

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE & MANAGEMENT

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**BUILDING AND MANAGING A HIGH PERFORMING SALES FORCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper reflects upon the different management approaches that are required in effective management of a sales force. Selling has a very different character compared to other functions in the organization in terms of relationships, competency and influence on the bottom line. We have taken an integrated view of management decisions, both operational and strategic, on motivating a sales force beyond the commonly used monetary incentives. Real-life examples are taken to explain the importance of goal setting, work culture, compensation and career opportunities for the sales professionals. The new imperative for companies is that one size does not fits all; companies need to align their selling strategy and sales force management with their business strategy, type of markets, products and also the kind of organizational systems.*

**KEYWORDS**

Incentives, Motivation, Product Life Cycle, Recognition.

**INTRODUCTION**

 Sales force is essentially a very different category of people as compared to the rest of the employees in the organization. These differences are summarized in table 1.

First, they are the front end revenue generating function and primarily responsible for making the products available in the market. They work aggressively to get that two feet display space on the shelf in a store, or to get their medicine prescribed by the doctors, or also to get accounts opened with their bank. In all these activities, and more, what the underlying characteristic of a salesman’s job is that it is by nature close to the customers, than to their own organization. They spend most of their time in the field, travelling, and making pitches, and generating conversions. They visit their field offices less often and the primary communication with managers happen in the form of reports. Therefore, it is but natural, that their bond with their employers is less strong as compared to that for other employees. Furthermore, their bond with customers and even with the sales people from other companies may be stronger than their bond with their managers. Therefore, effective sales force management is an imperative for a motivated and committed sales force.

Second, sales force people have a more direct control over end sales and consequent revenue generation, as compared to other employees. While the efforts of a quality manager in a manufacturing unit may take months to show results in terms of consumer acceptance of the product and consequent revenue generation, or that of a brand manager may take weeks to generate trials, the efforts of the sales person lead to immediate placement of the product on the shelves, ensuring availability and visibility, and consequent sales.

Third, selling is the last stage in the value chain of an organization and therefore its importance becomes even more significant. The role of a sales person ends only when the product reaches the customer (or the retailer), and it will ensure all previous links work effectively so that it can do its own work smoothly. That is why the organization design should be such that the sales function should have considerable influence over other functions.

Fourth, studies have concluded that the role of education in deciding the success of an individual in sales function is less than 3%. Selling requires behavioral and personality traits that are different from that required by people in other organizational functions. Most successful sales people are the ones that have not been to the best schools to have the best college degrees. Therefore, people in sales are paid essentially for their results (and education is not a proxy for competence), and have a high variable pay as compared to other functions.

**TABLE 1: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SELLING AND OTHER FUNCTIONS**

Parameters	Selling	Others functions
<b>Relationships</b>	Closer to customers and field personnel than their managers	Bond with own manager is strongest in their employment
<b>Instrumentality</b>	Sales force can directly affect revenue	Revenue is more or less an indirect outcome of efforts
<b>Control</b>	Last link in the value chain. Therefore, it is dependent on all previous links for its own job, and hence the need for higher influence	Coordination required mainly with adjacent functions on whom there is dependency
<b>Competency</b>	Personality and behavioral traits are large deciding factors of success in direct selling	Knowledge and other capabilities are required more for success in the role

**SALES FORCE MANAGEMENT**

As discussed, selling and sales force are vastly different activities and functions, respectively, from other functions in an organization. Hence their motivators, rewards and management are essentially different than those of others. In this paper, we will study the motivators and management of sales force.

**SALES FORCE MOTIVATION**

The most prominent theory related to sales force motivation is Vroom’s Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964). It states that

- a) Efforts should lead to expected results
- b) Results should ensure rewards
- c) Those rewards should be of value to the individual

These rewards are basically needs that an individual tries to satisfy. A good understanding of different types of needs is given by Maslow in Hierarchy of Needs. The lower level of needs, physiological and safety needs, pertain to basic monetary compensation for work, fringe benefits and allowances. These are the minimum essentials that are required for a sales person to be motivated to do work. Higher order needs, social and self-esteem, pertain to rewards and recognition for good performance. The highest order needs, self-actualization, is fulfilled by personal growth, career development, and autonomy.

