

In sales, **Strategy**
is the game plan.

Execution

is the name of the game.

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EVEN THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SALES STRATEGIES

WON'T SUCCEED UNLESS THE

SKILLS TO EXECUTE THEM HAVE

BEEN EMBEDDED IN THE SALES ORGANISATION.



Ask a results-focused sales executive, “What do your salespeople need most right now?” and the answer will likely be, “Sales strategy! They need better account plans.” This belief explains why so many companies invest heavily in sales strategy training, programs to help the sales team figure out the “who, what, when, and why” of their deals: *who* they need to contact, *what* they need to accomplish, *when* they need to act, and *why* these actions matter.

There’s just one problem: Where’s the “*how*”?

Although companies correctly assume that sales strategy is critical to closing better business faster, even the most comprehensive sales strategies won’t succeed unless the skills to *execute* them are embedded in the sales organisation.

Think about it. Strategy is *what* to do; execution is *how* to do it. Sales strategy is the game plan, but execution is the game itself. And in that game many sales teams focus too much on developing strategy...and not enough on implementing it.

Are You Really Equipped to Execute?

“Hold on,” you may argue. “Our strategic sales training is far more than just theory. It helps our people develop tailored sales plans, helps us assess whether we can win the business, and teaches our managers to coach to those plans.”

So what happens? More often than not, salespeople graduate from training with detailed account plans, but weak skills and tools for executing those plans. Managers leave training understanding how to coach against plans, but lacking the tools to help their salespeople execute them.

If a football team took this approach, it would lose every game. No matter how thoroughly its players understood the strategy for winning that day’s contest,

when they took the field they would lack the skills to execute the game plan...one play at a time.

The fact of the matter is, in sales as in sports, you do need a game plan, but that’s not enough. As they say in the athletic shoe advertisements, you’ve got to “have game”.

Seven Skills for Executing Strategy, One Agreement at a Time

What are the key skills for sales strategy execution? They are the behaviours that, when embedded in the sales organisation, result in agreements that advance sales towards closure. What are these agreements about? In addition to contracting issues (like pricing, terms, and conditions), most sales strategy depends on successful agreements in areas like:

- Which key players will your salesperson have access to?
- What information will be gathered from the customer?
- What information will be given to the customer?

Seven Critical Skills for Executing a Sales Strategy

1. Position your solution advantageously.
2. Manage the two-way flow of information skilfully.
3. Set and communicate high targets.
4. Ask questions that uncover underlying motivations and the true business and personal needs.
5. Communicate assertive requests and clear expectations.
6. Make value for value trades.
7. Manage tension in the sales process.

THE UNCONSCIOUS, NATURAL REACTION

OF MOST SALESPEOPLE IN NEGOTIATION

IS OFTEN THE OPPOSITE OF THE BEHAVIOURS NEEDED

TO IMPLEMENT THEIR SALES STRATEGY SUCCESSFULLY.



- What buying criteria will be used to determine who gets the business?
- What level of internal support will be enlisted to sell and service the account, and will that support be available when it is needed?

Successful salespeople know how to secure the all-important *final* agreement (the contract). More importantly, they also know how to craft *supporting* agreements throughout the sales process that ensure the final contract is as large and profitable as possible, and sales cycle times are as short as possible.

As seasoned sales professionals know, building agreements that advance a sale requires far more than just being persuasive or tenacious. It requires that seven key agreement-building skills become “wired” into your sales approach:

1. *Positioning your solution advantageously*, in a way that optimises its perceived value.
2. *Managing the two-way flow of information skilfully*, gathering and revealing it in ways that support your negotiation strategy.
3. *Setting and communicating high targets*, remembering that those who ask for more typically get more.
4. *Asking questions that uncover underlying motivations*, discovering and satisfying a customer’s real needs rather than their surface “wants”.

