Introduction

This article identifies trends in sales that are reshaping the sales profession and influencing the competencies sales reps need to succeed. Twelve trends emerged from a comprehensive review of trends. Each of these trends has the potential to push a sales organization off course, but the combination of them has created a perfect storm, which requires organizations to rethink their sales talent development practices.

Market dynamics and changing customer demands

1. Rise of empowered employees

The convergence of mobile, social, cloud and big data innovations has ushered into an era of buyer empowerment. Today most tech-savvy customer teams prefer to conduct their own research and are better educated about available solutions.

| Establish a social media presence as a credible source of information for customers seeking to learn about trends and evolving solutions. |
| Proactively research and target prospects to initiate interest-building engagements on potential solutions for their evolving business needs. |

2. Sales force verticalization

Customers increasingly expect sales teams to understand the dynamics of their vertical industry, they have a low tolerance for generic product and service information.

| Build vertical industry acumen |
| Articulate the unique value propositions of proposed solutions, centered on the customer’s unique needs in the context of their industry key performance indicators. |
3. Shift from “FAB” to “solution” to “insight” selling

Transactional sellers who cite product feature, advantage and benefit, are no longer sufficient. Buyers are looking for a credible partner with solid understanding of their needs, who challenges them, who provides insights and customized solutions. The objective is optimizing and transforming their current business.

| Use conventional and emerging research and analytics resources to gain understanding of the customer's needs, evolving challenges and opportunities. |
| Challenge the customer status quo and propose solutions that take the current and evolving needs of the customer into account. |
| Ensuring that solutions are justified, alternatives are explored and the best courses of action are expressed in the best interest of the customer. |

4. Blurring the lines between Sales and Marketing

More organizations are aligning and integrating their sales and marketing functions in order to ensure consistency in branding messages. It is necessary that those two functions are no longer delineated to attract and fulfill the needs of the current tech-savvy, resourceful and educated customer.

| Establish an accurate and enticing digital footprint in the marketplace by using the organization’s marketing and branding tools and resources. |
| Collaborate with marketing colleagues to define and implement sales strategies that engage with the right prospects at the right time with the right blend of branding and sales value propositions. |

5. Adoption of a hybrid sales model

Increasingly more customers are comfortable making decisions based on a mix of both face-to-face and virtual interactions. A lot of sales organizations are expanding the traditional role of their “inside sales representatives”.

| Enhanced fluency in the use of both conventional and advanced virtual communication tools and technology among sales professionals. |
| Augmented competencies to serve as “virtual sales specialists” and to participate fully in the end-to-end sales process. |

6. On-demand availability

Conventional and advanced mobile devices have contributed to the accessibility of both sellers and buyers. This trend reduces the need for exclusive in-person selling activities and results in reduces costs and improved productivity of the sales force.

| Use mobile devices and applications to extend presence, provide timely insights, ensure responsiveness, respond to competitor’s claims and drive opportunities. |
| Safeguard against overuse or inappropriate use of mobile technology. |
7. Omnipresent social media

Social media is becoming a major source of sales information for potential buyers. Successful sales professionals make intelligent contributions to social communities and continuously monitor their own presence on social media channels.

- **Leverage the intelligence from social media** to engage potential customers in the right way, at the right time.
- **Follow key prospects** in social media and provide timely insight to their needs.
- **Use social platforms to conduct real-time research** and gain insight, by using applications or portable devices.

8. Analytics-based prospecting

The way sales organizations target and engage with customers is changing because of big data mining, advanced analytics, pipeline and customer relationship management (CRM) technologies. The examination of customer data on a granular level leads to better insight into customer challenges.

- **Harness CRM big data to gain actionable intelligence** on customer priorities, needs, past purchases and KPI’s to synchronize planning and pursuit efforts.
- **Use customer intelligence to augment personal intuitions** with accurate intelligence in the prospecting and pursuit efforts.

Workforce reconfiguration

9. Multi-generation sales and customer teams

Millennials are becoming the dominant force as Baby Boomers retire, which results in multigenerational sales and customer teams.

- **Understanding of the key characteristics of different generations**
- **Incorporate tactics essential for working effectively with generational differences.**

10. Globalization of teams and customer base

Global sales teams and customer purchasing teams are the result of continued globalization. Within global companies decisions are made in a distributed but unified manner.

- **Incorporate a global perspective** in sales planning to accommodate multinational customers around the world, while being sensitive to local considerations.
- **Use communication style and language to suit cultural, social and linguistic differences** so the message is delivered correctly and professionally.
Sales Talent Development

11. Use of “win” analytics to gain learner insights

Sales successes and win challenges are captured more detailed than ever before because of today’s CRM systems and web-analytics tools. This granular data offers valuable insights into the development needs of a sales team.

Enhance skills in the use of win analytics and modeling techniques to analyze performance, desired behaviors and learning needs of the sales force. Use this insight to adopt efficient sales learning and development opportunities.

12. Emergence of integrated learning environments as a necessity

Sales talent developers need to expand their focus from learning products to fully integrated learning environments that embrace formal, informal and social learning. These emerging learning environments are more responsive to the sales force’s preferences, content attributes and on-demand need for learning.

Learning strategies

Gamification: use of game technologies to perform selling role plays in a virtual sales world.

Technology-enabled crowd learning: collaborative peer knowledge in real time.

Learning videos: to demonstrate the essence of sales practice.

Optimized mobile learning: use of various devices and delivery strategies to allow salespeople to structure their learning path.

Organizations need to adopt a multifaceted strategy to recruit, select, assess and continuously develop competent multigenerational global sales teams. Sales teams must be capable of interacting effectively with tech-savvy, educated and demanding global customer teams who are far advanced in their buying process when they engage sales teams.

Watch for these twelve trends to continue to affect the way companies structure and restructure their sales and marketing organizations.