TURBOCHARGE YOUR SALES ENGINE: THE POWER OF STRATEGIC SALES COACHING
There’s a somewhat famous joke told at the expense of mediocre managers about cost-cutting efforts. “Theoretically, if I cut costs enough, we’ll be profitable without selling any products.” The joke is funny because it’s true. But it’s also tragic in that it represents a certain “boss brain” mindset which still finds refuge in some corners of the business world. Forward-thinking business leaders, however, understand that cost cutting is only one way to attack the bottom line. Perhaps an even more effective approach to improving results is to attack the top-line with aggressive sales growth.

According to McKinsey & Company research, improving sales force performance can give organizations up to a 10% revenue boost. A robust sales engine, then, might be the key ingredient in strong market growth. But just as tuning up your car’s engine tune up has many steps and components, so does tuning up the sales engine. Where do you turn your wrench first?

The usual answer seems to be “give them good training”. And while our roles as training industry insiders should lead us to say a hearty “Amen!” to this answer, sales training seldom measures up to expectations. One well-known study demonstrates that as much as 87% of new information erodes within 30 days of training, which, in economic terms, means that $0.87 of every dollar spent is thrown away. As one wag has joked, the half-life of learning is two weeks, which ought to depress anyone who puts training in place.

We think an often overlooked key is in systematic sales coaching. We recognize that it’s a current fad to talk about coaching and developing a coaching culture, with books a-plenty on offer promising you the “secret” (in fact, Amazon lists over 1800 books with sales coaching as their topic). But the danger with familiarity is contempt, and that runs the risk of the fad passing out of favor. To us, that would be an un-alloyed tragedy. The truth is that systematic sales coaching – that is, coaching applied methodologically and habitually as part of a go-to-market approach – not only gives your sales engine a tune up. It’s more like turbocharging the engine. But don’t take our word for it. The research backs this up.
Huthwaite Research Group conducted studies which demonstrated that systematic sales coaching by front-line sales managers can reduce the sales cycle by as much as 18%. A study by the Conference Executive Board shows that companies with high-quality coaching achieve 102% of their sales goals, contrasted with an average of 83% of goal for the un-coached or nominally coached. According to another study by the Sales Executive Council, sales teams which receive more than three hours of coaching per month achieve 107% of their sales goals, contrasted with 90% for those who receive less than three hours.

It is no wonder that noted sales guru, Neil Rackham, author of the seminal sales book, SPIN® Selling, has called sales coaching by front-line managers the pivotal role for sales performance improvement.

Systematic sales coaching is applied in two specific ways, which we like to call tactical and strategic. Tactical coaching is about improving the face-to-face selling skills of a rep. It is done in real time with the coach observing the rep in action, and then giving him feedback on his performance. Strategic coaching, on the other hand, is about helping individual contributors to manage their sales pipelines and to bring deals to close.

This white paper will discuss six steps to apply strategic coaching to turbocharge your sales engine.
Time is everyone’s scarce resource, so selecting your coaching target is the first and most critical step in the process. Coaches cannot coach everyone equally, so how they apply their coaching time is essential. With tactical coaching, this selection is about WHO to coach. (Generally, coaching experts and the currently available research say to focus on the middle of the performance bell curve, rather than either end. But that is a topic for another day.)

Selecting your coaching target with Strategic Sales Coaching is about helping sellers select the right accounts to put under the coaching microscope. The first step in selecting targets is to eliminate what does not fit into an ideal customer profile. Sales teams are going to have neither the time nor the resources to strategically analyze every available account. Why? The ancient proverb explains it best: if you chase two rabbits, you will catch neither one.

Targeting criteria involve focusing on those opportunities which are desirable and winnable. What makes an opportunity desirable or attractive? The answer is highly individualized, company by company, but there are probably some obvious ones. Revenue and profitability come to mind immediately. Is the customer’s logo attractive? Does the opportunity fit with our long-term strategic plans (e.g., an industry where we want to have presence)? How aligned is the customer with our corporate values (e.g., they are long-term and relationship focused, as opposed to short-term and transactional – although the reverse could also be desirable)?

An opportunity that is winnable depends on how well positioned you are with respect to the competition. This is more than a SWOT or competitive analysis, although that is an important step. It also has to do with your relationships with key stakeholders and decision influencers in the account.

We describe some time-tested and validated approaches in our book, *Premeditated Selling*. Narrowing your focus is the best way to ensure the rabbit is caught.
John Harvey Jones, the late English business thinker, once said: “Planning is an unnatural process; it is much more fun to just do something. The nicest thing about not planning is that failure comes as a complete surprise, rather than being preceded by a period of worry and depression.” We love that sentiment because of its ironic impact. Because the sad truth is that strategic planning falls into the “important but not urgent” category of tasks, and it often gets overlooked. One of the great outcomes of systematic Strategic Coaching is that sellers are forced into doing what their “busy-ness” does not require them do.

Putting a plan down on paper, so to speak, is a challenge of itself. Doing it well requires the assistance of a good strategic sales coach.

Each customer—and each opportunity—is unique. Winning strategies adapt to circumstances and situations, but they invariably involve having a comprehensive understanding of the customer. As we describe in our book, these could involve the decision timeline, the budgeting process, the influencers involved in the decision, the criteria they will use to make their choice, how strongly you are positioned against the competition, as well as other critical insights.

These insights allow the seller to develop an initial strategy. Which internal resources could be brought into the mix? Which customer influencers need to be won over? What aspects of the solution need to be emphasized or strengthened? What lessons learned from prior campaigns can be applied in this opportunity?

