Your salespeople are working from home – give them the sales tools to do it right.

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Over the last few weeks, sales teams all over the world have switched from proactive, in-person selling to working over the phone. Now that the World Health Organization has officially named the coronavirus outbreak a "pandemic," it looks like your reps may be off the road for a while.

Is the world overreacting? Is this a prudent response?

If you're a sales leader, it doesn't matter: You have to hit your goals and it's harder than ever to meet with customers.

Great leaders find a way

Successful sales leaders are used to beating the odds. This particular challenge is brand new, but the good news is that all of your competitors are facing the same problem. That means you don't have to beat the coronavirus – you just have to beat your competitors by ensuring your salespeople are performing better than their counterparts.

In short: Your job is to make your salespeople better at their jobs! Great sales leaders empower sales forces.

The essential selling tools: Hardware + Software + Data

Technology has grown in importance over the years. For outside reps, technology tools have long been important to enhance their primary sales task of calling on customers in person. A laptop, smart phone and some customer data could drive more sales thanks to more calls per day and better calls, too.

During a pandemic, however, sales reps often can't physically call on customers at all. For one thing, many companies are sending their white-collar workers home and so there's no one to call on. In other cases, companies are simply eliminating person-to-person contact wherever possible and that means they're not letting salespeople in the door.

That means your salespeople need to make calls using technology. They need to communicate via voice, video, text and email using their phones and computers. Ironically, the hardware is easy; it's the software that's hard. Many companies expect their reps to make do with Microsoft Office – Outlook, Excel, etc. There's nothing wrong with those tools...other than they're wildly inadequate for driving sales.

Of course, hardware and software do you no good if you don't have the great customer and sales data. And getting the right data in the hands of salespeople is the most difficult challenge of all.

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When you can't meet face-to-face, data drives results

Every good account manager knows the value of good customer data, especially when it can be complimented with timely transactional data. Accurate and complete customer contact data is important, but there's so much more you need:

- Recent order history, including buyer names
- Gross margin levels and trend
- Reporting on product categories purchased
- Spend mix analysis
- Gap analysis
- Contact history
- Quote tracking

Account managers need this data when they're making calls in person, too. But when they're working over the phone:

- Your reps are literally sitting in front of a computer it's very easy to access and update data
- They can't rely as much on interpersonal chemistry

So good data is no longer something to enhance a personal sales call – - it's absolutely vital to making an effective call at all.

Don't let the pandemic mean sales disablement

No one knows how long the current pandemic will last, but the silver lining for sales leaders is that this is a great opportunity to help your reps learn new skills that will help them when times become more "normal" again. They'll learn how to be more effective on the phone (and even dedicated outside reps are on the phone a lot). They'll learn the value of utilizing data to make more effective calls. And they'll become more proficient with technology ranging from video conferencing to software and data.

That means this is the perfect time to introduce a sales focused tool for your sales team. They're in front of their computers or on their mobile phones where they can access the system easily and learn how to use functions like call scheduling and notifications. And they badly need the data contained in a good system.

You need your reps to learn how to be productive while working from home as quickly as possible. So, this isn't the time for a two-year, massive implementation. Instead, choose sales tools that are easy to use, quick to implement and provides customer data from your ERP seamlessly and with little effort.

Pandemics are tragedies but business must continue, or the economic damage makes everything much worse. Your job is to react more quickly and intelligently than your competitors and that means driving sales force productivity even though your reps can't make calls in person. Your reps can beat the competition, but only if you provide them with the right tools.

Even in the last week the game has changed dramatically. The conversation has shifted from driving growth to protecting existing business and limiting or preventing sales erosion. You cannot do this effectively with traditional approaches. The time to change the game is now: Weaponize your sales teams today.

About the author

Ian Heller is the Founder and Senior Partner of Real Results Marketing, a consulting firm that has provided marketing and strategic planning expertise to the distribution industry for 16 years. Ian holds an MBA at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and is a popular writer, speaker and consultant in the distribution industry.

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