

Creating Consistent & Predictable Sales



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How to Drive a Winning Sales Team in Unpredictable Times

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Do you feel like there's a heightened sense of unpredictability right now? There's always a bit of that in sales. But leaders tell us that working through this economic recovery, in uncertain markets, with the dark cloud of the recession still looming about, and all the attending consequences of COVID and lockdowns, including a surge in mental health issues—it's creating a ton of pressure.

Just looking at professional pressures, sales leaders have to navigate tighter budgets, smaller margins, aggressive quotas, and longer sales cycles, which coalesces down the food chain into a kind of claustrophobia for already frazzled sales reps. In order to get the

right work done, you need to be savvier and probably require some reorganization in priorities and function.

In our recent webinar with Frank Cespedes, Senior Lecturer at Harvard Business School, he outlined the top strategies sales leaders need to focus on. They included getting back to the fundamentals of understanding customer needs and journeys, using digital tools carefully and effectively and separating them from the hype, and changing your team's roles and core competencies. We'll dive into each of these tips below to help you to keep your business on track and have a banner sales year.

Separating the Hype From Reality in Digital Transformation

Sales Requires Context

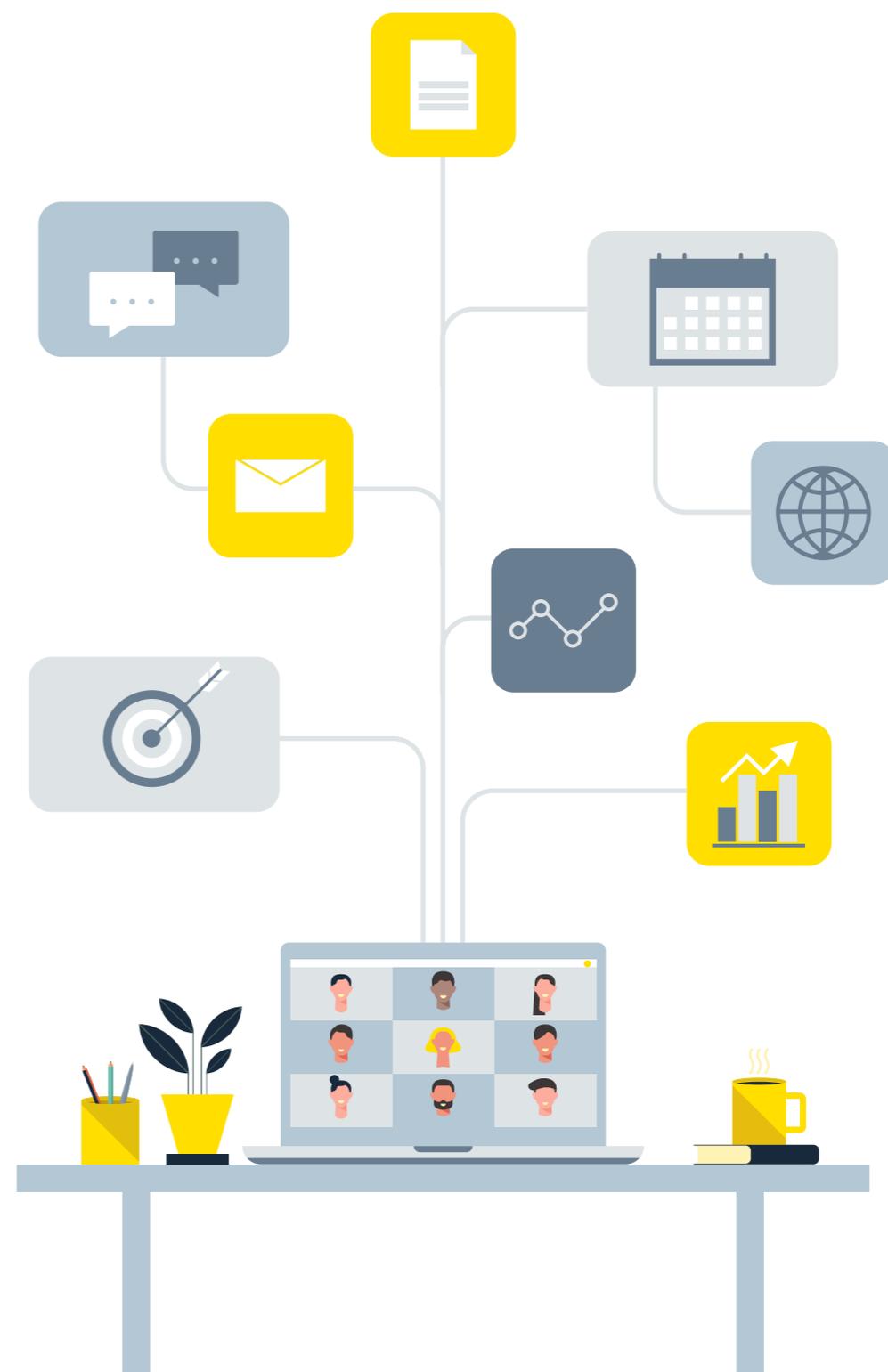
Of all the activities our business engages with daily, sales is one of the most directly tied to context. A lot of ink has been spilled and budgets spent on solutions to understand a customer's context—where they're at in their buying process, their geographic location, their needs. Similarly, a sales rep's job changes significantly as what they sell and who they sell to changes. Context is critical to know when to make the first interaction with a customer and subsequent interactions.

