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# Prospecting Skills Are Key To Your Sales Organization's Success

by BILL BROOKS

**H**as the way you prospect for new business changed? The answer to that is probably dependent upon what you sell, where you sell it, who your customers are, the nature of your competition, how your prospects and customers have been traditionally contacted, the budget allocated for winning new business and lots more.

However, it has been my observation that one thing has never changed. Somehow, somewhere you will be expected to develop strategies to get you and your message in front of qualified prospects. That will never change for salespeople. You included!

I was recently working with a sales organization that had such a strong backlog of existing customers and long-term accounts that they had made several potentially fatal mistakes. First, they hired salespeople who were excellent at managing accounts but lousy at finding new ones. Second, they started to miss key delivery dates, and then quality dropped. You can guess the result — too many salespeople dependent upon impossible customer retention and insufficient revenues as disenchanted customers left by the handful.

Another mistake was that their pay plan strongly rewarded retention of accounts. What did that mean? They attracted and retained salespeople who were skilled at these types of duties. One of the real problems was that the salespeople had very little impact

on the key things necessary for effective customer retention. That, of course, led to low morale and a disgruntled sales organization.

In addition, their sales education program had absolutely no training related to prospecting skills. As a consequence, their sales force knew nothing about telephone skills, trade show strategies, personal positioning, permission-based prospecting, electronic marketing, seminar presentation skills or any other skill sets so necessary for effective prospecting.

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## Reinventing the Sales Force

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Now they are trying to reinvent an entire sales force that is resistant to being retooled, must quickly find new customers, must redefine their sales compensation plan, work to re-sell customers who left, and start to find ways to attract prospects. How would you like to be facing that combination of challenges?

The sad part of this is that they wouldn't have to do it all if a single sales principle had been adhered to throughout their entire decision-making process. Here it is: Long-term successful selling is always a function of an effective prospecting and marketing effort. Period.

What does this mean? Let's take a look at several specific issues that must always be addressed:

- There must always be a segment of any sales force whose primary job is to find new business.
- Those people who will find new business and work to retain or service accounts aren't necessarily the same people. They require different skills and competencies.
- An effort needs to be in place to recruit both types of salespeople. Or, at worst, stress the need to do both.
- A pay plan needs to be in place that rewards precisely the outcomes you seek — both for new busi-

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ness and retention of existing accounts.

- Salespeople need to be trained rigorously and consistently in both skills. Remember, selling skills that are not used are lost. Ongoing application and training is an absolute necessity.
- You must never fall down in delivery, quality, customer service or meeting commitments, or you'll never retain customers anyway.

There is little doubt that professional selling requires a whole set of skills. There is also little doubt that finding, selling and retaining profitable customers is the role of any sales organization. It could even be argued that they are the three most important components for business in general.

If these things are so obvious, why do so many organizations seem to ignore them? Perhaps it is the reality that people and organizations know what to do, they just don't do them. Could that be true for you? Your organization? Unfortunately, I have seen this same scenario at least six times in the past year. It needs to be fixed. Fix your situation before it's too

late. Remember, it takes a lot longer to win a new customer than it does to lose one. And that is dangerous.



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