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Are your sales meetings wake-up calls or sleep-inducing?

Denver Business Journal - by Garry Duncan

You've got a long to-do list, proposal deadlines, a gut ache, a screaming need for another shot of caffeine -- and the sales meeting hasn't even started yet.

These are not good signs, but are all-too-common ones in the typical sales meeting supposedly designed to motivate and create new business. Instead, they put many participants in the doldrums.

While there's certainly a need to discuss company policy and new product information, routine sales meetings should focus on ways to freshen ideas and help people sell better. Developing innovative strategies for sales calls will produce greater results than just reporting the status of accounts and general information, and providing product up-dates. Similarly, individual reprimands deserve a venue -- but not in group meetings.

As sales team leader, know what you want to accomplish at the meeting. Don't follow the lead of Lily Tomlin, who said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific." Be very specific about whether this is a meeting to motivate team members, communicate goals and objectives, update hot issues, make group decisions about team issues, recognize team progress and achievements or to train and develop skills.

Once the meeting's purpose is established, develop a comprehensive plan to hold it effectively versus winging it -- as so often occurs -- with someone dashing out an agenda two hours ahead of time.

Ideally, everyone should know the agenda and be prepared for their role and participation, so that coffee and doughnuts are not the main event.

Five meeting planning questions that must be answered fully are:

- Does this meeting need to be held?
- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- Will the meeting focus on information exchange (communication, team-building, advising and updating -- excluding discussion of totally new products, an event generally best reserved for a lunch meeting or other special venue), decision-making (issue resolution, creating options and solutions) or training (sales training or product training)?
- What will the agenda be?
- Who should attend? (Don't automatically corral the entire sales force unless the topic or gravity of the meeting warrants.)

While staging the meeting, pay close attention to "10 rules of good conduct" that can determine the session's success or failure. These rules are:

1. Don't compete with group members. Give their ideas precedence over yours, while keeping the discussion on point. Holding a good meeting is similar to a good sales call. Make sure the "buyer," in this case the sales force, has ample opportunity for full expression (whining and complaining excepted).

2. Listen to everyone. Paraphrasing and repeating back comments to reinforce their clarity and ensure that you've understood them correctly is a positive; being judgmental about them is not.

3. Don't put anyone on the defensive. Presume that everyone's ideas have value. Call for resolution and consensus to help build teamwork.

4. Control the dominant people without alienating them. Often, this can be accomplished by acknowledging their input, then asking others to comment on it. This will likely place the dominant person into a comfortable listening role.

5. Realize that your interests and alertness -- or conversely your lack of interest and ennui -- are contagious. Don't fake enthusiasm; find issues and topics (or ways of presenting them) around which you can get genuinely excited.

6. Keep all participants informed about where they are and what's expected of them. Keep notes on flip charts or a board that everyone can see.

7. Check with the person who has a problem to determine a satisfactory solution or how to pursue solutions based on ideas raised by the problem. For a protracted problem-resolution process, establish a clear plan with deadlines.

8. Select others to take a turn conducting a meeting, and decide when. That way, they can plan well ahead. Those who learn to lead learn

how to participate.

9. Establish golden rules. These should include time allotments for particular topics and starting and ending the meeting on time.

10. Summarize key issues raised at the meeting, then develop and assign action items for the next meeting. All action steps decided upon in one meeting automatically should go on the agenda for the next meeting.

Finally, evaluate the meeting with the group. Among the questions to ask are:

- Did we accomplish the tasks at hand?
- Were desired outcomes met?
- Was each individual prepared?
- Did the meeting promote structure and facilitate interaction?
- What were the lessons learned by each participant?

Take the time to conduct a meaningful sales meeting and you'll discover that the results -- much like those that occur when putting the right energies and focus into a sales call -- will more than justify the effort.

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