TABLE 2: NEED HIERARCHY OF SALES FORCE IN MASLOW'S FRAMEWORK

Maslow's Need Hierarchy	Motivators
Self Actualization	Autonomy Special rare recognition
Self Esteem	Advanced Training Public Recognition Special incentives Promotion
Social	Sales Conferences Encouragement by superiors and peers
Physiological and Safety	Salary Commission Basic Training

**WHAT TO MEASURE**

A recent study conducted by Vantage Point Performance (Jason, 2014) revealed that there are about 306 metrics that sales force measure to measure their performance. But the question is that do all these metrics matter. An analysis of the sales metric reveals that they are broadly of three types.

The first of them are called Business Results. These are metrics such as market share and revenue which are dependent upon the efforts of an entire organization. These are not directly controllable by the people in the field. The targets are broken down into meaningful KRAs (Key Result Areas) and metrics for the field personnel in sales, for them to be able to directly influence what they control.

The second metric in sales is Sales Objectives. They include more direct metric like sales of a particular SKU (Stock Keeping Unit), converting particular customers, etc. They are also not something that sales force directly controls. Their success is defined by the support from other functions, type of competition, and most importantly, the behavior of customers.

The third metric that sales force can directly control is called Sales Activities. This is the task that sales people actually do, like collecting information, making reports, sales calls, demonstrations, etc. This is directly measurable, for e.g., the number of sales calls made this week.

Sales Activity is a lead indicator, i.e., its presence will be instrumental or will define later success. If the company sales force makes more sales calls (Sales Activity), it will acquire more number of customers (Sales Objectives), which in turn lead to greater revenue and market share (Business Result).

Other metrics are important too, but they are lag indicators. They measure success when it has already occurred or not occurred. Lead indicators predict successes, and they are more controllable. Therefore, it is important to measure the activities of sales people and ensure that tasks are completed rightfully, than whether things that are not in their control are achieved or not. The key is to measure what they can influence and control.

Pingali (Pingali, 2010) gives a framework for deciding what to measure depending upon the stage of product life cycle that the product is in and the attributes of the product that the customers evaluate while making a buying decision.

**INTRODUCTORY PHASE**

When the product is evaluated on search attributes, such as in the case of foods, the goal of the sales person should be to ensure that the product is both visible and available to the customer. For products that are assessed on experience attributes, such as in Do-It-Yourself furniture, the sales person should be targeting demonstrations that show the product's value that the customer is interested in. In products involving credence attributes, such as in insurance (LIC) and healthcare, there should be no evaluation, as it is difficult for the sales person to communicate the emotions and feelings that the product tries to cater to.

**GROWTH PHASE**

For products evaluated on search attributes, the focus of the company should be to increase the penetration of its product in as many stores as possible. The sales force should therefore focus on adding new dealers, getting more doctors to prescribe their medicine, etc. In case of a product evaluated on experience attributes, the focus of the company should be to minimize the post-purchase dissonance that could occur after the sales generated in the introductory phase and to increase positive 'word-of-mouth'. The sales force's new imperative should therefore be to ensure good after sales service and reduce complaints. For products evaluated on credence attributes, the company's focus at growth stage should be to build trust with buyers and therefore the sales force should focus on making calls made to prospective and current customers, and therefore building relationships.

**MATURITY PHASE**

In products that are evaluated on search attributes, focus of the company at this stage should be to grow its market share (in an already saturated market). For products evaluated on experience attributes, the mandate of the sales force should be to generate sales after the demand has been created through the positive 'word-of-mouth' publicity in the growth phase. In products evaluated on credence attributes, the focus of the organization should be to retain the loyal customers it has succeeded in winning. The sales force should therefore focus on repeat sales through this customer base and try to reduce customer turnover (percentage of customers leaving).

TABLE 3: SALES FORCE EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR DIFFERENT MARKET SITUATIONS

Market condition (Product Life Cycle)	Type of Product		
	Search Attributes	Experience Attributes	Credence Attributes
Introductory phase	Displays organized	Demonstration	No evaluation
Growth phase Low Competition	New retails outlets opened and Sales	New service outlets	Number of calls
Maturity phase High Competition	Market share	Sales	Customer base retention

Source: Pingali, "Managing your Sales Force, A Motivational Approach", Seventh Printing, p. 112, 2010

**COMPENSATION**

The compensation structure consists of two things: size and shape.

