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SELLING STRATEGIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Creating and using sales strategies has been an evolving tactical process since the cavemen traded sticks. In the adolescence of the digital age, we must adapt to the way business is being conducted today. BY MARK OKUN



strat•e•gy 'strədʒjē/: noun: a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim.

As of late, there has been an increase in the desire to use antiquated sales tactics. Remember, a good sales strategy consists of creating and implementing an action plan that allows you to have an advantage over your competition.

This blueprint of thinking applies to showrooms, rep agencies, and vendors alike. While each group requires a specific plan for its customer base, the foundation, planning, and implementation methods are the same.

A good strategy directs your focus and pinpoints your effort on the appropriate actions that will provide the best benefit up and down the channel you are in. Success begins with a detailed and well-designed map of your target territory. Sadly, many sales organizations don't spend the time, effort, or money needed to create and implement a thorough sales strategy.

To clarify, let's review familiar activities that masquerade as "sales strategy," but are not.

Sales strategies are not sales goals, which are volume projections based on known quantities (i.e. sell more widgets here or increase the number of product placements there).

These are only goals to reach; targets, if set correctly, are real and achievable — although they are still not a sales strategy.

Sales strategies are not manipulations or schemes. Today's customer is fully versed in old school manipulations and schemes. That's why they must be eliminated at all costs to move forward in today's sales environment. If there is even a whiff of a manipulation — either intended or unintended — that customer is lost for life.

Sales strategies never start with the words, "We hope" or "I hope." Hope is not a strategy. Hope is what you do when you are out of control in your situation. Just being friendly and authentic is not a strategy for success. There is no "set it and forget it" mentality when it comes to creating and implementing sales strategy.

The sales strategy is the often missed "how" of the equation. A highly effective strategy will provide the step by step details which, when implemented, measured, and coached will result in the improved metrics you want.

When creating a strategy that is going to be successful, there are some crucial elements to focus on:

PEOPLE

Understand in-depth who your customers are. Identify your target market, those who you want to interact with in the course of obtaining your business goals. The target market you create is comprised of probable clients that, when engaged, will assist you in reaching your desired results. Temper broadening your targeted market selections by remembering the old phrase: "You can't be everything to everybody."

COMMUNICATE

Learn how customers communicate and the speed they want to be communicated with. What do you think of when you read the word communicate? I would guess a significant percentage would think of a phone, and specifically a cell phone — for good reason. The cell phone is currently the most used communication device of all time. Voice, text, pictures, video all in one package. It also has made our ability to connect with people instantaneous.

LEVERAGE

Leverage the unique advantages that you, your company, and your products bring to the table that provide a better experience for your targeted channel. No matter how it is packaged, you can't be unique if you employ a cookie cutter sales strategy or a me-too product line-up.

TRY A 3-STEP SALES STRATEGY

When you begin to create your sales strategy, think of Habit #2 from Stephen R. Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: "Begin with the end in mind."

Starting at the end is sometimes hard for people to comprehend, but do your best to picture in your mind the result you want. Without a clear mental picture of where you are going, attempting to reverse-engineer the map to get there is difficult.

Developing a strategy is not a one- or even two-hour project. To actively involve key participants from the beginning through the end of the process may take several days or weeks, depending on the schedule.

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STEP #1

Create your mission as a simply put, overall objective of your business. In as few words as possible, express who you want to be and to whom do you want to be it for?

This is not some hocus pocus. It is a simple, clear statement of intent that is the essence of your planned customer experience. If the mission statement is too long and not specific to the purpose it will fail; the more concise, the better.

An easy way to begin is to answer 4 questions:

1. What do we do?
2. How do we do it?
3. Whom do we do it for?
4. What unique value to we bring to the market we are in?

STEP #2

The next step is to create the vision of your store, agency, or company that you and your customers will want. This vision is first set up in your mind and must include details of exactly what your successful outcomes and interactions will look like when achieved.

This initial step of vision creation begins with your perspective as the salesperson, manager, or business owner. It will include the specifics of the vendors and products you sell, services you offer, and each part of interacting with your clients. This includes the not so glamorous company policies and procedures. A quick side note: put yourself in the position of one of your customers. The more human we can be when

dealing with our clients, the greater the bond we will build with them, creating lifelong customers.

The vision continues into your public spaces, displays, non-human interactions, and advertising — all of these demonstrate your well-thought-out plan. Every facet of your completed vision is put into writing the details that will help you create the map to follow.

Now that you know what the result of your mission looks like and you have that picture set in your mind, take a step back and imagine what happened just before you reached the positive result. By evaluating each step of the customer interaction, the full picture becomes clear. Once you have completed your vision based on the role you play, step back and re-create it as one of your clients would best experience it.

Apply the same methods to create your client's vision and provide the same level of detail. This will create two very different perspectives of the same model; both perspectives are required to hit your target.

Now test your vision by asking yourself: How will the vision we created make me feel as a customer? Do the policies make it easy to work with us, our staff, or agency? Do our store displays cause an emotional response? Will people feel comfortable and is trust being built in each part of the process?

Next, put it into play and determine if the result of all the customer interactions is meeting your mission and vision. If not, make adjustments for any bumps in the road as needed, staying focused on ensuring an excellent customer experience from the greeting through the after-sale follow-through.



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In order for everyone to adapt to the new strategy, they must have the knowledge to act upon it.



Mark Okun is Business Contributor to enLIGHTenment Magazine and President of Mark Okun Consulting & Performance Group. He has more than 30 years of hands-on retail experience training and coaching sales associates in the lighting and furniture industries.
Mark@bravo
businessmedia.com

STEP #3

Now that you have your basic vision in place, act on it. Many times we miss out on success because we don't start implementing our plans since we are waiting to perfect the process.

