

Looking beyond numbers

MARK MCCARTHY argues that sales superstars are not always what their figures suggest

It is standard practice for sales management to spend a large percentage of time on coaching and support that focuses on the top and bottom quartiles of the sales team: the top quartile because it was fun and interesting to be with the best-performing people; the bottom quartile because of its obvious need and to support the company's performance management policy.

Both groups of people got this attention primarily through the 'numbers' associated with them. The kernal of the team would merrily go about their business with minimum support from the manager, unless directly requested, occasionally bumping into a coaching session should they slip into the bottom quartile of results for too many months in a row.

This may be an over-simplification, but it will no doubt resonate with many managers and salespeople. (Incidentally, my thoughts and comments primarily concern B2B field-based sales, complex product selling and multi-level relationship development.)

I have several clients for whom I facilitate 'onboarding' or orientation sessions for new salespeople. The first question I ask them is, "Have you joined this company to fail or be mediocre?" Clearly, no hands go up. I probe further as to why this is the case. Answers fly back along the lines of: "No one wants to fail". But the sad fact of life is that the majority of these highly motivated, eager, previously successful people will fail or be regarded as mediocre. Most of these new people are likely to be in that group around the mean average.

I believe that organisations drive this outcome. The organisation lets them down, not the other way around. Rarely have I found a salesperson, even in the lower percentile group, who is content with their lack of success.

Reasons for this outcome typically range from a lack of equity of resources, poor quota allocation and poor recruitment methods to personality-based issues between the manager and salesperson.

A few years ago, I found a sales leader who believed that he knew without doubt who his top performers were. He had been out with them, spoken to their clients, colleagues and managers, and clearly all the numbers supported the label of 'top performer'. I was not so sure, but he was adamant - so much so that he agreed to support an experiment of mine. (See my last article on experimentation in *Winning Edge*, November/December 2011). He identified a top performer and a third quartile performer, two people who had been consistently in these ranking positions for at least two years. We swapped their portfolios, which happened to be geographically based and had existed for the same period of time. For the sake of commercial prudence, we let the high performer's



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customers know that the experiment was taking place.

The hypothesis was that the high performer would still outperform the lower performer and that the lower performer would be likely to decrease the performance of the high performer's portfolio.

The results, however - which were unbelievable to the sales leader - showed no improvement in either portfolio. We made several observations:

- A number of the top performer's clients praised the new ideas and insights from the temporary sales executive

- The top performer took a significant morale and confidence knock

- The low performer left the company three months later. The reason was that the experience had made him realise that he was not, in fact, a low performer at all

- The sales leader immediately requested a full review of all portfolios, associated quotas and sales management time distribution.

The last point was a start, but not the complete solution I was hoping for, given the data we generated.

One way to increase sales without new hires, expensive training or additional financial incentives is to focus on the kernal of your salespeople - those outside the top and bottom quartiles - and find out what is keeping them mediocre. Get past the lagging indicators and consider how these people can improve productivity. Are you asking for a fair result from the resources they have been given? You will be surprised at the momentum that can be achieved from people who, though previously judged to be moribund, are given proactive sales management attention and a fair crack of the whip.

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