

Plan your sales strategies for success

Successful sales don't happen by accident. They start when you form a strategy based on knowing why you sell and why your customers buy.

By JUDITH M. GUIDO

Like most things that succeed in life, successful sales strategies begin with planning (the work you never seem to make time for). You can avoid unnecessary disasters and missed opportunities by taking a few moments to organize your thoughts and make a clear, decisive plan.

Don't overcomplicate it, but keep it simple. Remember, the KISS principle never fails!

Plan your planning session

The first step of planning is the interrogative phase. By asking yourself these questions; you'll form a good idea of what you want to accomplish and how you will do it. Begin by asking:

▶ *When is the best time of the year to schedule a*

planning session? In many organizations, planning comes before budgeting. In others, this type of session has no time frame.

▶ *Who should be involved in the planning process?*

You already know those people who bring the most to the table in terms of participation. Some people try to avoid getting a room full of "yes-men" by purposely inviting employees representing various responsibilities, operating styles and viewpoints. This can foster real creativity and insight, if the sessions are handled properly.

▶ *Where will the planning session be held?* It is always best to get away from the office because employees feel free to concentrate on the matter at hand, rather than their day-to-day responsibilities.

▶ *How long should the planning session last?* If you are organized, you can accomplish a lot in one day. Go into the meeting with a clear agenda and time limits for various discussion points. This gives everyone the framework to keep their discussions focused.

▶ *Should we seek outside help to facilitate and coach our planning session?* If you feel unskilled at running a planning session like this, you might consider using an expert.

Get to the point

Once you have set the framework for the sales planning session, narrow in on your major points of discussion. By defining these early, you can provide a better structure and focus to the session:

▶ *What are the most painful problems that need solutions?* What elements consistently keep your organization from achieving more success?

▶ *Where and how can we leverage our greatest strengths?* Defining your key strengths is a major step; it allows you to understand how to use them to your competitive advantage.

▶ *Do we have a company vision?* If so, what have

Keep your eye on competitors

While planning a sales strategy is an exercise in internal analysis, don't forget to keep a sharp eye on your competitors. Employees, customers, networking and other sources of information can be invaluable in this. Key areas to watch include:

▶ Movement of competitors in your market. Did they add new products or services? Did they open a new branch?

▶ Did they "borrow" some of your customers?

▶ Are they buying or selling certain materials, franchises, types of equipment?

Your best defense to their movements are to make competitive research and intelligence a regular part of your sales planning strategies.

we done in the last year to get us closer to or further from realizing that vision? Is it time to reconsider or restate your vision?

Build a healthy dialog

That wasn't so difficult was it? You're more than halfway to enjoying the sweet taste of success. Once you've set your planning session date and assembled your team, be prepared to have some healthy dialog on the following subjects. These are key questions that will help you formulate a clear and successful strategy:

► *Who sells in your organization?* It might seem like a simple question but you'd be surprised at the responses you'll get. Is your telephone receptionist or crew leader the best sales person in your organization? Is it time to rethink your sales methods?

► *How, exactly, do you sell?* Once you've determined who sells, analyze how you sell (formally and informally). All the mailers, advertisements and sales calls in the world won't help you if your best method of selling is something else. You need to track how various types of sales are made in your organization to determine a future strategy.

► *What type of sales tools are you using?* Do you use collateral material like leave-behinds, brochures or direct mail pieces? Do reports, face-to-face sales presentations or simple cover letters convince your customers best? Review these materials, how they're used and how persuasive they are in your session.

► *Are you conveying the right message and image?* Are your sales methods and tools consistent with that image? For instance, if you are projecting an image of professionalism yet make very unprofessional sales presentations, you're not consistent. If you are going after "folksy," yet show up for a client meeting in a designer dress suit, you're not consistent. You're confusing to the customer or potential customer.

► *Are your materials professionally done?* That doesn't mean you have to use an outside advertising or marketing agency. With today's software packages (Microsoft Office, Microsoft Publisher, Lotus Suites and Power Point, for example), you can create impressive marketing tools in-house. Professional means that it is a piece you can be proud of, and it is gram-

matically correct. You'd be surprised by how many misspelled words and the amount of poor grammar you'll find in sales and marketing pieces. Don't accept any materials that are second class — if you're not happy with what you see, fix it!

► *To whom are you selling?* Do you really know who is buying your services? Are your materials and presentations appropriate?

Get your employees involved

Few organizations rise and fall because of one per-



son. Rather, most succeed because of the combined efforts of many employees. If you're not bringing your employees "into the loop" on what your sales goals are, you may be missing out on a tremendous resource of knowledge, ideas and connections.