Some Analysts Generalize Instead of Rely on the Facts

Analysts have predicted a revolution in sales—a digital transformation—for years. Even with increased attention and increased budget spend, many companies are not seeing the results they expected. [Research suggests that](#) "8% of global companies have been able to achieve their targeted business outcomes from their investments in digital technology."

To see the kind of success that the top 8% have found, sales organizations should identify the business changes they want to implement and then let technology support those solutions rather than the other way around.

As you examine your sales team and strategy, consider how many organizations have misunderstood or misapplied the concepts of technology, big data, and digital transformation. Then, apply the principles correctly and see the investment in your people and technology truly pay off.





What Many Sales Leaders Get Wrong

It's common knowledge that the market changed drastically in the past year, but some sales teams are just starting to change themselves. The pandemic highlighted some of the trends already happening in sales organizations, but fundamental truths about handling these trends and continuing to stay ahead of changes still exist.

Online Marketing is Increasingly Cluttered

Many organizations are seeing dramatically diminishing returns on their digital marketing efforts. Even in 2019 and in the first few months of 2020, many major brands were pulling out of their digital ad spend. [Chase, Proctor and Gamble](#), and others reduced their spending by millions without any measurable effect on their business outcomes.

Facebook has reached a saturation point, and consumers are scaling back—the platform [increased the number of ads](#) served by a quarterly average of nearly 30% year on year since Q3 of 2015. While the number of ads served increased, the price per ad has decreased, making it less appealing to brands and consumers.

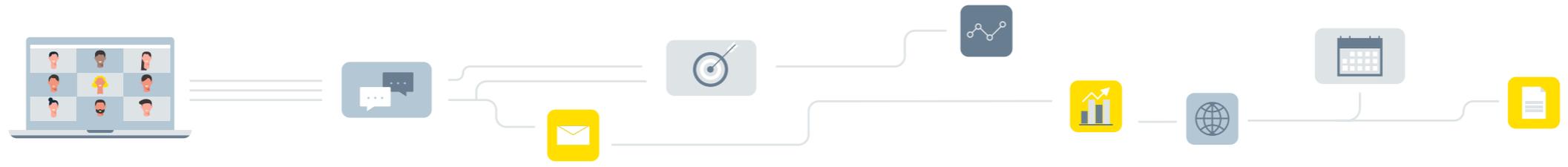
How to Get Past the Digital Hype

Sales leaders need to separate hype from the facts of their organization. Relying solely on trends or gut intuition to make decisions about spending leads to bad or suboptimal decisions about priorities and how to allocate resources.

Using intelligence and data to understand your operations, your market, and your resources will prevent creating a situation where you optimize for activities that your customer does not value.

Disruption in many markets is real, but the path to combating this disruption is more than simply spending more on technology or looking to technological solutions. Using technological solutions to identify disruptive forces and then creating a relevant go-to-market strategy will keep your business ahead of the competition.

Digital Transformation is Driving Sales



Changes in Buying

For decades, the classic buying model for sales has been awareness, interest, desire, and action (AIDA). These steps make up the classic funnel model for marketers and sales to pinpoint where customers are and create strategies to move them down the funnel to an eventual sales deal.

Today, buyers engage in simultaneous processes that are dynamic and work more like a flow or a loop than a funnel. Potential customers explore, evaluate, and engage in parallel streams and do much of their own research using tech tools. Many traditional sales activities are now self-directed, and there's less wiggle room for organizations to influence customer decisions. [B2B buyers today spend](#) less and less time meeting with potential suppliers, anywhere from 5 to 17% of their total research time.