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5. *Communicating assertive requests and clear expectations* during the sales process.
6. *Making trades*, remembering to balance *offers* of value with *requests* for value in return.
7. *Managing tension in the sales process*, and using it to drive optimal agreements.

It seems logical to expect sales professionals to use skills like these to craft agreements that help close sales. But too often this doesn’t happen. So then, “Why is common sense not common practice?”

Creating Effective Agreements Is Counterintuitive

Key sales execution skills are *counterintuitive*. In other words, the unconscious, natural reaction of most salespeople in negotiation is often the *opposite* behaviour needed to implement their sales strategy successfully in today’s competitive, cost-conscious environment.

For example (see “Winning Strategy Execution: The Right Way, the Wrong Way” on page 5), suppose a salesperson’s account strategy calls for selling

the customer a new, high-value product. Buying influences have been identified. Competitive strengths and weaknesses have been assessed. The decision has been made whether to take a direct, indirect, or “divide and conquer” sales strategy. But then, when the salesperson meets with the customer to implement the plan, several mistakes occur, including:

- Talking about price before value is created;
- Sharing information about the new product before knowing which features will create value for the customer...and which won’t;
- Limiting sales “data gathering” to the main contact, rather than calling higher and wider; and
- Responding prematurely to requests for unusual delivery requirements without first uncovering the underlying needs driving those requests.

Although persuasive selling might ultimately close a deal, badly crafted agreements like these made throughout the sales process can lead to margin erosion, slow cycle times, and lost business.

PERSUASIVE SELLING MIGHT ULTIMATELY CLOSE A DEAL,

BUT BADLY CRAFTED AGREEMENTS MADE THROUGHOUT THE SALES

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Coaches: Part of the Problem?

But doesn't management coaching help solve the problem? Shouldn't sales managers help sales professionals determine how to execute their plans? In theory, yes. In practice, not enough.

Why? Because most sales managers are groomed by the same organisations that produced the sales professionals they coach. They have taken the same sales training...training that teaches them to do things that may or may not close deals more quickly, and too often lead to poor, unprofitable agreements. Some of the "messages" from these ineffective educational experiences include:

- *"The customer is always right", even though you know you can add more value to the solution by giving them something better or different than what they have asked for;*
- *"It's a good idea to share extensive information about the features and benefits of your products", even though your customer*

may find fault with specific features, and use this to your disadvantage in deal negotiations;

- *"You are the customer's advocate to make sure they get what they want and need", even though this might encourage you to give away too much, too quickly to close the deal; and*
- *"It's important to avoid and reduce tension during the process wherever possible", even though tension is often the source of creative negotiation breakthroughs.*

Poor or ineffective sales training, along with years of "accepted wisdom", may help create happy customers in the short term... but often leads to unprofitable deals. By focusing too much on giving the customer what they *want*, managers reinforce their sales professionals to close deals that leave money on the table. And they may perpetuate the behaviours that make it impossible to execute sales strategy effectively...*or* efficiently.

When effective agreement-building skills have been embedded into an organisation's sales approach, things are quite different. Managers spend less time rescuing deals or closing deals at any cost. Instead, they:

- coach their team members on the effective use of counter-intuitive sales behaviours to close better deals faster;
- reinforce a common language, proven skills set, and shared expectations in order to fundamentally change the way the sales team interacts with customers; and
- observe and support those behaviours on joint calls, and encourage the team to share "best practices" on building better agreements throughout the sales process.

Execution skills are embedded in the sales management process in high-performing sales organisations. This can be accomplished by requiring the approval of not just a sales strategy, but also a sales execution plan, as a prerequisite for offering a customer an extraordinary discount, term or condition.

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One Final "Counterintuitive" Idea: Focus On Execution Skills First

If sales professionals and their managers lack the counterintuitive skills needed to execute a well-crafted sales strategy, what can a company do to manage the costly consequences? Should sales training focus first on strategy or execution?

