



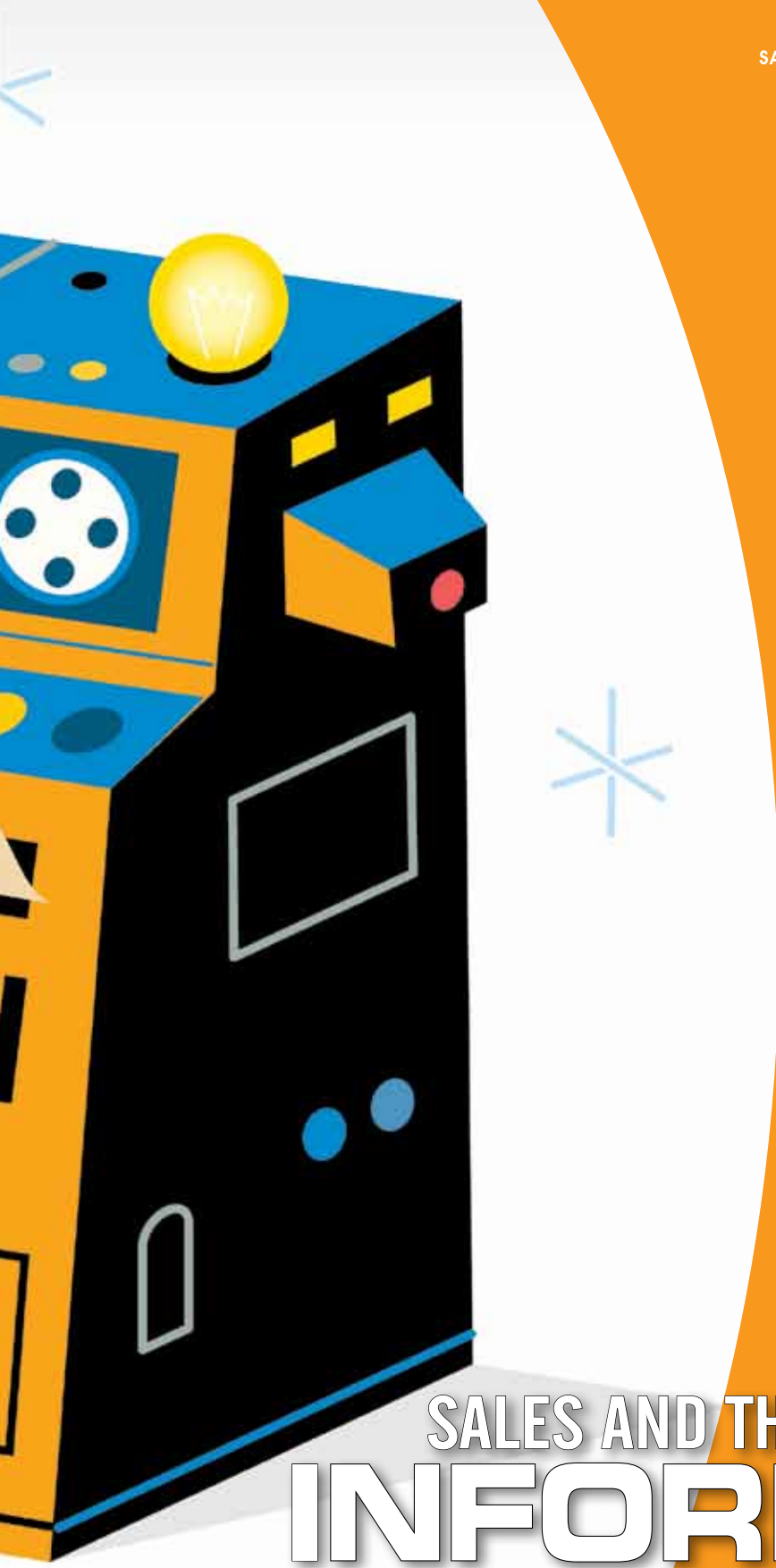
**YOU MUST COLLECT AND STORE INFORMATION
TO BUILD THE COMPLETE PICTURE**

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THE TRICK IS TO CONSISTENTLY COLLECT AND STORE INFORMATION. EVENTUALLY YOU'LL ASSEMBLE AN ACCURATE PICTURE. IT'S LIKE THE POPULAR GAME SHOW WHEEL OF FORTUNE. WHEN VANNA WHITE TURNS OVER ONE LETTER, IT DOESN'T GIVE YOU MUCH OF A PICTURE OF THE ANSWER. BUT AFTER SHE'S TURNED OVER SEVERAL OF THESE SMALL INDIVIDUAL PIECES, THE WHOLE BECOMES CLEAR AND THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE IS SIMPLE TO UNDERSTAND. THAT'S THE WAY COLLECTING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR COMPETITION WORKS.

SALES AND THE ABSOLUTE POWER OF INFORMATION

Excerpted from the book *Take Your Sales Performance Up a Notch*.

EDITORIAL | DAVE KAHLE



DAVE KAHLE

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Most salespeople love to be active — out in our territories, seeing people, solving problems, putting deals together. This activity-orientation is one of the characteristics of a sales personality. A day sitting behind a desk is our idea of purgatory. Unfortunately, this activity orientation is both a strength and weakness. Much of our ability to produce results finds its genesis in our activity orientation. It provides some of the energy to move us to sales success.

But it can be a major obstacle. Far too often, we're guilty of going about our jobs directed by the credo of "Ready, shoot — aim." The luxury of this kind of unfocused activity is a casualty of the Information Age. As a salesperson committed to constant improvement, you understand that to be effective you must be focused and thoughtful about everything you do. Activity without forethought and planning is a needless waste of time and energy.

If you were going to build a home, for example, you'd want to know about the nature of the ground on which the home was to be built. You'd need to have a good idea about what kind of weather conditions the home would be enduring, what the building codes were, what materials were available and what they cost, and what kind of skilled workmen were required. The list could go on and on. The point is that you wouldn't be able to build a home very effectively if you didn't have good information on which to base those plans.

DELIVERING EFFECTIVE SALES

