



SellingPower

How Social Learning Can Create Top Performers

Overview

Top performance in today's sales environment requires a highly collaborative approach. Reps who have either grown up using tools like email, social networking platforms, and mobile devices ("digital natives") or who are heavily engaged with such tools are in a much better position to become top performers and win more deals, faster. Accordingly, a collaborative team environment enabled by "social learning" capabilities represents revenue opportunities for forward-thinking sales leaders who want to train, manage, mentor, and coach winning teams.

The Traits of Top Performers

What makes a top performer? According to long-standing research provided by Caliper Corporation (a sales-hiring assessment firm that for more than forty years has helped companies achieve peak performance and develop productive teams) and published originally in *Harvard Business Review*, these traits include:

Empathy. The ability to accurately sense reactions and to objectively perceive people's feelings – without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing

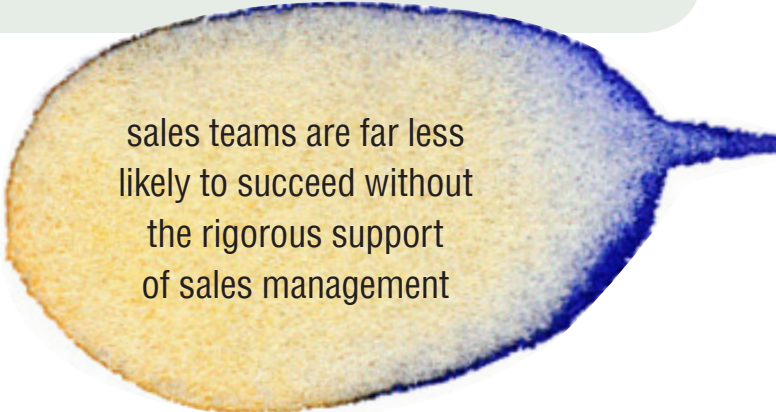
Ego-Drive. The need to persuade another person to say "yes," which provides a fundamental, internal gratification

Ego-Strength. The self-confidence and ability to handle rejection and accept criticism in a manner that is positive and growth-oriented. (In a B2B sales context, this means the ability not just to deal with rejection, but also to bounce back and be exposed to potentially more rejection.)

In addition to hiring salespeople with these personality traits, sales leaders can help produce top performers by teaching certain fundamentals: product knowledge, market and industry awareness, and selling skills, i.e., ability to seek, qualify, nurture, persuade, and close with customers and then expand the relationship over time. These fundamentals are more relevant than ever in a complex and rapidly evolving sales environment.

Creating Top Performers

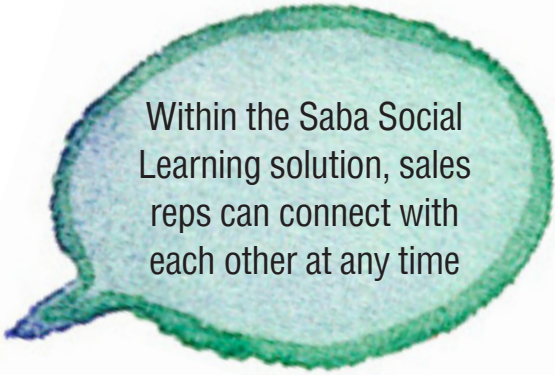
The challenge for many sales leaders is finding the time and resources to help reps cultivate the



sales teams are far less likely to succeed without the rigorous support of sales management

necessary skills and knowledge to engage successfully with today's prospects and customers. Currently, customers rely more on the Internet and social media than on relationships with sales reps to get information and make buying decisions. As a result, the sales rep who operates as a "lone wolf" – with little connection to the team – has become less effective than the combined efforts of a team. Accordingly, nurturing top performance requires leadership that encourages and enhances teamwork.

In fact, evidence has shown that sales teams are far less likely to succeed without the rigorous support of sales management. According to the B2B Sales Index from SEC Solutions, which was created by aggregating detailed sales process data from more than 10,000 front-line sales representatives across all markets and industries, pre-sales-call planning "has been, and will continue to be, a proven marker of high performance." The results of the sales index show that **top-performing sales teams are more likely to spend time strategizing with their managers, finding innovative ways to overcome customer objections, and tackling obstacles**



Within the Saba Social Learning solution, sales reps can connect with each other at any time

that may be preventing a deal from closing. Top sales reps reported spending 15 percent more time than peers did on developing call strategies with their sales managers and vetting potential opportunities.

Clearly, the connection between coaching and a successfully closed sale is a strong one. By using a social learning platform, sales leader can bypass the frustrations of conference calls and effectively provide continuous coaching while also facilitating company-wide sharing of best practices.

