Account Reviews

The process is all about inspection

by: Larry Coco, Coco Training & Consulting Inc.

Let me set the scene for this article. It is a Monday morning after a great weekend and you are looking forward to starting the business week on a positive note. As you drive to the office, you think about all the things you want to accomplish. You have planned meetings with your sales reps. Their forecasts and activity sheets from the prior week are due and you need to review them.

As you walk in the door, you are met with "stuff" that needs to be taken care of. You feel the time crunch, so you make some hasty short-term decisions. What happens next? Problems occur. Now you have more fires to put out, which means you have even less time. Does this sound familiar?

Truth be told, my goal in sharing this scenario was to grab your attention by bringing back some memories that would cause you to feel some pain. I can assure you that the rest of this article is dedicated to getting you to a better place, so let's keep going.

Years ago, I was introduced to a business approach called PDCA (Plan, Do, Check and Act).

The first step in this methodology is planning. As I travel the country, for the most part I see that office technology dealers are good at coming up with an initial plan or idea — for example, a new marketing promotion designed to drive a solution that will increase both revenue and profit.

The next step is doing. I think we are okay there as well. At this point, we meet with the sales team, fire them up and launch the program.

Now we come to the critical step — checking (another term for it is "inspection"). This is where we really fall apart. The bottom line here is that we do not have a true process in place to communicate effectively with our field managers and sales reps to know who they are talking to, what the next steps are, where we are in the sales cycle and if the program will be effective.

The final step is to act, since any plan worth its salt will require necessary adjustments to be made. I think you know where I am going with this. If we do not have a solid review process, then how can proper adjustments come into play? The simple answer is that they cannot.

Let's put the spotlight on an effective account review process for you, your managers and your sales teams. Why do we need one in the first place? Here are some benefits:

- A review process allows you to maintain better control over your business.
- It improves forecasting accuracy.
- It allows for larger transaction takedowns.
- It better positions your reps as "solution providers." (We say we do this, but do we really live it?)
- It allows management to observe and drive the daily behaviors of sales reps.
- It provides much-needed direction for sales reps.
- It focuses on activities and results. (I cannot emphasize this one enough. I think we all agree that highly valued activities lead to good results.)
- It allows the sales manager and sales reps to communicate at a higher level through effective questioning. (For those who have embraced an MPS strategy, these valued opportunities should now become a point of focus.)
- It promotes better teamwork and thinking.

Now let's get back to Monday morning. It is a great opportunity for a manager to spend 20 to 30 quality minutes with each of his (or her) sales reps. Put a sign-up sheet on your door so every rep knows what time his appointment is. In this weekly meeting, each sales rep should be prepared to participate and discuss the following:

- The appointment schedule
- A weekly summary, including key activities the rep performed in the previous week and the activities they are expecting to perform in the coming week
- An updated forecast
- Time and territory management
- An updated database/CRM tool
- Open issues

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It may be a good idea for every sales rep to scan and send his completed weekly summary and updated forecast to his manager every Friday before leaving the office for the weekend. We are in the technology business, right? As a good friend of mind always says: "Eat what you cook."

A quick story: I was recently in a dealership working with a sales manager. Her reps had rolled up their weekly forecasts and she, in turn, pushed them up to the president's desk. Of the $105,000 forecasted, $37,000 represented one opportunity. I asked the manager a few questions. She did not have a good feel for the account, so I asked the sales rep to visit with us. He told us he had cold-called the account the previous week and found out the company had a trial in place from a competitor. He had a contact name, but had not performed a needs assessment, had not proposed a solution and had not met the decision maker. Did this really belong on the forecast? Not a chance. The moral of the story is to never assume anything. Sometimes we let things like this slip through the cracks and that is unacceptable.

It is important for everyone involved to have a clear understanding of what you are looking to accomplish and what high-level questions will get you there. I would contend that an effective account review process is quality time with your major accounts (your people) designed to strategize key activities and potential accounts, uncover specific solution opportunities and build the mighty pipeline.

One way to really upset a sales rep is to have him create reports that, at best, get a quick glance from the manager, or are never really inspected at all. Sometimes we wonder why a sales rep will roll his eyes and become resistant when required to fill out reports, activity summaries, etc. Granted, it may be that the rep has not done the work (and this is often the case). It may also be that the rep views the added work as a worthless activity since he sees it piling up on the manager's desk, not being made a priority. Any way you cut it, it is a lose-lose for all.

Now let's move on to the monthly plan and review, which can take place a day or two following the month's close. These are meetings scheduled between the manager and sales rep that should be at least one hour long. I believe it may be a great idea for owners, vice presidents of sales, directors, etc., to attend these meetings as well. As a great quote says: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Normally, this monthly meeting can include the following:

- A review of the previous month's forecast. "Did you get your share of your commitment? Why or why not?"
- A discussion about the current/upcoming month's forecast.
- A review of the rep's monthly activities.
- A "big hit" list that includes all product and solution opportunities that are greater than $25,000. (Note: Whatever number works for you is fine. The important thing is to make the quota busters a top priority.)
- Focused account penetration. Perhaps you assign 10 targeted accounts each month to your sales rep and you tell him that next month you will discuss progress made.
- Year-to-date performance versus expectations.
- Sales strategies and trends.
- An action plan going forward.

Now let's put this all into perspective. None of it is easy unless you spend time making a plan and implementing it with precision. It requires both structure and process. Always remember that your top priority is to develop elite, high performers. Now think back to those Monday mornings and realize that if you are getting involved in things that are taking away from your top priority, there will be disconnects and a lack of direction. Frustrations will build.

When you share with your employees the importance of having a strong account review process — a true inspection process (emphasize that you are doing this to support them) — it should align everyone to the overall goals and objectives of your organization. In other words, it allows your employees to know where they stand and how they contribute to the overall success of the team and company.

Keep in mind that once you begin moving in this direction, the meetings and processes become easier to manage. You are now creating an inspiring culture. So there is your challenge: Be the fire inspector, not the fire chief. ■

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