Once you've defined your selling style, your market and your methods, get more employees involved in the process. One way to do that is to ask the following questions either during a sales planning session or at another time during the planning process:

► Do you have a "wish list" of dollar amounts, numbers of customers, percentage increases, specific market segments or target clients? Have you written

Getting focused; from top left: Hal Cranston, Aaron Eubank, Scott Wilson, Kevin Block, Darryl Orr, Scott Annan, and Dan Jensen.

Involve all levels of management in planning.

Left to right: Darryl Orr, Scott Annan, Steve Champ, Judy Guido, Dan Jensen and Ray Velasco.

it down and discussed it with key employees?

► Do others in the company know who is on the list? Never underestimate the power of your employees. They may have a friend, neighbor or relative who works at or is well connected to a



Know what your desired market is so that you can target it. When you know why your customer buys from you, it is easier to make that sale again in the future.

targeted company.

► Post your wish list and ask for comments. By offering some type of reward or incentive for comments, you may discover a wealth of new contacts and leads!

Compensation ABCs

If your sales strategy calls for hiring more people or making your sales more professional, you should investigate ways to attract and keep the best salespeople available. Start by answering these questions:

► How do you compensate your sales people? Do you use salary, commission, bonus, referral fees? Ask other landscape contractors or sales people from inside or outside the industry how they are compensated. National organizations like the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, the Professional Grounds Management Society, the Professional Lawn Care Association of America and other national and regional groups are wonderful sources for this type of information.

► How do you monitor and measure a salesperson's performance? This is known as sales metrics. I have found that it is always best to have the salesperson plan out his or her path, then sit down with them and jointly view the plan to see if the goals are realistic and attainable. Are they "pie in the sky" goals or are they not aggressive enough? Make sure you are both in agreement with the final plan. This is a productive exercise, as it is cooperative, instead of being "top-down."

► Do you have simple reporting systems to track:

- Customers contacted
- Customer retention
- Closing ratio (number of sales you've closed compared to the number of sales calls made).
- Contract termination date
- Current lawn care firm, landscape contractor or grounds manager
- Most profitable customers and why?

This information is important for a number of reasons. It analyzes sales productivity, competition and customer operations.

Know your options

You'll make better decisions if you have a good understanding of

your customers and your budget. Good communication goes both ways and your customers can really help you formulate a better strategy. Ask these questions:

► What have your customers communicated to you in the last year (both the positives, negatives and in-between comments, through formal and informal surveys or means)?

- Are they looking for new services?
- Are they being approached by your competition?
- Are they going through downsizing or experiencing budget cutbacks?

If you've answered "yes" to any of these questions, what sales strategies do you have to address these issues?

A golden rule is not to assume that you know your customers' needs, wants or desires. Save time, money and your mind by *asking them*. For years, I've been preaching that one of the most effective sales strategies is to become an "Askaholic;" it's a socially acceptable disease.

► Consider your budget. How much money will you need to spend on sales tools? Commonly used tools include:

- SFA (sales force automation) software
- Sales training
- Mailers
- Brochures
- Advertising.

Perhaps this is the year to purchase a laptop and find out why they are so popular for the business on the grow (I won't leave home without it!). Or you may want to try a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) like the Palm Pilot, which is a complete organizer, database and scheduler.

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If your employees know your key customers and sales goals, they may be able to contribute to the effort through their own work and contacts.

I hope that by now, you're on the web and have email. If not, it is one of the best investments you could make with your sales dollars.

Avoid tunnel vision

We all have a tendency towards tunnel vision. Take time to look outside your company. Study trends both inside and out-

side the industry. Consolidation is a major factor affecting the landscape industry and how are you prepared to deal with it? How will the current economy or political issues affect you? Are there new technologies that can enhance or hurt your sales?

When all is said and done, prioritize the sales issues and select the critical ones that will have the greatest impact on your business. In order to achieve success, your plan must be realistic and attainable. Don't put too much on your planning plate or you'll experience serious sales indigestion.

If this process seems overwhelming, sit back and take a deep breath, grab your calendar book and mark the date for your sales strategies planning session. The hardest part is getting started.

You'll be pleasantly surprised by the amount of camaraderie and enthusiasm that planning sessions can create.

Prior to ending the planning session, be sure that you've devised tactical plans, assigned responsibilities and set deadlines. Make certain that someone is monitoring and measuring the plan. Finally, remember that your plan should be flexible, as it needs to change with your customers' needs and the business environment. Ah, the sweet tastes of success. Bon Appetit! □

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