Welcome to the Era of Sales Agility

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Leff, you run the Sales Institute at Florida State University. What is the current state of sales education around the world?

Great question...Unfortunately, the answer isn't that simple. In the US, sales programs in universities have exploded. When I started at FSU in 2008, there were roughly 30 universities where sales was a formal area of study. Fast forward to 2018 and there are almost 75 universities with formal sales programs with another 50 in the early stages of program development.

However, I don't believe we are seeing that type of growth across the rest of the world. There are pockets in Europe where formal sales programs are taking root in the universities. The UK is beginning to see nice growth, as well as in Norway and Finland. The number of sales programs dwindles to just one or two as you go further east.

It's also important to mention that most of the growth at American universities has been at the undergraduate level. There is still a glaring lack of sales and sales management education at the MBA level in the US, but a few schools are beginning to experiment with Master’s programs.

You've conducted some fascinating new research to find the 'best' sales methodology, how did that topic come about?

In early 2012, there was a great deal of “noise” in the market related to the effectiveness of different sales methodologies. Obviously, consultative and value selling strategies were prevalent in the market, but there were new methodologies emerging that suggested that high-performing sales reps actually provoke their customers into new ways of thinking about problems and solutions. So a group of companies asked me to investigate the effectiveness of these different methodologies. Two years, four studies, and over 3000 salespeople later, we had some pretty interesting insights to share.

So what did you learn?

Well, the big “ah-ha” was that high-performing salespeople aren’t consultative sellers, they’re not
value sellers, they’re not relational sellers, and they’re not provoking sellers. High performing salespeople are ALL of these. What our research showed was that high performing salespeople are incredibly agile; they have the ability to shift between different selling methodologies depending on the situation that they are facing.

Likewise, underperforming salespeople use no real methodology at all, which should come as no surprise. But what was interesting was that average salespeople, the middle 50%-60% of the sales organization were adept at one selling approach and had a tendency to use it over and over again, no matter what the situation.

So, the conclusion of the research was that sales leaders were asking the wrong question. It’s not, what selling methodology is right for their organization...its what selling methodologies are right for common situations that the sales organization faces?

What are the implications of these findings for sales training going forward?

Another great question. I believe that our research calls into question what companies (and universities) have been doing all these years with a “one-size-fits-all” approach to sales. The overwhelming majority of sales training programs are designed for sellers to approach every sales opportunity the same way. But assuming the research is correct, this training is actually training what average salespeople do, not top-performers.

Since the original research, we’ve seen some top sales organizations begin to embrace a more agile sales approach where salespeople are taught multiple sales strategies that can be used in different situations. In fact, we’ve even designed a new training program that puts “selling agility” as the main objective; it’s designed to help salespeople be “fluent” in different ways to sell.

Is anyone already using this approach? Do you have any real-world proof that it works?

They are, yes. We recently worked with a major industrial supply company that wanted to help their salespeople be more agile in their approach to selling. We identified the key situations that these salespeople face on a regular basis and the strategies that have the highest chances of success in each. Then we launched a training program that teaches reps how to adjust across situations and the results have been dramatic. In the first year, the company achieved an 8% growth rate against a 4% growth target.

Won’t this more ‘agile’ approach to selling substantially complicate sales management and coaching?

No, in fact quite the opposite is true. By building agility in sales approaches based on different situations, sales managers have a more prescriptive set of factors to coach. Part of coaching is diagnosing where reps are struggling in their approach to sales. The agility approach to selling strategy allows managers to think through whether a rep’s inability to move a sale forward is due to misidentification of the selling opportunity or is due to the inability to execute the right sales strategy. In some ways, it creates a coaching checklist that managers can use to determine where reps are getting stuck in specific types of opportunities.

How does technology such as CRM or Artificial Intelligence play into this discussion?

I think that CRM and AI systems can be very important in helping companies identify the types of opportunities or situations they face regularly. These systems can alert management when it appears that new situations are emerging in the market as well. Finally, these systems can become dynamic coaches to salespeople by providing a set of suggested steps the sales person should take based on the situation.

Leff Bonney is also VP of Research and Product Innovation at Vantage Point. Find out more about Leff here.