

# How to get the most from your sales team in difficult times

*When economic conditions are hard, leading a sales force can seem like the most difficult job in the world. One of the main ingredients to achieving outstanding results is to ensure the team is motivated. The key to motivation is recognition.*

Ultimately, everyone wants to be appreciated and their hard work acknowledged.

This is especially true when times are hard and targets are not always met. Make sure you recognise people's efforts and achievements and don't rely solely on commission schemes. Some salespeople will have a need to be recognised publicly, by articulating and praising their successes. For others, a quiet acknowledgement will be effective. It is important to recognise the difference.

In difficult times particularly, people need to feel you appreciate the challenges they face day to day. If you do, they will be more forthcoming in recounting experiences and problems they are facing. This feedback is important. It ensures you have an understanding of what is going on in the field, and can, therefore, be effective in helping your salespeople improve.

Although commission schemes and incentives are important, many opportunities to improve sales are missed, as a result of only giving incentives based on final sales figures. While it is important to reward success, these incentives often fail to tackle problems within the sales process. It is essential to see the wider picture and incentivise behaviour, not just results.

Behaviour that is rewarded will be repeated, and, therefore, can often lead to a dramatic improvement in sales figures. For example; in hard times, because of the higher rate of rejection, sales people tend to make less client visits. This has a knock on effect with overall sales figures and the whole scenario becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. In this situation, providing incentives based on the number of client visits can make a real difference to your company sales figures, and break the downward spiral. Similarly, companies have had tremendous success running incentives based on the number of referrals collected; the simple reason being that this is usually easier business to convert.

In order for any commission and incentive scheme to have a positive affect, you must be aware of what behaviours need improving. This means ensuring that sales staff keep accurate records of lead generation figures, call rates, referrals, conversion rates and anything else which may be important to your business. An overall picture can then be built up through these figures, as well as through regular meetings and visits in the field.

Based on these figures, targets can then be set. These should be agreed at reviews or appraisals which should take place on a regular basis. At these appraisals, avoid the temptation to give people a monologue on how they are doing, but ask for their opinion. People are often very honest and realistic about their own capabilities and performance. Don't tell people what to do but reach conclusions together. People don't necessarily believe your words but they believe their own. If a salesperson has helped set a target they are much more likely to believe it is realistic and be motivated to achieve it. Improvements to be made should be written down and signed by both parties. The consistency of having objectives written and agreed means people are much more likely to respond in a positive way.

Ultimately, by keeping your team positive and confident, even in a downturn, you are creating conditions for them to be successful. People don't always get what they want in life but they always get what they expect. By showing empathy, monitoring all the figures and behaviours and ensuring targets are both realistic and bought into by the salespeople; you can keep expectations high and, therefore, still achieve results.

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