

## Don't let sales slide

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I have to get sales going, and I'm not sure what to do. I have one sales person, plus myself. This person has sold in the past, isn't selling as much now, which puts the burden more on me to come through with the numbers. Should I wait and hope things turn around? Do I get another sales person, which will just cost me more in the short run? What should I do about my current rep's low numbers?

Sales are critical right now, to set the company up for 2009. Act fast. Evaluate the slump. Evaluate everyone in the company – who can contribute to sales. Define the costs, risks, ramp up timing, and reserves available to bring on a new sales person.

Ask yourself, are sales up, down, or flat. For any product or service that's down, double sales and marketing efforts. Get things back on track as fast as possible. Letting sales slide can mean a slow, painful death to the company.

Take a look at both average sale value and numbers of sales. Is one down or up, and the other constant? That will tell you where to focus – price point or quantity of sales. If both average sale value and number of sales are down, your problem is especially urgent. Put all the company's time and attention to solving the problem. Stop the bleeding.

Now evaluate your sales rep. Look at basic metrics: number of cold calls, leads generated, highly qualified prospects ready to close within 30, 60, 90 days. How do those numbers compare to a year ago, to the company overall?

Talk it over with your rep, using facts. Share the evaluation you've prepared. Ask your sales rep about conversion from one stage to the next. Where are the soft spots? Is it getting harder to convert cold calls into leads = marketplace problem? Or does it look like there aren't enough cold calls at the moment = personal effort problem?

Ask yourself and your sales rep: What will it take to quickly fill the pipeline with highly qualified prospects? Assess your mood, and the temperament of your sales rep. Many people get frustrated in down markets and forget that they may have to push twice as hard just to do the same amount of business. Are either of you guilty of slacking off in frustration? Now is NOT the time to throw in the towel. In fact, it's time to re-commit.

Make 1 – 2 more phone calls / day. Go on joint calls to support your sales rep. Try a telemarketing program, email campaign, cable ad, or other identity boosting program. Ask customers to write testimonial letters to open doors with prospects who may be more cautious in a down market.

Open up house accounts to your sales rep for nurturing and expansion. Remember, in down economies, competitors will come after your accounts, to hit their numbers. Don't take your good accounts for granted.

Give up non-sales tasks and free up an extra hour per day to focus on sales. Yes, I know I'm always preaching about finding time to "work on" the business. In a recession, working on sales is often the equivalent of "working on" the business. You have to have a viable business left when the recession is over – growing sales is essential.

How about adding to sales staff? Get someone who is experienced, to do what you and your sales rep are already doing. Run the numbers on the cost and results of a new sales person. Estimate ramp up time, then double it.

Concerned you can't afford to hire? Think again. Consider these options: get someone to do research, make initial phone calls and open doors for yourself and your sales rep. This position in the pipeline often costs less than a closer, including commission. Promote someone from operations, who may not be so busy right now, to call existing customers and ask them for additional work.

Start interviewing. Look for someone who is confident and experienced enough to work on commission. Check references. Be prepared to watch performance vs. goals like a hawk. Consider hiring two people, and letting them compete for the right to stay.

Tell candidates what you expect. Don't be afraid to scare people off. You need people who are tough, and up for the task at hand – banging down doors and closing sales.

In a recession, the good news is that there are qualified people out there looking for jobs. Find the person who wants to work in your industry, in your size business. Ask candidates to be flexible on compensation. It's a buyers market, now.

Looking for a good book? Try, *Never Hire A Bad Sales Person Again: Selecting Candidates Who Are Absolutely Driven to Succeed* by Christopher Croner and Richard Abraham.

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