# Creating a Sales Team for Maximum Performance

VALUESELLING ASSOCIATES

The proven formula for accelerating sales results

# Building a Sales Team for Maximum Performance

Every sales manager's dream is to build or manage a team of highly productive sales professionals. But what exactly are the critical skills and traits of a top sales executive?

- High personal energy and strong work ethic
- An understanding of client issues and needs, and how to proactively develop relationships to address those needs
- Ability to create ongoing profitability in existing accounts
- Ability to cross-sell the entire product line
- Knowledge and skills of where and how to call at all levels within a company
- Ability to generate new business
- Consistent ability to exceed company sales quotas
- Loyalty and longevity with the company
- A strong sense of purpose and belief in the value of their organization

Many sales teams have one or two of these individuals; however, most sales managers would prefer to have all of their professionals meet this profile. So how do we build the skills within our existing team or create a profile to hire the top performers in the first place?

In this paper, we will focus on the top five skills required to build a sales team for maximum performance. These include:

1. Understanding our client's business issues
2. Knowing what value is to our clients
3. Accessing the actual decision maker
4. Operating from a mutually-agreed upon plan
5. Implementing a simple, repeatable sales process

So let's look at each of these skills individually.

## 1. Understand Our Client's Business Issues

The traditional approach to developing a sales team includes having them sit through a high-powered, fast-paced presentation. This presentation usually includes a long product slide set and a glossy brochure with a list of features. In this case, our salesperson is expected to learn everything about the products and services we offer in a short period of time. The goal with this approach is to make our salespeople "solution" experts.

What usually happens, though? The salesperson quickly becomes saturated with product information. They know what the product does but they may not understand why a customer would want or need these products. And if they get lucky enough to be in front of the client, when they lead with a pitch on the "product", the eyes of the client glaze over, and the salesperson rarely gets the sale. This is primarily because the salesperson has mastered their product knowledge but has not developed the skill to uncover the reason the client would care about the product.

Certainly a sales executive needs to understand the capabilities of the products and services they represent. Yet this alone is not enough. Instead of merely attempting to fill their heads with knowledge about the capabilities of their products or services, we need to expand our approach. We need to help them understand what problems our product line can solve and why solving these problems can be critical to our clients' business success. Ultimately, we need to teach our sales executives to understand why our clients would care about what the product can solve in their business.

To remedy this situation, we need to ask ourselves "who cares?", and ask it about every feature of the product, then list the likely business issue for the buying executive's role that each feature addresses and the problems it will resolve. With

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this approach, we are turning our salespeople into “problem experts”. Such experts are more consultative in nature and will be able to integrate our solution into the context of our client’s business.

For example, one of our clients is a leading software company. They asked us to help them improve their sales within their professional services offering. After several years of pushing their capabilities with glossy marketing brochures, they were only able to build a $2M service business. This was less than 1% of their overall revenue and was unacceptable to them.

What we suggested was that they transition the sales team from being “solution experts” to “problem experts”. This called for the sales team to learn the skills of probing for business issues and problems that their services could address. The sales force was then tasked with the goal of having each sales call include a conversation about their client’s problems and business issues. With that simple change, professional service sales jumped to $100M the next year.

## 2. Know What “Value” Is To Your Client

Value — perceived or real, personal or business — is the only thing that separates one product or alternative from another. Value is the client’s perception of the impact a solution will have on a business issue. It is always a combination of tangible and intangible components. The value-oriented sales executive can link the unique value of their solutions to their business objectives and issues.

The better we are able to help your client link the value in your solution to their business and personal objectives, the stronger the buy-in and motivation to take action.

So how do we determine what “value” is to our clients? We suggest the following:

- Research your client’s business objectives and potential unresolved business issues
- Determine the problems that may make the business issue difficult to resolve
- Identify the uniqueness in your solution that can be applied to overcome the problems, and, therefore, resolve the client’s business issue
- Understand the business objectives, business issues, and problems in terms of quantifiable metrics and personal impact

Every company has unresolved yet important business issues. They are all related to the overall objectives of increasing revenue, increasing profits, increasing market share, and improving cash flow. Examples of business issues include:

- Cost management
- Competitive challenges or losses (market share)
- Quality
- Time to market
- Time to revenue

With each of these business issues come many problems. Typical examples include:

- Additional or unnecessary steps
- Lack of skill or training in new areas
- Difficulty securing personnel or resources
- Changes in technical or regulatory support requirements
- Mistakes common to manual processes

Additionally, every executive has something personal to gain from solving a top business issues, such as:

- A promotion
- A bonus
- Increased credibility
- Being perceived as “the good guy”, a pioneer, doing the right thing, making a difference

**It is only after we have identified the critical business issue, its underlying problems, the value of solving these problems, and who has the authority to act, that we are in a position to move forward and close the deal.**

Finally, every problem and every business issue has a cost or impact. There is cost in doing something; there is also cost in doing nothing. Therefore, our objective is to enable the client to see the value from their perspective, not ours. Also, it is more critical than ever that the value metrics we create with the client are time sensitive and demonstrate payback quickly.