According to experts at Saba, a corporate solutions provider with more than 19 million users worldwide and ranked as cutting-edge by both industry analyst firms Gartner and Forrester, **continuous deal education provided by a social learning experience has the potential to increase pipeline, on average, by 120 percent.** For example, NetApp was able to use social learning capabilities and techniques provided by Saba learning solutions to increase the performance of its indirect sales channel by 45 percent.

The Power of Social Learning

In essence, the power of social learning exists in two areas:

1. Social learning gives sales leaders the ability to connect the most successful sales reps to the middle- and lower-performing reps.
2. Social learning allows top performers to stay on top of their game.

If everyone on the sales force sold as well as the top performers, revenue would increase exponentially. If the mid-career middle performers could duplicate a measure of the success of top performers, newer and potentially younger hires could move more quickly into the middle and upper ranks and increase sales and profits.

Saba Social Learning can help make this a reali-

ty. Within the Saba Social Learning solution, sales reps can connect with each other at any time through the use of the following functions:

Keyword tagging. Salespeople can tag files, videos, class lessons, and comments they find useful. For example, a senior rep who discovers that a competitor has launched a new but unreliable supply of ball bearings to the pharmaceutical industry can tag this comment by both product and customer type. Reps who sell ball bearings to pharmaceutical firms can easily find this information and shape their value proposition to emphasize superior reliability.

Comment ratings. Comment ratings allow future users to quickly find the material most likely to help them close the deal and the people most likely to answer questions quickly and competently. Sales managers can use comment ratings as a way to recognize the people who are helping others most.

Expert searches. Each topic or skill area is associated with the reps who make the most frequent and highly rated contributions to it. This allows those looking for help in a particular area to quickly contact the right expert even if they have a question that has never been asked before.

Bookmarking. Once a rep has found some great material on a topic, he or she can bookmark it for future use. Just before the rep makes the first call, goes in for an appointment, or gets ready to close, he or she can click the bookmark to get relevant information immediately, without any search or queries.

Discussion lists. Social learning expands the classroom by providing an easy way for junior salespeople to be in touch with the wisdom of their experienced and successful colleagues.

Enabling a team with these functionalities means that under-performing reps can follow a rainmaker in the company who often posts a discussion item or contributes a slideshow that helped him close a deal. Similarly, top performers can find the answers they need through other contacts in the company or in the extended enterprise, right when they need them most. Unlike traditional learning methodologies, the real-time nature of a social-learning environment can help reps keep up with fast rollouts of promotional campaigns and new product launches. And it allows them to tap this information at just the right

time to help move a deal forward.

With social learning, every rep who takes a sales training course can ask follow up questions, get answers, and share feedback, either in real time or on an ongoing basis. Also, instructors can set up virtual office hours to help reinforce lessons or answer questions, for example, What have been the recent successes in selling a particular product to a customer in a specific industry? Who closed the deal and what techniques were used? Suppose a competitor is winning deals exclusively on price; what has been the most effective way of proving our product's superior value to a particular industry?

Such questions are frequently vital for a salesperson working on a major deal. Without the benefit of a social learning space, however, it can be difficult for reps to find a colleague or manager who can give them useful answers on the fly. A social learning environment makes these answers discoverable, available, and storable as a public record for the entire sales team.

Social learning represents a vital asset for the sales leader who is trying to create a winning envi-


ronment specifically for top performers. Because top performers tend to be highly engaged and proficient in using CRM and mobile devices to fill the pipeline and close more deals, faster, they might have "different expectations," about how training and knowledge should be acquired and shared, says Saba Director of Product Strategy David Koehn.

"The new, engaged worker is likely to believe that everything should behave and look like Facebook," he says. "And sales leaders want training that lasts.

Every day that passes after you've given a sales rep formal training and it isn't applied, that's one more day of forgetting.

On average, 84 percent of sales training content is lost after 90 days.

When you put that together across the entire sales organization and measure that as a dollar value, that's an area of missed opportunity that has significant revenue applications."



Top performers among B2B sales teams are partly born and partly made.

Conclusion

Top performers among B2B sales teams are partly born and partly made. While research has shown that inherent personality traits play a significant role in determining who will succeed in sales, defining success factors also include proper sales management and leadership, training, shared best practices, and technology that supports the sales process.

Evidence has shown that leaders who develop effective collaboration strategies among their sales teams are much more likely to see wins. In a digital age, social learning is a natural way to bring global resources to bear on local solutions. For a global or other widely dispersed sales force, social learning may be the only practical way for salespeople to share important lessons and information – particularly because it provides a way for reps to connect with the right people to address a specific sales challenge.

By bringing the functionality of social networks into the sales process, social learning can help sales leaders create more top performers and stronger sales teams that drive more revenue.