Bringing buyers through their journey requires sales leaders to shift from moving prospects through a funnel to instead using context and intelligence to give buyers the information they

need to solve their big problems. Providing targeted, quality information gives buyers the tools they need to understand their problem, navigate the solution, and get the consensus they need from the decision-makers in their organizations.

And, digital enablement throughout the buying process has made selling more transparent. Sales reps are expected to be more than just a walking brochure. As customers get their information online about products, features, and competition, sales reps now have a completely different conversation with customers. Engaging more as a concierge to get buyers to the right people and validate and breakthrough barriers will smooth the process and support them in the ways they want to buy.

Changes in Sales Organizations

Increased transparency from buyers has also created an environment where sales is under increased scrutiny. While sales organizations in years past may have been somewhat of a black box, the amount of data available in boardrooms has invited more questions about how and why budget is spent.

Sales leaders have had to become more financially literate and better able to tie their strategy to the data and show results for their investments. Organizations have seen a decrease in the cost of goods sold (COGS), but selling, general, and administrative (SG&A) costs have risen. As a result, finance is paying more attention to how to optimize and justify costs in sales organizations. Skilling up sales leaders to engage in conversations with finance and board members on how to communicate value and also make these strategic decisions will be the biggest change to sales careers in the coming years.

Changes in Hiring and Competency

Hiring for a sales organization is challenging. For many professions, like engineering or finance, finding talent is relatively straightforward. Colleges and universities have programs and majors that speak to each discipline within these subjects, so looking for talent means hiring skilled people from those majors or colleges.

Many colleges and universities either don't teach sales or have it as a small part of a much larger business program. Finding sales talent can be more difficult because many who find their way into the profession aren't properly trained or given the tools to succeed. So, to help fill in the gaps, many sales organizations provide training programs or other enablement tools with little to no success. Spending more time during the hiring and recruiting process will help ensure your team has the core competencies they need to succeed, and then leaders can add on additional skills that make sense for the market and your customer.

When hiring, one of the most significant pitfalls many sales leaders face is overestimating competencies based on interviews. To combat this, sales leaders should:

- Offer more than interviews and find ways to see applicants in action.
- Utilize more than one person during the interview process to get more feedback.
- Compliment interviews with good, data-driven assessments.

Once a candidate is hired, create an onboarding and training process that immediately sets the reps up for success. There is no superpower for hiring good candidates, but implementing more strategies to get the good hires right and then keep the best employees creates the superpowers for effective sales organizations.

Nurture Sales Representatives Into Leaders

Success for sales representatives can and should take many forms on a sales team. Not every successful representative desires or is cut out for management, and some are happy to take different types of leadership roles on their teams.

But for those who do have the acumen for management, thinking like a manager can be a significant hurdle. Organizations that want to nurture management from within their ranks should ensure that their leaders have the experience and track record of working with customers and staying in touch with the customer experience.



Rethinking Ecosystems and Value Pricing

Multi-Channel Go-to-Market is Now the Norm

In the past decade, the multi-channel go-to-market strategy has become the norm for many organizations. This is a dramatic shift for many sales organizations as sales reps have learned to manage partners as a part of their responsibilities. Skills and data can help sales leaders ease the transition into managing an ecosystem of partners to leverage the value in these relationships without being bogged down by the everyday tasks that can come with those relationships.

Ecosystem and channel partnerships are a top priority for many organizations, and many executives predict it will be a major change agent in their business. However, many organizations are not seeing the success they expected from their partnerships. According to [Accenture](#), "While 58 percent of companies targeted a growth rate of 3-4 percent, only 40 percent are achieving it. Just 12 percent of companies are seeing a growth of 5 percent or more from ecosystems."

Changing the trajectory of your sales reps' training and job roles to pick and nurture the right partnerships and demonstrate value will be the difference between a dynamic ecosystem and a lackluster channel program.



Use Data Analytics to Create Opportunities for Value Pricing

Conventional wisdom leads sales leaders and representatives to believe that pricing is a race to the bottom for customers. However, data analytics increases opportunities for value pricing. There are more tools available for price testing, but not many organizations are willing to test prices to increase as the value proposition increases.

Using data to create value pricing opportunities that match customers and segments helps shift sales reps from thinking solely about top-line volume to each deal's business case and value.

Conclusion

The trepidation of the marketplace in 2020 and the continued unsettled environment means sales teams should be ready for anything. Building a winning sales strategy in unpredictable times means getting back to the fundamentals and allowing data and strategy to drive big decisions like hiring, technology spend, pricing, and customer interaction. Choosing wisely which avenues to spend budget will mean more opportunities for growth and stability.



PLAYBOOKS

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