

Old-School Selling Doesn't Cut the Mustard in the New World

As media reflection on the GFC and its infamously long tail finally taper out, the sharper players in the civil engineering and construction sector will be looking to maximise its lessons and convert these to more positive bequests.

In those quarters of the sector that manufacture products (as opposed to selling services), sales teams – as an organisation's revenue catalysts – were at the coalface of the phenomenon. Corporate leaders in these companies, therefore, would do well to start their search for "growth" lessons there.

Sales personnel remember anything but fondly the experience: accounts fell over, contracts were re-neged on, "sure sales" dissolved and pipelines emptied out in all directions. Sales and senior management rallied together to identify the best courses of remedial action in an environment where the desired effect refused to result from traditional reactionary measures.

If they weren't already obvious, a little focused reflection will give rise to some quickly-established findings. Among them:

"Order takers" relying on established routes and territories were weeded out in a marketplace in which even the most standard expenditures came under the axe. Selling by incentive – an automatic response to the financially stressed environment – didn't save the day for many of these operatives. And specials and promotions suddenly became a whole lot less meaningful in the face of massively up-scaled competitive behaviour.

Meantime, sales personnel relying primarily on the strength of relationships (including but not limited to those liberal with their corporate box invitations and similar approaches) also found themselves on less sure ground. There's nothing like sternly CEO-mandated cost-slashing to test loyalties.



A third type of sales operative – equally long overdue for an introduction to more strategic methods and approaches – went into overdrive in this tougher selling environment. The enduringly old-school "present, deal with objections, then close" operator may initially have seemed like just the artillery to roll out in a resistant marketplace, but even a slightly longer-range view has proved, or will prove, this an equally outdated mode of doing business.

While my discussions with various CEOs indicate degrees of awareness of the need to evolve towards more skilled and sophisticated selling approaches, there appears to be a universal preference to leave the matter to their group sales managers and human resource departments to address. To their detriment. It's a

cultural issue, and all cultural change starts at the top. Meantime, the service-oriented sector (comprising, for example, the industry's mid and top tier constructors, companies in which salespeople aren't salespeople they're "business development managers"), had its own special challenges.

Entire project pipelines dried up almost overnight. Those projects that were left to bid for, required (or those bidding for them would have greatly benefited from) highly competent, proficient pre-contract strategy and activity.

I would like to write that organisational leaders recognised this and worked with their people to rise to that challenge. Sadly, that's not the case in the many instances I witnessed. Obviously, projects were still won in this demanding and complex bidding arena but, from my observations and research, this was rarely due to any particularly stellar performance in this respect.

From my observations, there are two core problems many of our corporate leaders seem to be (persistently) either avoiding or missing. They're inter-related and they're not new. But, in this new,

tougher and profit-lean environment they're really holding organisations back.

The first area of concern is the scant appreciation of the real skill set of a genuinely peak-performing BD, or a salesperson of any other title. With their unrealistic expectation that two generally opposing personality characteristics can be found in one person, most companies set the scene for a half-performance by a BD right there at the hiring stage.

Recruiters and their clients expect of BDs the personality, street smarts and sociability to "oil the wheels" of a relationship, along with the thick skin to take the rejection that also comes with the territory. At the same time, they expect him or her to possess the sensitivity to read and intuit the client or customer, along with the tenacity, inquisitiveness, logic, information-ordering, analytical and strategic thinking skills to comprehend the client or customer organisation's bigger picture, and to identify a competitively superior and profitable solution.

It's a big ask of an individual. There's the odd multi-talented superstar, but they're rare. And in their absence, most companies take the honed social skills offering over the deep thinker.

I can cite the following example in which an established client of mine, acting on some level of recognition of this issue, called me in to perform the tasks they would have assigned to a BD of the latter variety, if they'd had one. It went like this:

One of Australia's largest construction sector "tier ones" wanted to break into the highly coveted Defence market. It was a sector they'd not only neglected for at least half a decade but also one in which they had turned out a less-than-stellar project result prior to that.

The Australian Defence market was gearing up to enjoy some large and prestigious projects, and my client's competitors had the majority toe-hold. To say the least, my client was coming from a long-shot and long-rusty position; the immediate priority was to understand the uncompromising world of Defence procurement, along with the characteristics and imperatives of the projects for which the company was qualified and wished to bid.

I investigated the status quo, and formulated a detailed, step-by-step strategy for the company to follow in achieving its desired turnaround image and performance with this audience. I also produced a detailed research piece and strategy for a flagship Defence project due to come to market within a year or two of that time, a project the company went on to win resoundingly.

The moral of the story lies in the asking of the question, "What if my client organisation had given that responsibility to any of the 'wheel-oiler only' BD types?"

The second issue leaders need to cast their eyes downward and notice is the often missing or dysfunctional communication channels from BDs back into the organisation – whether those links should be with bid team managers and members, subject matter specialists, or contract and procurement people.

Put simply, companies aren't placing sufficient emphasis on the BD's performance as a conduit of quality client or customer intelligence. (That, by the way, applies to all B2B industries, not only the civil engineering/infrastructure sector.) From my vantage point as a strategist in the pursuit arena, I can see that quality information isn't being gathered to start with. Even less information of any real value is being conveyed back to the critical points within the organisation, to recipients who could analyse that information and feed it into the strategy formulation process, if one existed. Which it rarely does.

Some organisations, recognising at least the information-gathering

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and capturing component of the problem, hire in consultants or implement software-based document-and-share systems in an attempt to address the issue. I haven't seen many work particularly well. In a non-infrastructure example, one global IT corporation I consulted to (a company that placed exclusive value on wheel-oiling personality values in its BDs) endeavoured to solve this problem with a hideously expensive software program.

The BDs resisted it like the plague. To them, there was nothing more boring than returning from a nice long lunch with a client or prospect and having to fill in a form that required them to remember answers to questions they probably hadn't asked. Consultants were brought in, to no avail. Desperate to justify the expenditure, management resorted to begging, cajoling and later mandating the system's use. It remained, at best, an exercise that generated template-value, inch-deep information and little in the way of genuine strategic insights.

A team of BDs out of the analytical, research-oriented and strategic thinking mould would have generated valuable information with or without a software tool.

The moral of that particular story is that, try as you might, you can't make a square-peg operative work effectively in a round-hole environment, even with the use of expensive software or the employment of impressively-credentialed consultants.

If an organisation were in a position where it were forced to choose between hiring a high-energy, sharp-talking socialiser and a

deep-thinking, detail-conscious strategic thinker for a BD role, my advice would be – assuming the latter possesses at least a decent and workable personality – to opt for the thinker. We're living in a new world that calls for new skills, and his or her skill set is among them.

This new world of intense competition and markedly increased customer or client expectation is one that also calls for a genuinely "whole-of-organisation" approach – and a clearer appreciation of what that actually looks like in practice.

To the extent that a sales or business development team resists a culture shift to this more analytical, more strategic, more communicative and unified approach, it prevents the organisation from reaching its full potential. And the leader that allows his or her company to stagnate in this manner in these fast-moving, fast-changing times, does so to the very great peril of that organisation.

About Jordan Kelly

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