The same principles apply to building a home as well as delivering effective sales performance. In both cases, good planning requires good information. It may be that your company provides you all the information you need. But, it's more likely they don't. If you're going to work with good information, you must be the one who collects that information. That means that you must create systems to collect, store and use the information that will be most helpful to you. Since our world is constantly producing new information, the system you create isn't something you do once and forget. Rather, it has to be a dynamic system that is constantly processing, storing and using new information.

THE INFORMATION-COLLECTING PROCESS

Creating and maintaining your system is a matter of following several specific steps.

Here's the process:

- 1 Create a list of the categories of information you'd like to have.
- 2 Working with one category at a time, brainstorm a list of all the pieces of information you'd like to have within that category.
- 3 Develop a system and some tools to help you collect that information.
- 4 Store it efficiently.
- 5 Use it regularly.

Step One. Start by listing the kinds of information you think will be most useful to you.

Think about your job and determine what kinds of information you'd like to have to help you deal effectively with your customers. Here's a partial list that would fit most salespeople:

- ⊕ Information about your customers and prospects.
- ⊕ Information about your competitors
- ⊕ Information about the products, programs and services you sell.

You may have a number of other categories, but this is a basic list with which you can begin.

Step Two. Once you've categorized the kind of information you'd like, you can then think about what information would be ideal to have in each category.

Start at the top and work down. Look at customers and prospects first. What, ideally, would you like to know about them? Some typical pieces of information would include information about the account's total volume of the kind of products you sell, the dates of contracts that are coming up, the people from whom they are currently buying, and so forth. All of

YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO BUILD A HOME VERY EFFECTIVELY IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE GOOD INFORMATION ON WHICH TO BASE THOSE PLANS.

that seems pretty basic. However, most salespeople have no systematic way of collecting and storing that information. So, while you may occasionally ask a certain customer for parts of it, you probably aren't asking every customer for all the information. And, you're probably not collecting it, storing it, and referring to it in a systematic, disciplined way.