Uncovering these value metrics can be achieved by asking probing questions, such as:

- "How much time are you spending on chasing inventory information?"
- "How much delay did that cause… and how does that translate to revenue production?"
- "You had mentioned quality issues, what is your client return rate?
- "How does this affect you?"
- "Are you impacted by this personally?"

It is only after we have the identified the critical business issue, its underlying problems, the value of solving these problems, and who has the authority to act, that we are in a position to move forward and close the deal. In the client's mind, value is directly linked to resolving their business issues, not by solving individual problems or projects.

Anything short of revealing the connection between value and the business issue means that we are expecting our prospects to make this linkage without us. And how likely is it that our prospects are motivated to finish the job for us?

Connecting value appropriately is often the missing ingredient in a successful sales cycle.

**Remember this:**

> ***A mediocre salesperson tells;***
> ***A good salesperson explains;***
> ***A superior salesperson demonstrates;***
> ***A great salesperson inspires buyers to see the benefits [value] as their own.***
> ***(Anonymous)***

## 3. Accessing the Actual Decision Maker

Research and experience tell us that not only are sales cycles increasing in length, but that more and more people at higher levels in the organization are involved in the client's decision process. On average, sales cycles are increasing in length by 20%, with three to four additional people involved in even the smallest purchase.

In today's market, we have people on the buying team who act in a variety of different roles: the gatekeeper, the economic thinker, the influencers, and the power person:

- The gatekeeper is the lowest level buyer who has veto power and may keep vendors away from decision-makers. The gatekeeper can also be an administrative assistant who answers the phone.
- The economic thinker is responsible for getting the best buy. This is the person who can do the negotiation, but they never use the product they are buying. It is the economic thinker's goal to limit differentiation to only price.
- The influencers are the additional people on the buying team who give recommendations for making a decision but who do not have final decision making power. Some of these people may have the clout to say no but not the authority to say yes.
- The power person is the highest-level decision maker who has the most influence of those on the buying team in the final decision.

Working with the various people on the buying team during the sale may prolong the process, but it builds sponsorship, credibility, and rapport between the seller and various buyers. So how do we gain access to the power person when so many people are involved?

Imagine that our target prospect in a new account is actually a fortress. Four walls have been built over time due to hundreds of other sales people trying to gain access to the key executives in this account. These walls are diligently maintained by gatekeepers, voice mail screening, and simply ignoring your attempts for a meeting until you go away.

If we wanted to break down the walls of any fort, would we shoot only one cannon ball or only ram a single wall once? No, we would use several attempts — simultaneously — to find the weak point and break down the wall. The same concept applies to prospecting using a method called A.I.M.: Anxiety, Influence, and Motivation

Since we are not really using armaments, what would cause anyone, including a high-level executive, to let down their walls? That's where A.I.M. comes into play.

In a nutshell, here's how it works. We identify our targeted executive prospect, and then we identify their boss, their boss's boss, their peers, and their administrative assistants. Next we develop a list of many targets. Then we compose a letter to all of the targets requesting a meeting with the following A.I.M. components:

- A comment that we are sending a similar letter to the other identified targets within their company, specifically by name.
- Identify our objective, which is that we are trying to establish the person on your list who would be most interested in a conversation with you about the subject you are proposing.
- Include any recognizable names of other clients or any credibility building points that will elevate their impression of you personally.
- A statement that you are focusing on their industry and are in the process of setting up similar meetings with the other key players (competitors). Be sure that you do this.
- A cited reference example of another organization with a short summary of the business issue you addressed with your solution, the problems that they were facing, and the value that they accrued as a result of implementing your solution.
- A promise to follow up with their administrator to schedule a meeting.

Within three days, follow up with the administrator for each target, repeating the same A.I.M. steps verbally of why you are calling, who else you sent the letters to, and a brief example of your success at another company.

Why does it work so well? Most people react unconsciously to Anxiety, Influence, and Motivation. When all three are applied at once, their emotional trigger is highly likely to cause them to at least seek to understand.

In the highly dynamic world of selling, there are two very desirable words: "yes" and a quick "no". The slow "no" robs sales people of their most precious asset — time. The quick "no" allows sales people to move onto opportunities they can win. The most significant contributor to the slow "no" is calling at non-decision making levels being blocked from executive-level access.

Spending all your time talking to middle managers and influencers of prospective clients not only creates a slow "no" proposition, it commits your level of contact in the account. Once established at the power person level they often will control your access to the power level where the real decisions are made. Always calling high first can more than double your company's win percentage.

## 4. Operate from a Mutually-Agreed Upon Plan

At some point in our sales career, we've probably asked at least one prospect some variation of the "so what will it take to get your business?" question. Many sales professionals integrate this question into every prospect engagement.

The bigger question is, though, did we commit their answer — the mutually agreed sales plan — into a written confirmation? In other words, did we send a follow-up letter or e-mail to the prospect confirming our understanding of the mutually agreed upon plan in order to receive the purchase order or check?

