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2021: What's Your Plan?

Positioning your sales staff for post-pandemic success

By Jim Peduto

The third quarter of a tumultuous 2020 is in the books, and we are well into the fourth quarter. Businesses everywhere have begun to think about 2021. While no one can predict what the new year will bring, one thing is sure: it won't be anything like 2020, or at least we can hope.

We've seen underlying trends accelerate at warp speed. Working remotely, the use of video conferencing and online ordering all saw dramatic increases. COVID-19 compressed years of change into a few months. It's time to shift our gaze beyond the economic downturn and figure out where to go from here.

Business to business (B2B) selling is at an inflection point. If you haven't already reconsidered your sales model, you are behind the curve. The fundamental question is whether your sales organization (people, processes and structure) is still relevant. Let's dig deeper.

People

The way customers buy is rapidly changing. In a world of information access, pricing transparency and virtual selling, salespeople can no longer sell the way they have always sold. Customers have immediate access to product information, specifications or pricing in just a couple of clicks. A salesperson who is redundant to what is on Google is of no value.

Successful salespeople differentiate themselves and add value by having great business conversations. As a result, the customer learns

something they didn't know and they change their thinking. While fewer than one in 10 salespeople are capable of that approach, the good news is that the skills can be measured, and your team can learn how to sell to a modern buyer.

Process

What does your post-COVID-19 pipeline look like? Many firms have spent months dealing with supply chain issues, personnel challenges, and pretty much everything but growing their business. If you've been fortunate because your firm has done

well selling COVID-19-related supplies, the party may be coming to an end.

Has your sales team created a pipeline of opportunities that will propel your organization to the next level? Does your sales leadership have the skills to coach your team and provide meaningful growth?

Structure

Even though markets have changed and the way customers buy has changed, most distributor sales organizations look like they did in 1980. As a result, selling costs are too high and sales productivity too low. Most distributors are leaving hundreds of basis points on the table and have put their business at risk.

A modern sales organization should grow faster than its competitors while increasing gross margin and reducing selling costs. If you already are, that's great. If not... why not?

We have been through a lot; 2020 was a year unlike any other. The firms that will emerge the strongest have invested in their sales organizations and are building capability that their competitors do not have. They will have a sustainable competitive advantage.

As Jack Welch famously said, "Control your own destiny or someone else will." **SM**

