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Five secrets for leading a great sales meeting

Most sales people I know would rather volunteer for a recreational root canal than attend a meeting. They see a meeting as a horrible, boring waste of their time. An argument can be made that, in this age of instantaneous electronic communication, meetings are no longer necessary. Any information that a manager needs to transmit to his or her team can be sent right to their phones, without losing a single minute of precious selling time. In the past 30 years, I've attended or led thousands of sales meetings. I have been to far too many meetings that left me wanting that hour of my life back. I have also attended meetings that left everyone in the room better informed, highly motivated and energized. It's no surprise that the best managers hold the best meetings. In fact, their ability to lead a productive meeting is one of the keys to their success. If you are a leader, learning this skill is critical to advancing your career. Here are five secrets of holding powerful meetings.

Number 1—If you shoot from the hip...you'll probably miss.

Like most things in life, the success of a meeting is directly proportionate to the effort expended in preparing for it. Planning a great meeting begins with knowing what you are trying to accomplish. A sales meeting is much more than simply bringing your team together to disseminate information. A meeting should impart information that cannot be delivered in an e-mail or a memo. A sales meeting is a chance to share your vision with your team. Meetings are a chance to connect with your people on a personal level. The purpose of a meeting is to focus a group of individuals on a common shared purpose. If the leader is unprepared, the meeting will be counter-productive. A disorganized, ill-prepared meeting sends a signal that you do not value your team's time. Taking the time to plan and prepare demonstrates your commitment to the success of the group.

I believe that the inherent complexity of our business and the fast pace of change in today's business environment necessitates holding regular sales meetings. Establishing a regular meeting schedule eliminates the "I didn't know about the meeting" excuse and encourages full attendance. The manager should prepare and distribute an agenda for every team meeting. As a sales manager, I set aside

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a minimum of an hour per week to plan my sales meeting. This may seem to be an extravagant block of a busy manager's time, but your meeting is your only opportunity to impact the performance of the entire team. To facilitate this process, keep a meeting tickler file. As you go through the week, place items you want to cover with the team in this file. Use your observations of your people to identify training needs, people to be recognized and upcoming sales opportunities. The contents of your meeting file can be quickly reconfigured into an agenda. Using a standardized meeting structure saves time and lets the reps know what to expect. My sales meetings followed this format: sharing excellence (success stories) followed by a quick review of current projects and of any upcoming opportunities and finished with a training session. By using these techniques, an effective sales meeting can usually be planned in less than an hour.

Number 2—The beatings will continue until morale improves.

Spending an hour screaming at your reps may be cathartic for the manager, but it accomplishes little else except to torpedo your team's morale. Not only is this strategy unpleasant, but it is ineffective. If you browbeat your team as a group, the worst offenders usually think you are talking about someone else. On the contrary, when you recognize top performers in public, you communicate a clear picture of what behaviors you want to see. This motivates the others in attendance to earn their share of the limelight. Undesirable behavior is better addressed in private meetings with the offenders. It is critical to keep your meetings positive and upbeat. Reps get beat up enough by their customers; your meeting should be a place where they can recharge their motivational batteries. A lively meeting provides a break from the stress and the grind of making sales calls. I always provide refreshments and keep the atmosphere light. Psychologists have found that people are more likely to absorb information when they are in a good mood. Remember leading a meeting is a performance. Keep the pace and the mood upbeat. Always model the attitude you want to see in your reps, especially in your meeting.

Number 3—Wake me when the meeting is over.

Many managers confuse holding a meeting with delivering a sermon. They stand at the head of the table and talk at their team for an hour. This is guaranteed to put people to sleep faster than any pill or potion developed by the pharmaceutical

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industry. You can force people to attend your meeting, but you can't make them pay attention. They may smile and nod at everything you say, while mentally planning every detail of their weekend activities. If you do not engage your team's attention, you are wasting everyone's time. To keep your team engaged, everyone must have a chance to contribute to the meeting. Encourage your people to talk about their successes and the challenges they're encountering. Prompt the reps to share their ideas and to offer advice to one another. Think of yourself as more of a facilitator than as the leader of the meeting. Guiding a discussion is much more challenging than delivering a monologue. As the leader you need to keep the conversation on point and the meeting on time. Ask good questions to stimulate the team's thoughts and to develop creative responses to challenges. For example, you could ask, "The competitors are saying this about our product, what do you think is the best way to respond?" Reps can't "check-out" mentally when taking part in an active discussion. By activating the creativity of your entire team, you will come up with better solutions than anyone could do on their own. Reps are much more likely to embrace and act on ideas which come from their peers, than they are to accept anything dictated to them by their manager.

Number 4—I hope you've learned your lesson.

Every sales meeting should include a training component. Your people should leave every meeting a better, more confident salesperson than when they arrived. Training should be a big part of your planning and should consume a large portion of your meeting. Training should be tightly focused on one issue and should address current problems facing the team. Each week one sales manager I work with has one of her reps research a competitive product and present what they discovered in her team meeting. If you have a rep who is particular skilled in selling a particular product or at handling certain objectives, have them share this knowledge with the group. Getting reps involved makes them learn the subject inside and out and proves your trust in their abilities. Use resources such as the Link and Learn archive at Paperchain.org or other books and magazines to bring new ideas to the group. Training is critical to your success as a leader. The better trained your people are, the more confident and motivated they become.

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Number 5—Making it stick!

Planning and leading a meeting requires a serious investment of your time and your energy. To protect that investment, you must ensure that your people take the information discussed in your conference room and “take it to the streets.” I always ask one person to take notes during my meetings and then distribute a copy to the entire team. The notes make sure that everyone is on the same page and that everyone knows what needs to be done. I also let my team know that “There will be a quiz.” I ask my team to use the material discussed in training and report out on their success at our next gathering. This serves two functions; it forces the reps to pay attention in the meeting and to actually try out the ideas presented. During one report out, I actually had one rep who said that he used something from training, “Just to prove what a really dumb idea it was” and was amazed when it worked. Holding reps accountable is a way to get reps to step out of their comfort zone and maximize your sales meeting “ROI.”

Conclusion—“Meeting” your objectives.

Someone once defined a meeting as “an event where minutes are taken and hours are wasted” and unfortunately this is true more often than not. Why are most meetings so bad? I believe it is because only a handful of sales managers are willing to do the work necessary to prepare and lead a great meeting. It is no coincidence that this seems to be the same handful of people who always manage to exceed their sales quotas. Meeting adjourned.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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