



Complacency Kills

The lesson is crystal clear: Never stop selling

by: Troy Harrison, Troy Harrison & Associates

Recently, I was talking to a business owner about prospecting and selling new accounts when the business owner asked me an interesting question: “When should I stop worrying about selling new accounts?” My response is always the same: “You should never stop selling new business!” It has been said that “pride goeth before a fall.” That is probably true, but in business, “complacency goeth before total collapse.”

I once worked (for a short time) for a company that had an astounding growth rate. It went from zero to \$35 million in annual revenue in 10 years — all on the skill sets of some talented salespeople and excellent customer service. When the company got to \$35 million, management decided that the company was going to take a “break” from selling new business. The logic was that the company was making plenty of money, the people were happy and selling new business placed unnecessary strain on the company’s infrastructure. Two short years later, it was doing \$17 million in annual revenue, losing big bucks and management was panicking about the longevity of the company.

What happened to this company is not uncommon. First, one big customer went into bankruptcy and ceased operations. Then, top management at another big customer was swept out and the new management did not want to use the same vendors as the old. Add in a customer’s death and it was down to \$23 million in a few months. So, what happened to the rest of its business? Complacency.

When the salespeople were told not to sell new business, a couple of them did not like it, but most of them did. Remember, everyone at this company was making big bucks and relieving the salespeople of prospecting responsibility while keeping their compensation high made it a dream job for many of them. Not all of the salespeople were financially affected by the collapse in revenues; those who were not affected did not feel any real pressure to build the company back up.

Next, customer service fell by the wayside. The intent of the “no-new-customers” edict had been to make customer service and production jobs easier, more pleasant and more productive. It had the exact opposite effect. The customer service reps, no longer having to deal with the changing needs of a sales force bent on growing the business, got fat and happy (not unlike the salespeople). Attention to detail and follow-up



suffered. Production expanded what work they had to fill the time allotted, since there was no pressure to get orders out to impress new customers. The whole thing took on the customer-friendly atmosphere of your average Department of Motor Vehicles office.

In a nutshell, an entire company got lazy. That \$35 million looked good, but management did not count on normal customer attrition. Granted, it is unusual to lose three huge customers within a few months’ time, but it is not so unusual that you can think, “It would never happen to me.” The salespeople, customer service people and production people who were only too happy to shift into “maintenance” mode found it tough to shift back into “hit-the-bricks-and-sell” mode and the company struggled mightily with these issues. The owners did not help much, either — as the company lost big money, they jetted to vacation homes, and bought new Mercedes and Porsches instead of tending to business.

Salespeople are not immune to this syndrome, either. Salespeople can attain a certain income level and decide that it is “enough” for them to live on. Like the people at the company discussed above, it is tougher to restart prospecting than it is to never stop.

I once interviewed a gentleman for a sales position who had a long background in the industry that I was working in, had worked with many of the same types of clients that I wanted to do business with and presented himself very well. The chinks in his armor showed when he told me how he built a \$1.5-million-per-year territory (very impressive in that particular industry and time period) by prospecting and cold calling. He bragged that he had been working with many of his customers for more than

10 years. When I asked him how much business he was doing in the present, he replied that he was doing about \$350,000 annually. It was elementary to drill down and find out that he had built this great territory, stopped prospecting, lost customers to the usual attrition and had not filled his sales funnel with new prospects and new business. His plan, in fact, was to bring his business (what was left of it) over to my company and, presumably, ride it all the way down to zero. Not surprisingly, I did not hire him — and I do not know if anyone else did.

The lesson here is crystal clear: Never stop selling. Complacency is a silent killer in the sales world, sneaking up on even the most successful businesses and individuals. It is easy to fall

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into the trap of thinking you have “made it” and can coast on your current customer base. But the hard truth is, customers come and go — sometimes in bunches and often when you least expect it.

Smart sales managers and top salespeople know that the key to long-term success is to keep that sales funnel full. Always be prospecting, always be looking for new opportunities and always be hungry for growth. It is not just about hitting your numbers today; it is about ensuring

you will still be in the game tomorrow, next year and a decade from now. Remember, in sales, the moment you stop moving forward is the moment you start sliding backward. Keep selling, keep growing and never, ever get complacent. ■

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