Do you think your competitors know exactly how much potential each of their accounts has? Do you think they know other pieces of useful information, like, for example, how many pieces of production equipment each customer has, and the manufacturer and year of purchase of each? Probably not. If you collect good quantitative marketing information, you'll be better equipped to make strategic sales decisions and create effective plans. For example, you'll know exactly who to talk to when the new piece of equipment from ABC manufacturer is finally introduced. And, you'll know who is really ripe for some new cost-saving product that's coming, or the new program your company is putting together.

DEVELOPING A SYSTEM

You may currently be doing a so-so job of collecting information. It's like golf. Anyone can hit a golf ball. But few can do it well. Anyone can get some information. Few salespeople do it well.

Step Three. Develop a system and some tools.

The single most effective tool is an account profile form. It's an incredibly effective tool that generates and organizes some of the most powerful processes.

ACCOUNT PROFILE FORM

An account profile form is a form full of questions, or more precisely, spaces for the answers to questions. The questions are all about each of your accounts. The form is the document on which you store that useful information. It can exist in a couple of different forms – paper or electronic. If you're using contact-management software on a laptop computer, then the account profile form can be several screens for each account. If you're not computerized, then it needs to be created on paper. Regardless of the media, the principles and processes are the same.

A well-designed, systematically executed account profile form can be one of your most powerful tools for acquiring a competitive edge. Here's why. First, it provides you a way to collect quantitative information that will allow you to know your customers more thoroughly than your competition. All those pieces of information that you said were potentially important to you can be collected and stored in the blanks on the account profile form. Create a one-page form with blanks in it for each of the quantitative pieces of information you want.

In addition to the quantitative information about the business, you need another version of the form for each of the key individuals within those accounts. That's called a personal profile, and it is your mechanism to collect personal information about the key decision makers. You apply the same concept and principles to the task of collecting personal information about the key decision-makers within your accounts. You may end up with one document for the company and 10 to 15 personal profiles for all the key people within that account.

Now, imagine getting ready for the next sales call on that customer and reviewing the things that he likes to talk about, refreshing your memory on the name of his spouse, and the names and schools of each of the kids. As you plan your presentation, you review the primary buying motivation for each of those key people. Do you think you'll be better prepared to have an enjoyable, relationship-building conversation with that customer than your competitor will? Of course you will. Do you think you'll increase your likelihood of delivering a powerful and persuasive presentation? Of course you will.

STORING INFORMATION

Finally, the form allows you to store important information someplace other than in your head. The problem with keeping information just in your head is that it isn't always readily accessible. When you want to have a relaxed conversation with one of your customers about his interests, you can't always remember that he golfs and was a starting halfback on his college football team. However, if you have that information stored on a form, you can review it just before you go in to see your customer, and put it uppermost in your mind.

IS A NEEDLESS WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY.

To some degree, every good salesperson implements these concepts. The difference between the run-of-the-mill salesperson and the salesperson who wants to take his/her performance up a notch, however, is the degree to which the committed salesperson disciplines himself to stick to a systematic approach. Most salespeople do it as they think of it, but don't keep the information systematically. Sales Masters understand the need to discipline themselves, and thus do a more thorough job of collecting information.

Step Four. Store it efficiently.

You may have done a great job of collecting information, but if you've stored it on old matchbook covers, coffee-stained post-its, and the backs of old business cards somewhere in the backseat of your car, it's probably not going to do you much good.

If you're computerized, then your computer can be the super tool that allows you to efficiently store the information. If not, you're going to need to create a set of files (yes, manila folders!) in which to store your information.

Step Five. Use it regularly.

Before every sales call, review the information you have stored. That review will help you make good decisions about each aspect of the sales call. Likewise, review the information as you create your annual goals and sales plans, when you create account strategies, and when you organize and plan your territories.

As you can tell, an account profile form is a master tool that holds all of this together. If you'd like help with this, visit my web site for a free download of "How to Create an Account Profile Form."

COLLECTING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR COMPETITORS

Now that you have a system in place to provide good information about your prospects and customers, you need to turn your focus to another area of your business – your competitors. Information about your competitors can be

almost as important as that which you collect about your customers. As things change at an increasing rate, it's more important than ever for you to be aware of what your competitors are doing so that you don't get blindsided or seriously outmaneuvered.

