

The Need for a Sales System

“I have my own style of selling.”

That is a remark heard often by sales managers in every industry, usually from novice salespeople.

What they usually mean is something like this: “I don’t have any real system to what I do, I don’t want any scrutiny, and I probably am not going to learn anything from you.”

Recognizing that each individual, as part of a team, brings something unique and valuable to the table is an important part of the sales manager’s job. When assessing the performance of a salesperson, the manager must be able to determine if that individual’s sales “style” is helping to drive results or serving as camouflage to hide from accountability.

More importantly, should your company allow every salesperson to have their own style, or should you have system for selling to which everyone adheres?

Let’s consider the concept of a “selling system.”

Almost any work can be systematic. “Systems” are how good work gets done. McDonald’s did not grow its business by hiring people and challenging them to figure out how to do the job. Their training program assumes that the trainee has no skills as they may relate to making a hamburger or taking a customer’s order. McDonald’s has one way to make their burger and there is no middle ground—you do it their way. They have a system for greeting customers, making fries, they tell you how much ketchup, mustard and onion and how many slices of pickle go on the burger. Everyone at McDonald’s works the system.

Because of the system, McDonald’s can make almost any one, regardless of their capabilities, into productive, effective employees.

This truth—that good systems make people effective -- operates in every area of work. Even highly skilled, highly educated professionals apply this concept. There are, for example, better ways to try a case, to perform a surgery, to fly an airliner, and to counsel a mentally disturbed patient. Talk to effective professionals in any of these areas, and they will verify that they use effective principles, processes, and tools to complete these complex tasks. They use a system.

In fact, the more important and complex the task, the more likely that the effective principles and processes for successfully completing that task have been defined. The pilot of a 747 has a process to fly his craft safely based on a standard that has been tested and proven. He is not free to improvise.

This is not to say that there is no room for individuality, for continuous process improvement, and for variations based on the specific circumstances. Ironically, having a firm understanding of the system that an individual works within usually provides a perspective that makes necessary freelancing, in unusual circumstances, more effective. The system provides the structure from which the individual can grow.

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Take a look at most non-sales related departments in almost any enterprise and you, most likely, find a process. A warehouse has specific procedures for loading and unloading shipments from a truck. The inventory department has a process for tracking the goods that are coming in or leaving the warehouse. Certainly, the accounting department has very specific guidelines and rules for tracking the monies attached to the shipments. Why should sales be different? It isn't. There are principles, processes and tools that have been proven to be more effective than others in sales, just like in every other profession. It is like a football game. No coach says to his team, "OK, you guys go out and figure out how to be successful." Rather, a coach develops a "best way" to tackle, to block, to pass, to catch, etc. And then, the coach develops the system, creates a game plan, and teaches his players that system and that plan.

In a similar way, a selling system addresses the interaction between the salesperson and the customer, providing a "game plan" for success. Think of it as a template for the salesperson's face-to-face tactical encounters. It is based on the principle that, when it comes to selling a specific product or service to a certain type of customer, there are principles, processes and tools that are proven more effective than others.

Study any successful company that fields a large number of salespeople, and you'll discover that almost every one of those companies has developed a well-defined, selling system. And they teach that system to their salespeople—"This is the way we keep track of our files, this is the way we collect information about our customers, this is the way we present this product or that one, this is the way we think about strategy, this is the way we develop a weekly plan," etc.

The larger, older, and more successful a company is, the more likely it is to have a highly sophisticated and refined selling system.

The large old life insurance companies are great illustrations. Go into the local Northwestern Mutual office, for example. Talk to a manager, tell him you would like to sell for him, but you are going to do it your way. See how far that gets you. Or perhaps IBM has an opening for a maverick sales guy.

You have the idea. A well-defined selling system is one of the essential components of an effective sales company.
