TIPS TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AT SALES MEETINGS

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THE DISTRIBUTION TEAM

Sales meetings are a natural part of all distribution organizations. Let's face it. That is what our charter states – we sell stuff to others. At some point, as sales organizations, we need talk about how all this selling is going. In a recent group discussion with some sales managers, we had a healthy discussion about engagement and how to make these gatherings more productive. Salespeople, by their very nature, tend to be independent free spirits. Forcing them to stay seated for an hour or more while the management drones on about company performance and what they should be focusing on will never gel with their personalities. This is the rub. Management wants to corral them and the team would rather be doing anything else with the time allotted. So, how do we get salespeople to see value in a sales meeting? How do both sides, management and sales professional, walk away feeling that the gathering was not a colossal waste of time? Here are some ideas to start bringing both sides together.

Purpose

When associates are disgruntled with management, the most common cause is confusion about purpose. Why are we doing something? Are the goals clear? Probably not. If your meetings are stale and lack engagement, it might be a good idea to go back and revisit why you are having them. What is the focus of the meeting? Are we there for training? Is the meeting going to focus on a particular segment of the business? Are we going to focus on financial performance? Often, salespeople are pulled into these gatherings with very little information on the what the ultimate goal of the meeting will be. This needs to change. How can we expect people to engage when we don't give them an opportunity to prepare?

Make sure to create an agenda and distribute it well ahead of the meeting. If you are going to talk about prospecting or upcoming projects, give the participants the opportunity to gather information. People don't engage when they are uncomfortable sharing on a topic. The sales ego is a fragile thing. No one likes to look stupid in front of their peers. Some of you might be thinking, why do I need an agenda if we talk about the same things each meeting? This leads me to the next suggestion – diversity.

Diversity

Where is it written that all sales meetings have to follow the same format? I think many of us have fallen into this trap and justify it with the word "consistency"? There is nothing wrong with consistency and long as it doesn't lead us to professional laziness. One of the best suggestions that came out of my gathering of sales managers was diversify the focus of the meeting each week.

As an example, the first week of the month could focus on the financials and company performance. The second week could focus on individual wins or challenges. This is where we want the team to really engage. The third week could be a training session with a supplier rep. The fourth week could be a discussion stemming from an article or piece of media assigned by the manager. I found this suggestion fairly intriguing. One of the group members suggested that he would look for an interesting article or abstract (short version of a business book) and distribute it to the meeting participants. During the meeting, they would discuss the piece and look for any opportunity to incorporate some new technique. A friend of mine, Paul Reilly, hosts a podcast called "The Q&A Sales Podcast" where he discusses questions sent in from his listeners. I could envision the team sitting down, listening to one of his short form episodes, and discussing the technique presented.

Obviously, the four different formats are just a suggestion, but what else could you try? Some companies are separated into different divisions or customer segments. Would it be beneficial to focus on one of these segments for a week? Sales managers struggle to get their people to sell the whole basket of goods available. Most salespeople become comfortable with a particular product group, or customer segment, and they rarely step outside their lane. By mixing up the focus of the meeting each time, salespeople will be exposed to areas where they might not be as comfortable.

Roles and Attendees

During our group discussion, one of the members suggested that he was having trouble with team members holding back because the president of the company attended all sales meetings. I get it. The leader of this sales organization wants to know what the sales team is doing to drive revenue. Unfortunately, it has led to very reserved conversation and a reluctance to discuss real challenges. So how do you tell the boss that their presence is having a negative effect on the meetings? Not an easy one.

In this example, the president liked to talk about the numbers – revenue, margin, pricing, etc. This is how their mind functioned. Taking notes from an earlier paragraph, one group member suggested that the president attend the first meeting of the month. In this meeting, they would focus on financials and sales performance. The president's involvement would not be necessary in the other 3 meetings that month. Obviously, the sales manager would have to do a little soft selling of the idea to the president; but most president's I have worked with have the ability to recognize the issue and see where their presence might become a barrier.

Another great way to get team members more involved is to assign leadership roles in the meeting. In other words, let others to the leading for a while. A good manager is willing to let others have the spotlight. This can be particularly effective in those meetings where you are trying to highlight a product group or customer segment. Let someone share their experience and expertise. If someone wants to take the lead on new prospects or projects, let them. The less the manager talks, the more the team engages.

These are just a few suggestions to break up the monotony of the sales meeting. Gatherings are supposed to be productive, and dare I say fun. This is a time to swap wins and losses. It can be a time to vent about customers that annoy us to no end. It is a galvanizing time, but don't let the banter get you too far off track. Sales meetings should take no longer than 55 minutes. I will leave you with a quip from one of my former mentors, Dr. Rick Johnson, "If you really want to keep meetings short, take away the chairs." Good luck and know that I am always here to help.

About the Author:
Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com