The written plan might include such steps as demonstrations, benchmarks, evaluations, loaners, talking to references, literature review, etc. Now comes the good part... *anticipate that our prospect will **not** live up to the agreement!*


" PERHAPS A LITTLE TOO HIGH PRESSURE, HIGBY "

Why is this a good thing? It's a good thing if our prospect changes the agreement, because we are then within bounds to ask for something in return. Ideally, ask for something that will avoid further delay of the sales cycle, since delays are likely to occur if they are not addressed early on in the process.

For example, let's say our prospect tells us that we will get the business if we successfully demonstrate our product or service and set up a reference for a testimonial. Then we commit our "agreement" to writing. After completing these proof steps, we go for closure only to hear the prospect say that now they would like to try out our product or service for 30 days to be sure that it will address their needs.

We can acknowledge that we are a little disappointed because our original agreement did not include this step; however, we understand that they need to be confident in their decision, so we offer a compromise. We agree to provide the evaluation if they will provide us with ___________ (fill in what you anticipate you will need to avoid further delays to their decision cycle).

Our compromise might include a request for a discussion to reconfirm the value that this product or service will provide and a meeting with the ultimate decision-maker to present these findings.

Having a written plan allows us to stay in control of the sales cycle and avoid confusion on milestones and the future business relationship. Not having a plan relinquishes control of the sales cycle to our prospect.

## 5. Implement a Simple, Repeatable Sales Process

Have you ever really inspected why our salespeople struggle? We have a team of highly qualified sales executives. They are busy. They are professional. They have great skills. Yet they fail to produce the appropriate business results.

There's one key reason for this: the absence of conscious competence. When an individual lacks a simple, repeatable sales process, they cannot understand why things go well and, more importantly, they cannot fix stalled or broken sales cycles because they don't know why things are not going well. The impact of this to our organization and team is lack of consistency, ineffective management coaching, and inaccurate forecasting.

**Lack of Consistency:** Not having an organization-wide sales process creates a lack of consistency when dealing with clients. Each of our salespeople will use their own approach, which may even differ from client to client. This is not to say that sales can be mechanized, because it cannot. Yet high performing organizations are methodical in how the approach opportunities, qualify opportunities, allocate resources, and commit forecasts.

**Ineffective Management Coaching:** When a sales team lacks a practical, systematic sales process, and each individual is using their own, there's no way for our sales management team to effectively coach and mentor. To be an effective coach, sales managers must be experts in the process themselves. How can a sales manager be an expert in the individual processes each salesperson is using? Just as a coach of a football team needs to be able to demonstrate, explain and correct the skills his players exhibit, the same is true for sales managers.

**Inaccurate Forecasting:** Accurate forecasting is typically the number two issue for sales leadership. The first is making the revenue plan. A sales leader's credibility and executive reputation depend on delivering the revenue plan and understanding the business pipeline and revenue to take to the bank for the organization.

A methodical sales process that is integrated into pipeline management will yield more accurate results and achieve forecast.

Having a sales process will help build a repeatable, scalable sales program that can be duplicated in each of our prospects' buying cycles. Without a sales process, we just end up with isolated sales techniques.

Once your team is trained, it is important to have a reinforcement program for long-term success. The learner who is continually and successively exposed to new material in regular intervals is more likely to integrate and implement the new material. Training is not an event, rather a process to develop the behaviors and processes that the organization deemed critical to success.

## Conclusion

So let's go back to where we started: the *perfect* salesperson. Is it really only a dream? We don't think so. We ***can*** consciously hire based on high-performance traits and continue to build on these skills as well.

In today's competitive marketplace, success in selling is more challenging than ever before. It requires a higher level of skill, as well as client relationship savvy. Clients want — even expect and demand — platinum-level service along with top-quality products. They want ethical, professional, honest relationships with their sales professionals.

They want custom-made solutions to their short- and long-term problems. They want a salesperson who understands their business and has something to offer in solving their business issues and achieving their business objectives.

A well-performing sales team means increased profitability, momentum, and growth for our organization. Additionally, success breeds success. A well-performing team means increased retention and improved recruitment opportunities.

Let's equip each of our salespeople with the five elements discussed, and we'll be on the road to creating a sales team of maximum performance.

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### About ValueSelling Associates

ValueSelling Associates, based in Rancho Santa Fe, California, is the creator of the ValueSelling Framework®, the sales methodology preferred by sales executives around the globe. Since 1991, ValueSelling Associates has helped FORTUNE 1000 business-to-business sales organizations compete and win in markets crowded with seemingly similar products and services. ValueSelling Associates has maintained its position as a leader in the industry for nearly 20 years by continually evolving to meet the new challenges sales forces face. Clients turn to the experts at ValueSelling Associates for classroom training, online training and consulting services that yield immediate impact, repeatable strategies and sustainable results. With the ValueSelling Framework, sales teams of all sizes learn the secret to qualifying prospects and converting them to profitable customers. Inside and outside sales teams alike will benefit from flexible training, consultation and a customizable toolset that can be adapted and implemented to drive business performance up.

ValueSelling Associates has offices in North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific, with headquarters in San Diego, CA. For more information or to contact an Associate, visit the ValueSelling Associates website at **www.valueselling.com,** or call 858.759.7954.