organization, you should be very aware of decision-making as it pertains to how your people sell and how you choose who helps your people sell more. I often receive inquiries from prospective clients for sales training interventions. In response to these inquiries, usually from the training and/or human resources department, I'll mention that I'd like to speak with the ultimate decision maker before I present any proposals or pricing for my services. Simply put, I want to make sure I'm clear on the organization's business objectives before I move any further. In other words, what are the key business reasons they want to conduct sales training in the first place?

Often these searches involve a showcase of trainers from across the country eager to display their front-of-the-room skills and win over the training department. Once they're successful, they will then work to get their price in line with what that department has budgeted to train what a large sales force is usually.

Recently a major wireless communications company called and asked me if I'd like to be considered to conduct a series of training seminars. I told the caller I'd be glad to be considered as long as I understand who is making the final decision and get the business objectives directly from that decision-maker. The caller's response was rather vague. She replied that the training department would make the decision as a committee and send the recommendation up the ladder to its final decision point.

When I mentioned that I'd like to speak with the final decision maker, it somehow didn't compute and the caller said she'd get back with me. Can you guess what happened next? You're absolutely right. Nothing happened. I didn't play by their rules and as a result missed out on an invitation to their showcase of sales trainers.

Who is the loser in that situation? I contend that the sales organization is the big loser. I believe that sales organizations hiring sales trainers by the showcase method with decisions made at the training department level are doomed for results far below what they need and deserve. Why? The reason is due to the very method they use to evaluate and hire sales trainers.

If you're managing a sales organization, you want your sales representatives to reach the decision maker, get the meeting where they understand exactly what that buyer wants and customize a presentation that gives the buyer what he or she wants. Then and only then is presentation time a good investment and the potential to get the sale at its very highest.



An organization that hires a sales trainer who never sees the final decision maker is likely to receive training that fails to target this critical issue in professional selling. If you're not in front of the decision-maker, you're spending your time with a person who can only say no and never say yes. Those odds are worse than 50/50. Unless you're compensating your sales force purely for the number of sales presentations made, you're in for a long year of frustration (likely no longer than a year in that position) because you're not reaching the decision maker. You also want a sales trainer who exhibits the specific behaviors you desire from your sales force.

I once made several calls on the general manager of a radio station, working to sell seats to public sales training seminars at that time. After two meetings, I had finally uncovered his specific needs and earned the privilege of presenting my service to this prospect. As we started this meeting, he asked a key question about payment terms, which I answered to his satisfaction. At that point, still prior to my presentation, he agreed to send one of his account executives. As I was returning my presentation tools to their respective bags, my smile was so large that he asked why I was smiling. I responded that he had bought without my having to make the sales presentation. His response was classic: "You're selling sales training, so I have to believe that you're a product of what you teach in your seminars. I like what I see, so there's no need to make your presentation."

This prospect had the street smarts to understand that if he was going to invest training dollars in any of his sales people, he certainly wanted an instructor who would use the same behaviors he saw as effective in their sales efforts. The moral of the story is that sales professionals need to be in front of decision makers and sales managers need to make sure the message is crystal clear when it comes to improved productivity of sales professionals. Nothing happens until somebody sells something, and nobody sells anything until the decision maker has made the decision. Try to work around the decision maker in your selling and you'll work yourself right into delays, frustration, setbacks and failure at every turn.

As a sales professional, you certainly had better be aware of multiple levels of decision-making in a given organization. At the same time, you should also get in front of the person or persons where the final decision rests. The person who signs the check or purchase order for your product or service is your prospect. The rest are members of the supporting cast, important in their respective roles and unable to give you the go-ahead. Get to the decision maker early in your process. Make this your very first contact if you can. As difficult as you may see the work of reaching a busy decision maker, it's relatively easy in comparison to the work and frustration often involved in swimming upstream through an organization, depending on others to do you're selling for you. Take your lumps, learn your lessons and get very good at finding and reaching decision makers. Your results and income will reflect this critical skill of professional selling.