
Clone Your Top Producers

by LOUISE ANDERSON

Do you have a handful of superstars who bring in so much business you wish you could clone them? I bet you do. Every team has its stars, the people who continuously produce and seem to know intuitively what they need to do in order to succeed. These are the people you'll move heaven and earth to keep on your team. Problem is, these superstars tend to be thin on the ground.

You can't clone your top producers, but you can clone the things they're doing to be successful. What if companies stopped wishing for more superstars and instead focused on helping the mass of everyday agents — the middle 80 percent — improve their performance? Even a small improvement would have a big impact.

Unfortunately, the traditional approach to performance improvement is not very effective. Every producer wants to earn more, yet beyond a certain point, commissions aren't effective in improving performance. The next step for many firms is to try to move the needle by holding sales contests that reward the top producers with cash awards, vacations and the like. The problem is that oftentimes, the same agents happily take the prizes every month, leaving the "80 percent club" without any increased motivation or sometimes, any clear idea of what they would need to do to achieve superstar-level results.

Incenting Top Performers

Here's an incentive program you can use to make improvements across the board. It takes a little bit of time to plan, but if designed properly, it will bear fruit

as soon as it's put in motion.

- First, identify your top producers. You know who they are.
- Next, figure out what they're doing and how they're doing it. Ask questions like: How's it going? What's contributing to your success? What are your obstacles? If you could wave a magic wand and change anything today, what would it be?

Use the answers to identify the best practices at work. Is there some base of product information your top producers know better than anyone else? A technique for building rapport with a prospect? An open-ended question they rely upon to help them identify the buyer's pain?

Once you've determined what makes the top producers so successful, you can boil it down into specific behaviors that can be taught to others — your middle 80 percent.

- Third, define what you need in terms of behaviors and results. To make it simple, I often set out a pro-



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gram of two best-practice behaviors and one result. That way, you're rewarding the behaviors that lead to success, while keeping your program grounded in reality so people don't spend endless hours executing the behaviors perfectly.

Spell out the program clearly, then market it to your producers just like you'd market a product. Have a party to launch it, find ways to keep it in front of people, and make sure it pays for them to follow it.

- Fourth, reward people on the spot for achieving the behaviors. Most incentives programs dole out rewards when the bottom-line results are in, typically at the end of the quarter or fiscal year. I call this "rewarding an autopsy," because by the time you've diagnosed the problem and prescribed a solution, the "patient" — your current accounts, prospects, leads, maybe even the agency — is dead. Months down the road is too late to identify what was done right or wrong and correct course. Instead, reward producers every time they take one of the actions (or achieve the result) laid out in your program.

Recognizing Performance

How are you going to reward people? Cash is obvious and easy to account for. It's also been proven in numerous studies to be the worst incentive there is for changing behavior. I won't go into all of the reasons here, but some are fairly intuitive. When you award cash, people feel obligated to spend it on something responsible, like bills, or they put it in their checking accounts where it disappears from sight and memory. They may also perceive a pay cut if it's taken away. Far better to award people tangible items of their choice, which feel like a well-earned treat and are likely to be remembered and displayed for years. Some firms use a professionally produced incentives catalog. This can work well as long as the items offered are high-quality and genuinely appealing to your producers.

Make it short. Usually a few days is enough to see if the program is working; if it's not, make adjustments as necessary. When 60–80 percent of participants are achieving the desired behaviors, stop. This program has done all it can. Publicly recognize the producers who improved the most and the best practices that were highlighted.

The total length of a program might be as short as one month or as long as one year. It may even be an ongoing program focusing on tougher issues such as

culture, learning and other corporate objectives.

This brings up a question agency marketers may have: Won't this program breed resentment among the best producers — something no firm can afford? It should not, since everyone's commissions will be growing, and it will not if you make a point of publicly recognizing and rewarding the people who are bringing these best practices to light. Since the top producers are already exhibiting these behaviors and best practices, they will continue to be rewarded throughout the program.

Begin Again

Then, start a new program. You can continuously improve your practices and results if you once again identify your superstars — there may be some new ones! — and of course, what they are doing that can be replicated and rewarded.

Let me give an example. I once worked with a bank that needed to increase sales at each branch. We determined that at the two most successful branches, tellers were asking each customer an open-ended question about graduations, home renovation projects, or other seasonal events (behavior #1). The teller would then relate a story from his or her own experience to build rapport (behavior #2). Based on this conversation, the teller might be able to refer the customer to the appropriate product specialist (result).

By rewarding people for adopting this pattern, the bank averaged 26 closed sales per team member, versus 15 previously — a 58 percent improvement. And those results are not unusual. Although this example comes from the banking world, I have used this approach in a wide range of industries, including insurance, and every time, we see a minimum ROI of 200 percent, sometimes several times that.

By the way, you can use this rewards system to encourage almost any new behavior, including the skills new producers learn in their initial training or procedures required by the home office. The key is rewarding the behaviors that produce the results you want — not just saying, "Raise your close rate X percent."

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Bottom-Line Results

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In addition to achieving bottom-line results, this approach has the advantage of building morale and agent retention. The reason is simple. Producers want to be successful in their careers, and a performance improvement program gives them a way to achieve better results, month after month. They also appreciate the rewards and recognition built into such a program. It's true that many producers choose their career because of the commission-based compensation structure. However, don't underestimate the power of recognition, whether it comes in the form of a company-wide award or a simple "Great job handling that client." A recent Robert Half study found that "lack of recognition" was the third-most frequent reason cited by good employees who were leaving their jobs.

Change happens through people. Many agencies already have the team they need in order to increase productivity and profitability. Give your producers the right tools and the right motivation, and you can achieve dramatic change — not next year or next quarter, but today.

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