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Selling lessons from 2009 that can help you in 2010

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There are significant lessons for salespeople and sales managers provided by 2009's challenges.

For many in sales, this is their first major economic recession. Their opportunities decreased and closing percentages dropped as cautious buyers cut spending and budgets. Mental toughness and resilience, always important in selling, were more vital than ever in 2009 and remain so in 2010.

Also, professional sales people have been talking about value for years, but 2009 demanded that sellers clearly document value and return on investment (ROI). Efficiency also proved to be paramount; those with shoddy and inefficient approaches and processes had poor results. Teamwork and collaboration were essential, and those who can successfully integrate these concepts in 2010 will profit.

Finally, as the economy moves from survival to gaining growth and market share, there will be little room for mediocrity. Consider how you can make each lesson work for you in 2010.

- The need for mental toughness will intensify because buyers will remain cautious, and markets are likely to return to growth slowly. Don't allow the negative to enter your mind. Keep a personal journal, avoid negative self-talk, stay focused on goals rather than past events and frequently refresh your thoughts with positives.

Start each day with an appreciation call to a good customer to place your mind in the right place. Recognize competition is keener in a reduced sea of opportunity.

- Sellers who were able to document value and ROI had far greater success in 2009, and 2010 likely will demand more of the same. Be prepared with solid case studies, numbers and specific examples to back up any claims. Initial trials and sample applications are additional ways to increase buyer comfort and lower their perception of risk.

Don't forget to use customer testimonials and to arrange conversations and tours, when applicable, with current customers. Documenting value doesn't mean communicating value. Creating value starts with the initial needs interview, and facilitating the buyer's discovery of the implications of current problems or future gains.

Helping a prospect see problems they didn't recognize, didn't see coming or need to prevent creates value beyond your offering. Remember that the customer's own data is the most credible, so attempt to use a format or process that enables them to use their information in assessing ROI.

One distributor is gaining business in this market using a "productivity-enhancement" process that documents the value and ROI using the customer's own information, following an in-depth review of their situation.

- Because of the many layoffs and downsizings, everyone must do more. Thus efficiency, especially for salespeople, will remain paramount.

Products and services are becoming more complicated. So sellers who can best explain the value of what they're offering — how it can benefit potential customers — will sell more.

Prospects often don't think through the complexity of how a new or intricate offering can benefit them. Sellers must realize how prospects can integrate new solutions, and be able to relate that quickly and clearly. Sellers must take the time to gain superior knowledge and understanding of the prospect's business. Doing so reduces objections, obstacles, shortens sales cycles, strengthens trust and increases closing rates.

A buyer's perception of your competency helps establish trust.

For vendors, investment of resources in presentations and proposals often is costly, so more thorough qualifying increases efficiency and reduces overhead.

Be prepared with a list of questions you need answered, and obtain as many answers as possible before you meet with the decision-maker. With reduced staff and likely higher costs in 2010, it's disadvantageous to write unnecessary proposals, conduct unnecessary appointments or be disorganized in obtaining all the information you require.

- Sellers able to employ teamwork and collaboration will enhance their chances for success in 2010. Collaboration with internal colleagues, as well as outside channels, suppliers and, of course, customers is gaining importance.

Teamwork also is crucial because the current economic environment has slowed innovation and the introduction of new products. Teamwork helps retain customers' loyalty, which can waver if they don't see new products.

Growing existing clients and finding new clients is easier with the efforts of many versus one. Collaboration enhances relationships and provides a significant edge over competitors by presenting you as a resource with breadth and depth, enhancing loyalty.

Finally, every seller, manager and company should include the mantra to grow and be better in 2010. Tough markets demand you bring your "A" game, so personal skill and process improvement should be high on everyone's to-do list.

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