
Best Practices For Salespeople

by DAVE KAHLE

One of the most debilitating myths about the sales profession is that salespeople can learn on their own, on the job, and eventually become good at their jobs. This myth implies they'll eventually develop their own style, and that will bring them the maximum results.

That myth is true for about five percent of the salespeople in the world. For the other 95 percent, nothing could be further from the truth. The overwhelming majority of field salespeople perform at a fraction of their potential because they have never been systematically exposed to the best practices of their profession. Instead, they have been expected to “learn on their own.”

I like to paint. I don't mean pictures, I mean walls and bedrooms and hallways. I enjoy the physical nature of it and the resulting change in the feeling of the room. I've always liked to paint, and have done so for more than 30 years. Once, for about two months, I actually made a living doing it. I thought I was pretty good at it — until a little while ago, when I was watching one of those reality home improvement shows. On it, a professional

painter demonstrated the best way to apply masking tape, hold a brush and apply the paint. Yikes! I was doing it all wrong.

All this time I thought I was pretty good, in my own self-taught, learn-on-my-own sort of way. I guess I really didn't have any standard. But I almost always painted by myself, and had only my own opinion. I thought I was pretty good compared to what I thought was good.

Value of Best Practices

Then, when I discovered the best practices of a true professional, I saw that my own ideas were not up to the standard. I wasn't nearly as good as I thought I was. If I'm going to become really good, objectively, verifiably good, I have to change my routines and incorporate the best practices.

So it is with sales as well. The world is full of salespeople who have learned on the job, pretty much on their own, and have never been exposed to the best practices of the profession. They delude themselves, as I did, holding the opinion that they are pretty good. And that delusion keeps them lingering in levels of performance considerably beneath what their potential would allow them.

Sales managers often share that delusion, and occupy themselves with other matters, unable or unsure how to improve the performance of their team. Typically, the sales manager was, in a previous incarnation, a high-performing salesperson. He/she was

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one of those five percent who learned on their own, who studied the best practices, and who incorporated them into his routines. As a result, that sales manager, formerly high-performing salesperson, expects every other salesperson to be just like him; to have the same motivation, the same drive, the same ability and propensity to learn. He, therefore, makes little effort to expose the sales team to best practices, because he did it on his own.

That's too bad. Every profession in the world develops a body of knowledge about the best way to do that job. And every professional in the world is expected, if they are serious about the profession, to regularly study those best practices, and to incorporate them into their routines with a disciplined, methodical effort. That's why teachers have in-services, doctors go to conferences, nurses have in-service training, etc.

Educating the Salesperson

The job of the salesperson is no different. There is probably no other profession that is more written about, and to, than field sales. Over the last 50 years, there must have been thousands of books written, tens of thousands of articles published, thousands of audio programs prepared, and hundreds of newsletters and magazines published — all for the field salesperson, and all describing the best practices of the profession in various terms and methods.

Just as there is a set of best ways to paint a room, so there are sets of best ways to ask a question, seek an appointment, build rapport, make a presentation, close the deal, and follow up on the purchase. Astute salespeople understand this, and seek to continually expose themselves to the best practices. They continually work on incorporating the best practices into their routines, repeating them until they become habits.

Astute sales managers do likewise. They continually expose their salespeople to the best practices of the profession and encourage every salesperson to improve by methodically incorporating them into their routines. Those companies that systematically and methodically expose their salespeople to the body of knowledge regarding best practices of the sales profession consistently outperform those who don't.

It is the path to improvement that the rest of the professional world understands. It's time for the sales profession to do likewise. □

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