Instead, start taking action on your plan once complete — even if it is not perfect. Then make the adjustments needed based on the results of the experience. Remember to always be fine-tuning to stay on course toward your goal.

These three steps can deliver a 360-degree look at your vision of sales success. This is the “What” you want to accomplish; now let's move towards the “How.”

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

You have completed constructing your mission and vision; now it is time to implement. Often a company or person will invest the hard work only to fail to launch. The following points are the catalyst to put your visions into actions.

EXPLAIN

You and the people who helped create the strategy have a clear understanding as to why and what strategy changes are being implemented. It is mandatory that the entire team understands

these points as well.

When we start asking associates to apply new ways of doing business, they will have questions and opinions — and we must listen. They may feel that the changes are unnecessary. Take time to clearly explain why the changes are happening and what they will achieve. Your frontline staff also provides valuable insight and should be involved in the creation phase.

PROVIDE EDUCATION + TRAINING

In order for everyone to adapt to the new strategy, they must have the knowledge to act upon it. Some team members may not have the necessary skills to be successful. With the solid strategy you have created combined with regular training and coaching sessions, everyone can be pulling in the same direction.

METRICS AND KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

You must have a method in place to measure the success of your strategy. Inspect what you expect to happen. This is essential for monitoring customer engagement levels, sales, and product performance. While the details of these measurements are specific to each person or company, they must be in place so you know where you are in the process. The KPIs you monitor help identify any adjustments needed to products, policies, or procedures. Fine-tuning your strategy is an ongoing process that must be part of your calendar.

FEEDBACK

Getting feedback from frontline staff is as critical as the metrics you put in place. Feedback makes your strategy as effective as possible.

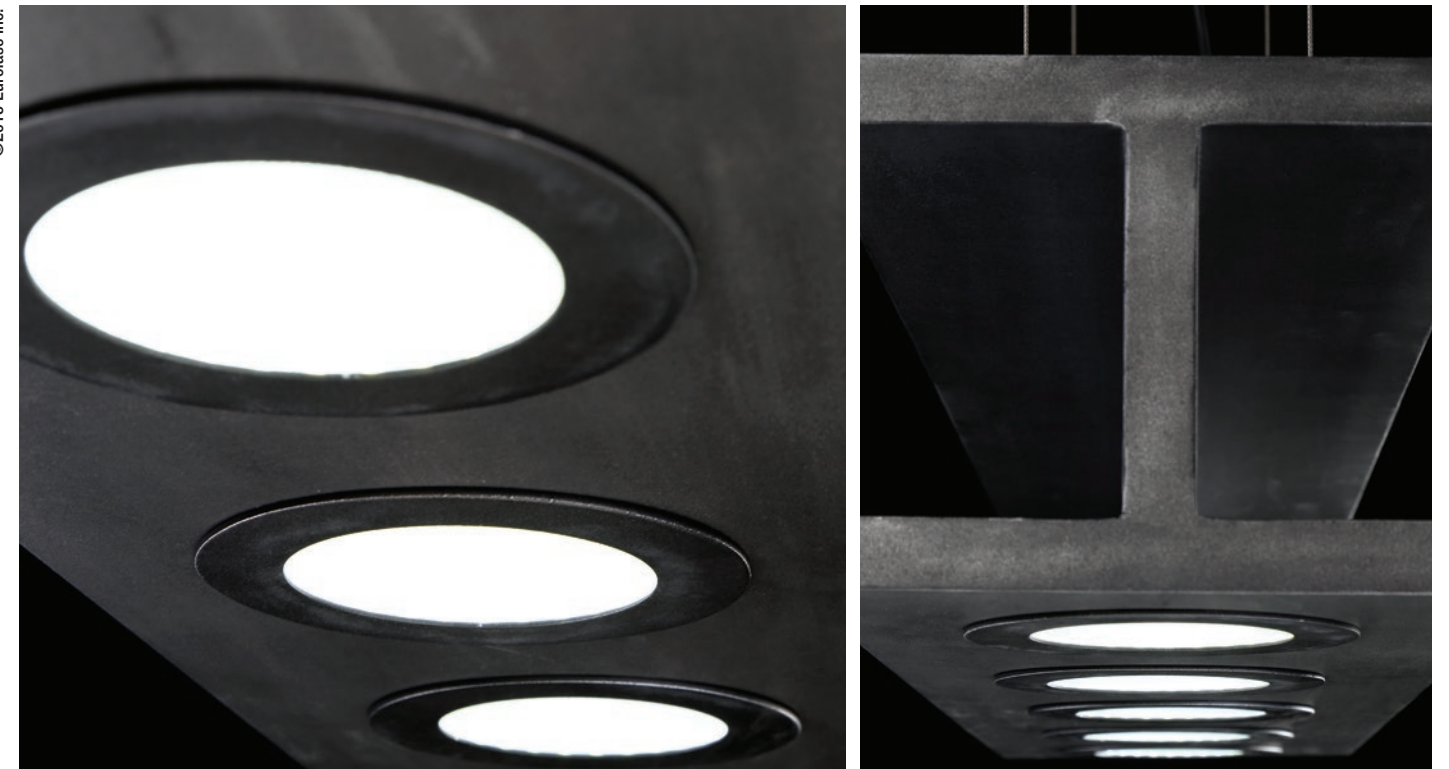
INSPIRE

It will take some time for everyone involved to get used to working the new strategies. As a leader, it is your job to put extra effort into inspiring your team to embrace the new ideas and not to become demotivated or disillusioned. You are the cheerleader of the new vision.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE WORK

The work it takes to create a strategy is worth the time, effort, and expense. This simple guide is only an introduction to creating a sales strategy. My goal has been to get you interested in creating a strategy for success; your future depends on it. ♦

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