That happened to me. To this day, I still get a sick feeling in my stomach as I remember the day when I lost my largest account to my arch competitor. It was an account that made up 20 percent of my total volume. In my blissful ignorance, I was content to grow my business by calling on the end users and purchasing department, while my competition was successfully building a relationship with the administration. The result? My best account signed a prime vendor, sole-source agreement with my competitor, and within 60 days, I was almost totally out of that account. I was blindsided.

That's a lesson that sticks with me, and one from which you can learn. To become good at knowing what your competition is up to, begin by thinking of yourself a little differently. Here's a simple three-step process for mastering this competency.

Step One. Collect bits and pieces of information.

Begin by consciously collecting little bits and pieces of information at every opportunity. For example, you may have lost a bid or a particular piece of business to your competitors. Rather than just moping about it, use it as a learning opportunity. Try to find out from your customer why they awarded the business the way they did. If it was price alone, try to find out how much lower their price was. If it's something else, find out what. That information won't help for that particular piece of business, but it may give you an insight into the pricing policies of your competition. Write the information down or put it in your PDA.

Take your good customers to lunch, and casually see if you can steer the conversation in such a way as to learn something about your competition.

Keep your eyes open to the coming and going of competitive salesmen. Note when you see them, and in what account.

IF YOU COLLECT GOOD QUANTITATIVE MARKETING INFORMATION, YOU'LL BE

THE SYSTEM YOU CREATE ISN'T SOMETHING YOU DO ONCE AND FORGET. RATHER, IT HAS TO BE A DYNAMIC SYSTEM THAT IS CONSTANTLY PROCESSING, STORING AND USING NEW INFORMATION.

Be sensitive and aware of competitive literature, business cards and price quotes lying around. And don't forget to talk with the other salespeople who work for your company to get their insights.

All these are ways to collect bits and pieces of information. By themselves, they won't help much. But, if you combine these bits and pieces, you may very well see trends, uncover strategies, and discover tactics your competition is using.

Step Two. Store the information.

As you collect each bit of information, capture it by writing it down, and putting the note in a manila folder marked "competition." You may even have a separate folder for each major competitor. If you're automated, type the information into your computer, and store it in either a word processing or database file.

Regardless, what you're doing is assembling a quantity of information. Diligently collect those bits and piece of information, and file them away.

Step Three. Use the information.

After you have collected a quantity of these, you'll be able to open that file on a regular basis, consider all the pieces of information, and discover a great deal about your competitors.

The trick is to consistently collect and store information. Eventually you'll assemble an accurate picture. It's like the popular game show *Wheel of Fortune*. When Vanna White turns over one letter, it doesn't give you much of a picture of the answer. But after she's turned over several of these small individual pieces, the whole becomes clear and the answer to the riddle is simple to understand. That's the way collecting information about your competition works.

The back of an old business card on which you noted that you saw a competitive salesperson showing a new line of widgets, by itself, doesn't mean much. But if you filed that along with all the bits and pieces of information you've collected, and then pulled it all out and analyzed it,

you might see an entirely different situation. Suppose you reviewed that business card note, and combined it with the note you made to yourself that you saw some sales literature on the competitive widget line on the desk of one of your purchasing agents, and then saw that you lost a major bid to the competition because he quoted a new line at lower than traditional prices. All at once you've uncovered a potential threat to your business. Clearly, your competitor is pushing a new, lower-priced widget line. You didn't learn that from any one piece of information, but rather from the combination of all those pieces, considered as a whole.

The key to uncovering that information, to discovering what your competition is up to, is to consistently collect pieces of information, store them, and then analyze them as a whole from time to time.

As you may be able to tell, this article focuses on skills that previously were not in the toolbox of the typical outside salesperson. But, in the Information Age, much of your ability to make good decisions depends on your being able to collect good information. If you are going to take your performance up a notch, you must see yourself as a dealer in information as well as a seller of stuff. An important initial step is to get good at collecting good information. ■

BETTER EQUIPPED TO MAKE STRATEGIC SALES DECISIONS AND CREATE EFFECTIVE PLANS.