A smart strategy is hard to come by if these basic insights are not captured and leveraged. But just as important is to realize that a preliminary strategy should be written in pencil. That is, it needs to be adaptable to changing circumstances and new information.

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Top coaches in any field understand the importance of challenging the sellers on their teams, pushing them beyond what they thought they were capable of doing. People often excel when pushed outside of their comfort zones. The best coaches do not employ a one-size-fits-all methodology, but rather they tailor their approaches according to the individuals they are trying to push. The goal is to help their team break through mental and physical barriers in order to achieve success. In strategic coaching, this often takes the form of asking questions that shake up settled ideas.

Asking questions that merely assess basic, easily-retrievable information on the account doesn’t help formulate new strategic ideas. In helping a seller improve a strategic plan, the job of the sales manager is not to play “stump the rep”, but rather to challenge their assumptions and conclusions about what seems to be happening in their accounts – and just as importantly, what they are planning to do about it and why. It is less “what”, than it is “so what”. Doing this well in coaching demands not only experience in an interrogative approach, but also careful pre-planning around a coaching framework which puts QUESTIONS at the center.

The Right Questions to ask are not simply the smart openers, but also (and more critically) the secondary and tertiary follow-up questions which require the seller to think, analyze, and explain. And it’s these follow-on questions which shake up settled thinking.
As the Harvey-Jones quote above illustrates, we believe that planning is a crucial and often-ignored selling task. We advise clients to put into place programmatic call planning as a way to maximize every value creation opportunity with customers. A good call plan will involve what outcomes you want from the meeting and how will you get there. Obviously, we also believe in programmatic opportunity and account planning. But planning without doing leads to failure. As the Chinese proverb has it: “Talk doesn’t cook rice.” Or to borrow from Shakespeare: “Action is eloquence.”

Successful sales coaches do not just help their sellers plan; they help them put those plans into action. What needs to be done to strengthen our position? Who is responsible for making it happen? When is it going to be done? Establishing a well-thought-out action plan, with time-bound milestones and clearly defined task owners, helps move the theory of the plan to the reality of the deed. It also allows for smart and timely follow-up, helping the coach to “inspect what you expect”. Once this framework is ready, it is all about following up on the agreed action items critical to the strategic plan.

In some cases, when a strategy is not fully executed, it could be because of factors outside the rep’s control. A status check can help in determining if the strategy was faulty or if the execution was poor. While we tend to believe our top performers know how to execute a strategy that was jointly developed. Unfortunately, even top performers may fail to execute the strategy as expected. Therefore, this step allows managers to learn what went well and what didn’t go well. It is through this dialog that an existing strategy can be refined.
There is a proverb in war strategy which applies to strategic coaching and planning. No plan survives contact with the enemy. Or as heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson famously quipped, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” In selling, one of the best questions to ask is “what if”. Rigorous contingency planning – playing out multiple scenarios, thinking through roles, responsibilities, and responses, and rehearsing – is vital to developing a winning strategy. And effective coaching is about prompting sellers to plan for the unexpected. Too often sales managers assume their sellers know what to do and how to do it. We have seen this assumption lead to many good opportunities – and effectively laid out initial strategies – crash and burn in fiery sales carnage.

In every strategic opportunity, there are events happening that possibly could change your course of action. Some of these events could be based upon how, what, or when we are selling into any given account. Putting your strategy in pencil (or erasable ink) is the best way to stay flexible in the face of evolving circumstances.

Systematically applying Strategic Coaching across your sales team will shorten your sales cycles, improve your team’s performance, and increase your top-line growth. It does not just give your sales engine a tune up. It supercharges it to achieve sustainable success.
Meet the Authors

Steve Gielda is the principal partner at Ignite Selling, Inc., a global sales training and consulting company and co-author of Premeditated Selling: Tools for Developing the Right Strategy for Every Opportunity. Steve has spent more than 20 years helping Fortune 1000 companies in the healthcare, manufacturing, distribution, and IT industries to improve their sales performance. His emphasis on building and maintaining strong relationships and his focus on driving business results is what sets him apart with his clients. Steve began his career in sales with Lanier Worldwide, a document management solutions company, eventually becoming a regional manager. He was also vice president of sales and channel management at CTN, an office equipment manufacturing and distribution company. After CTN, Steve worked as a senior sales consultant for Huthwaite, helping to create unique sales training solutions for his clients. Most recently, he was a franchise owner with the Advantage Performance Group consulting and learning firm, and an active partner in building the business of Sales Momentum, a customized sales training organization.

Kevin Jones is the principal partner at Ignite Selling, Inc., a global sales training and consulting company and co-author of Premeditated Selling: Tools for Developing the Right Strategy for Every Opportunity. Kevin has been designing and delivering training solutions that impact people’s lives for last 15 years. Kevin’s goal is to create a learning environment where participants can thrive and where lessons learned can be translated to the field. Kevin has worked in finance, sales, and sales training. It was in sales training that Kevin found his true passion—developing people. Kevin received a B.A. in Business from North Carolina State University, and an M.B.A. from the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Kevin uses his academic exposure and real-world experience to develop training solutions that drive business results. Kevin’s work has enabled him to influence hundreds of companies in more than 30 countries worldwide.
About Ignite Selling, Inc.

Ignite Selling is a sales performance improvement company with over eight decades of combined experience in sales, sales coaching, and sales training. With our strategic sales consulting and learning alignment approach, we design custom programs that are unique to our customers’ needs and enable them to achieve their specific business goals. Our programs use Interactive Learning Maps™ and Competitive Sales Simulations to give learners an engaging and relevant learning experience and prepare them for their real-world challenges. We focus on igniting and inspiring teams to take their sales to the next level.

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