THE KEY TO EFFECTIVENESS: **FIRST** EMBED EXECUTION SKILLS

IN YOUR SALES ORGANISATION,

THEN IMPLEMENT STRATEGY TRAINING.



Again, the answer can be found on the football pitch.

Every good football coach knows that before the team can carry out a game plan, they must master the skills to win on the pitch, play after play, from the opening kickoff to the final seconds of the game. In fact, the best coaches know that without embedding those skills deeply, their players might not even understand the game plan... much less be able to execute it.

It's no different in sales, where focusing on the seven "execution skills" described earlier:

- ensures that sales team members not only understand sales strategies, but can envision creative ways to implement them;

- makes it more likely that effective agreement building throughout the sales process becomes second nature, freeing sales reps to focus more brain power on strategy development;
- makes it more likely that they will gain "quick wins" using their execution skills, and become more confident as a result; and
- helps sales professionals improve their performance with current customers, even before applying a sales planning methodology to them.

When sales managers and salespeople master those insightful

behaviours first, the strategic plans that emerge afterwards are infused with successful agreement-building at every stage of the sales process.

The key to effectiveness: first embed execution skills in your sales organisation, then implement strategy training. The idea may seem counterintuitive, but in the long run it's the path to profitable, value-based selling success.

Gregg Crawford is president, founder, and CEO of BayGroup International, a global consulting and performance improvement firm.

Winning Strategy Execution: The Right Way, the Wrong Way

After attending a sales strategy workshop, your sales professional determines that they will expand a key relationship by introducing a new product to the customer. The success of the strategy depends on how well they use counterintuitive agreement-building skills to advance their sales process.

When the customer...

The natural intuitive and WRONG approach...

The counterintuitive RIGHT way...

Asks for a better price before the product's value has been established.

Agree to begin talking about the price... only to find that it is then impossible to build value.

Acknowledge the importance of price, but gain agreement to defer the discussion until value has been created.

Requests comprehensive information about your new product.

Agree...and then give too much information...only to find that the customer objects to specific features.

Give just enough information to earn the right to ask for more information from the customer.

Refuses to let the salesperson call higher and wider in the account.

Agree to do the best you can with the contacts you have...only to find that they don't have the information or relationships you need to sell value.

Create some "productive tension" with the customer, assertively requesting the necessary meetings.

Demands an unreasonably short installation schedule as a condition of closing the sale.

Agree to negotiate about deadlines, and attempt to get what the customer wants... only to find that the expensive "fix" actually fails to solve the real problem.

Probe further to uncover the real, underlying need and craft a creative solution that satisfies it while protecting the profitability of the deal for your organisation.

About BayGroup International

BayGroup International partners with corporate executives to improve shareholder value by:

- Ensuring that key business initiatives demonstrate significant ROI;
- Helping implement corporate strategies successfully; and
- Building skills across the organisation for creating profitable agreements, both internally and externally.

BayGroup International implements strategic projects that include research, highly-tailored performance improvement development, and the tracking of results. Our work in client organisations is supported and reinforced through executive leadership communication campaigns, management coaching, and Internet-delivered performance support tools. Using our proven behaviour change approach has helped clients achieve desired business results, and improve the ability of key employees to build better agreements with:

- Customers, especially when competitive sales pressure threatens profits.
- Suppliers and other outside parties, whose increasing costs can erode the bottom line.
- Internal team members and between individuals, where failure to handle tough, contentious issues can threaten quality, customer service, restructuring, and other strategic initiatives.
- Strategic partners, where poor agreements can threaten the success of mergers and acquisitions, as well as other mission-critical alliances (in areas such as distribution, research and development, and marketing).

By partnering with BayGroup International, clients achieve significant improvements in human performance and bottom-line results.

Since its founding in 1980, BayGroup International has built a select client list of major global corporations, focusing on the technology, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, transportation, consumer products, and financial services industries. Our consultants have worked in North and South America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. We serve our clients from offices in major cities around the world.

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