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10 ways to motivate, retain your top sales talent

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How do I get my sales team to work harder and try to do their best?

Is my sales compensation plan rewarding the right behavior? How do I retain top sales talent?

At the risk of making it sound too simple, there is one general principle that works well in motivating, inspiring and retaining salespeople: recognition and appreciation. The cost to the bottom line is little. But recognizing and rewarding salespeople often is overlooked because it takes time and attention. A salesperson may say they're leaving for higher pay, but research shows they're really leaving for higher praise.

Informal recognition is as powerful as formal recognition programs. Sam Walton once said, "Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free and worth a fortune."

Here are 10 simple and proven methods to show appreciation:

Be specific. Many sales managers will say to a salesperson, "Good job on the XYZ account." If a sales manager really wants the words to resonate with a salesperson, get specific about what "good" looks like.

For example, "I appreciate your ability to read the customer so well. I noticed that you really have a knack for getting the internal team to support your cause. I know you always operate from a place of integrity."

When you're specific, salespeople realize you are watching and paying attention instead of using tired clichés.

Be focused. When you give a compliment, make its delivery the only thing you do. This means you're not checking your e-mail, voicemail or PDA. Slow down, look your salesperson in the eye and focus on the message.

Give public recognition. Salespeople thrive on recognition. Don't make success a private event. Mention what your salesperson is doing right in front of customers, colleagues and fellow team members. Public "atta boys and girls" go a long way.

If you have a salesperson who's getting great feedback from clients, ask the customer to write a testimonial letter. This is a win-win for both parties. The first win is that great feeling of importance and appreciation felt by your salesperson. The second win is for the customer. Can you imagine how inspired this salesperson is going to be working for this client in the future?

Involve the family. Hard-working salespeople often are on the road, putting in long hours or entertaining clients at night. Send a thank-you letter home highlighting specific contributions and attributes of the salesperson. Thank the spouse for the important role they play via their support and encouragement.

If there's no partner, look up the salesperson's parents, and tell them thanks and congratulations for raising such a great kid!

Make the salesperson the teacher/coach. This falls right in line with public recognition. When you have a salesperson delivering excellent work, don't keep it a secret. Turn over part of the sales meeting to the salesperson, and let them teach and train the team on a best practice.

The salesperson gets recognized for their expertise, and the message often means more coming from a peer, who is also in the trenches. It also motivates team members to become an expert so they can get on the next meeting agenda.

Give feedback immediately. Don't wait until you have time to give the compliment or feedback. Two weeks later doesn't generate the same response as immediate recognition of good attitude, problem solving or closed deals.

Buy some paper. E-mail is nice; however, a nice card that aligns with what you're recognizing goes much further. A handwritten note means you've taken your personal time to find a card and write a note.

Recognize something besides sales. A sales manager's biggest gripe is about poor attitudes. Yet, I see few awards hanging in offices that praise someone for consistently showing up and seeing the glass as half-full. (In fact, grade school may be the last place this award is given.)

Create symbols of recognition. Why do people drive expensive cars? Among other reasons, they're symbols of success.

What are symbols of success at your company? It can be anything from certificates, rings, blazers and jackets to club membership dues. It's not so much the item; it's what the item represents.

Get the big dogs involved. Praise shouldn't come from just the vice president of sales or the sales manager. Have the chairman, CEO, chief operating officer or chief financial officer make a "congratulations" call. As much as your team likes you, it's always nice to hear praise from other sources.

Want to grow sales in 2007? Get good at watching for, rewarding and appreciating good behavior.

About the Author

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