

‘Salespeople who can adapt quickly in a changing market will be increasingly valuable’

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated trends that were already present. The impact of these trends will continue well past the return to “normal”.

We have been talking to sales leaders over the past three years about the drivers for sales change and the need for sales organisations to adapt to flourish. COVID-19 has driven sales change even faster and moved the “important, but not urgent” box to the “both important and urgent” box.

For those looking to generate sustainable growth in a changing future, the question is how will we need to change our sales organisations for the future? Here are some possible answers to this central question.

As field-based sales forces have found themselves hanging the key to the company car in the hall and putting away the carry-on airline bag, many companies have found business has continued well.

Statistics from one client company show there has been no negative impact on the sales result. It calculated that if on “return to normal” they replace half the number of pre-COVID-19 face-to-face visits with electronic contacts, they will reduce each rep’s cost of sale by nearly £7,500 in 2021. A changed coverage model could make a significant difference to this business.

Now may well be the time to shift coverage models by possibly increasing inside sales to cover larger deals and to work later into the buying cycle; perhaps moving from territory-based coverage to segment-based; possibly changing the balance between relationship generalists and product or application specialists; maybe reworking the structure of strategic account teams.

With changed coverage models will come changed roles and changed capabilities. Above all, there will be a need for flexible, agile sales forces. It may be that the sales force of the future looks like a military rapid reaction force, trained, ready and available to respond to new and very different situations.

Salespeople who can adapt quickly in a changing market from segment to segment, product to product, channel to channel will be increasingly valuable. This requires two sets of capabilities and forms of development. Firstly, the flexible sales force needs to have strongly

embedded selling skills that can be applied whatever the situation. It will be worth identifying what these core capabilities are for your organisation for the future.

Secondly, it will be critically important to provide just-in-time top-up training to help apply these skills to new circumstances. Remote sessions, online learning and sales gamification will come even further to the fore.

Leadership too will need to change. Recent months have seen the best sales leaders adapt to remote management and coaching. Frequency of contact has increased not decreased. There has been a new focus on the individual’s wellbeing and motivation. Coaching becomes increasingly important and is being underpinned by some remarkable artificial intelligence coaching tools and by a greater application of data.

While some customer relationship management software has proved its worth, others have required a shift to different ways of understanding and interpreting customer contact data. Where these approaches have been applied well, there has been a positive impact on employee engagement and the sales result. These trends will continue into the new environment. Sales leaders and organisations who master them will reap the benefits.

These views of a changed sales future are based on some 30 years of working with sales organisations through good and bad times. In these times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity there is a need to have a clear picture of current strengths and weaknesses, and a flexible plan for a future full of risks, but also rich in opportunity. ●



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