Size of compensation depends highly on the kind of industry and competition. Industries whose core competence lies in marketing and selling (where differences between products are less), will have to have a big size of pay for sales function as compared to others. It also depends upon what the competition in paying, as any business would like to have the best talent for it.

Shape of compensation is its composition. The usual split between fixed and variable ranges from 70:30 to 40:60. However, some industries (and even some companies) give 100% variable pay, which is only commission on sales, and no guaranteed pay. This actually depends upon the instrumentality between sales people's efforts and the outcomes. Where it is possible to directly impact sales (and variability is low), it makes sense to reward for higher sales, that is a higher variable pay.

Similarly, the degree of accuracy with which the contribution of people can be assessed towards results should define the form of rewards for them. Monetary rewards would be ideal in places where performance assessment systems are accurate and fair. People will acknowledge the outcomes that are based on equity rather than on subjective and opaque criteria.



TABLE 4: SHAPE OF PAY STRUCTURE OF SALES FORCE

	High Variability in Performance	Low Variability in Performance
Accurate performance assessment possible	High fixed pay monetary rewards	High variable pay monetary recognition
Accurate performance assessment not possible	High fixed pay non-monetary rewards	High variable pay non-monetary rewards

## WORK CULTURE

As discussed earlier, the primary interaction of the sales person with the organization is limited to interaction with the immediate supervisor. As such, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that the sales person understands that the company cares for him. The supervisor has the responsibility to define the culture for the sales person. Moreover, more than 50 percent of the components that affect the sales force (autonomy, work pressure, feedback, and responsibility) are dependent on the immediate supervisor. It is therefore important for the supervisors to know how to create the right cultural environment for their people.

That is, the sales supervisors need to assist sales persons in goal setting, analyzing performance, and also give feedback. In situation of failure, supervisors could give constructive feedback rather than criticism (Johnson and Kim 1994). Thus the encouragement and contact provided by the immediate supervisor is most essential for any sales person's good performance (Monoky, 1994).

## CAREER PROPOSITION

Some of the major enablers in the work of a sales person are the presence of promotion opportunities, recognition and the thrill of competitiveness.

## PROMOTION OPPORTUNITIES

Making progress and winning are cited as the largest motivators for sales persons (Donal, 2013). Companies should have well defined criteria for success in the role of sales, and also clearly defined rewards and promotion opportunities available for those who outperform. The prospects of gaining career growth after success in a role increase the motivation of the sales people.

## RECOGNITION

Special recognition motivates salesperson much more than ordinary rewards (Gilbert, 2003). Mahindra & Mahindra organizes Black Belt awards for the outperforming people in sales. It is a very coveted prize that is awarded once in a year in a conference. Dominos restaurants selects 'Employee of The Month' in each of its outlets and its photo is displayed prominently in the outlet. Similarly, Indigo airline, in its customer feedback form, gives the passengers an option to name a crew member who they want to be rewarded. It rewards its crew based on customer feedback, and this is an unbelievably great recognition.

## ADVANCED TRAINING

Special trainings and mentoring opportunities are considered as meaningful tokens of recognition for sales persons. In HUL, over and above the one-week per year mandatory training that the sales person undergo, high performers are also given opportunities of advanced training and learning programs.

## PARTICIPATIVE GOAL SETTING

Goals that are mutually defined, and are difficult but achievable and coupled with regular feedback lead to higher performance. When sales persons are allowed to participate in setting their own goals, it generates higher goal commitment and more resilience to failure (Kopf, 1989). ITC has a goal setting approach in which targets for the next month's sales are decided beginning with the sales person's estimation of demand in his own territory.

## CONCLUSION

Sales force is the last step in the value chain of activities of an organization and is the most customer-facing function. It is unique and different from other functions in terms of control, relationships, instrumentality and competence requirement. Sales force management, therefore, depends largely on the kind of product that the company sells, the product life cycle stage as well as the ease with which performance can be assessed. This also entails a culture of empowerment by the immediate supervisor, recognition for outperformance and presence of good career growth opportunities. Companies need to take cognizance of the fact that there is more than incentives to motivate sales force. Companies need to have a relook at what metrics they are using to measure performance and whether their sales strategy matches up to their business strategy. One size does not fit all; this is the imperative for sales force management.

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