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Don't wish for a happy New Year, make it happen!

The American portrait painter Chuck Close once said, "I don't wait for inspiration to strike; I go after it with a club." Anyone who wants 2013 to be a better year than 2012 should adopt Close's approach. Rather than waiting for things to get better, go after your goals with a club. After years of recession and increased competition, simply "working harder" probably isn't going to make things much better. Most people are already working harder and longer than ever before. It's time to jump out of the box and try some different approaches and techniques. Everyone knows the cliché: "insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," but few heed it. To jump-start your thinking I've put together five ideas for sales people to try in 2013 and another five for their managers. You may be doing some of these things now, if so, look for another idea to replace them. The secret is to keep experimenting, throwing out the failures and building on your successes.

Five ideas for sales people

Develop "Amnesia"—You don't need to whack yourself in the head with a hammer. You just need to forget everything you know about your advertisers. Go through your files and look at them with fresh eyes. Forget what this customer "likes" or that "so and so is a real cheapskate." Look at each account like they were a new prospect or advertising with a competitor. Lay aside your prejudices about the account and present them with new ideas and propose the program you feel they need.

Give your presentation a make over—Salespeople, like everyone else, are creatures of habit. I've worked with some salespeople for over a decade and the sales presentation they use today has changed very little from the Clinton era. Take the time to sit down and write out a new presentation. Think about the objections you often get and what kinds of questions customers ask. Create a presentation that attempts to answer these in advance. While you're at it, prepare a presentation binder with graphics to support what you are saying. Vow to start the New Year with a new sales approach.

Learn to love research—Many salespeople hate research. They believe they can convince customers to buy advertising based on the force of their personality. This may have worked in the past, but today's post recession customers are more wary. They won't commit until they're sure that they are making the right decision. Use

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your audit, the information on PaperChain.org, Google and other research to get the customer off the fence. You need to take the time to educate yourself about what is available and how to use it effectively. Your competitors are using their research to promote their products and to trash yours. Without research you are “bringing a knife to a gun fight.”

Run for office—Imagine you are running for congress from your sales territory. Actively network and get involved in community organizations and events. Just joining the Chamber of Commerce offers little benefit. Attend and participate in meetings and volunteer to work on committees and service projects. Taking an active part in these groups lets you step out of the role of salesperson and build relationships with the key people in your area. You can leverage these relationships to make sales and secure introductions to hard to reach prospects. Working with community groups is also an excellent way to gather information about what’s going on in your market.

Be afraid, be very afraid—My daughter has a t-shirt that reads “You’d be paranoid too, if everyone was out to get you!” Guess what...everyone is out to get you, or at least to take your customers away. Every daily newspaper rep, every radio salesperson, every billboard advertiser and a hundred others are looking at your paper and trying to figure how to steal your lunch money. In this dog eat dog market you cannot afford to be complacent about any account. When a customer tells you they are switching to a competitor, it’s usually too late to save the account. The only way to protect your account list is to consistently deliver service that goes above and beyond what the customer expects. You need to surprise the customer. Drop them a card on their birthday; send them the occasional thank you note, use your network to find customers for them. Simply showing up on time, saying please and thank you and getting their ads right is no longer enough. You need to make them love you.

Five ideas for sales managers

Conduct the orchestra—Take a look at your business card, if it says “Sales Manager,” that’s what you want to do when you’re at work. Far too many sales managers spend their days acting like “super sales people.” They handle calls and “put out fires.” They are convinced that their reps couldn’t handle these situations and that it is faster to do it themselves. Managers should spend the bulk of their time on activities that only they can do. If your reps can’t handle their accounts, it is the manager’s responsibility to either teach them what they need to do or to replace them. Managers should spend their

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time developing their people and in planning. The more time you spend on activities that benefit your entire team, the more successful you will be. Like a conductor, your job is to hire the best “musicians”, make sure they know their parts and then to use your baton to maintain a fast tempo.

Make people cross their “t’s” and dot their “i’s”—I have been known to tear up my rep’s paperwork and make them redo it. Sales managers need to hold their people accountable for everything they do. Sloppy paperwork leads to miscommunication, which leads to angry customers, which leads to lost revenue or even lost customers. A lot of shoddy work gets by supervisors who are afraid of “micro-managing.” When your people know that anything less than excellence is unacceptable and that you are checking their work, you’ll get good work. This goes far beyond paperwork, look at ad layouts and sales planning, look at rep’s files and call sheets. I’ve had more than a few conversations about a rep’s appearance. I’ve found reps quickly develop good work habits reducing errors and saving time. This may not win you many friends, but it’s your job to set the standards.

Eat lunch—I try never to eat lunch alone. I’ve had some of my best conversations with reps and customers over a burger. There is something about breaking bread with another person that lubricates the tongue and gets them talking. I’ve learned more about my people, their goals and their problems in a restaurant than I could ever uncover in my office. I find this is a great way to offer coaching advice. In this context, my advice comes off as friendly conversation rather than “the boss telling me how to run my territory.” Likewise, getting customers out of their business relaxes them and makes them more inclined to do business.

Talk to customers—Make a habit of talking to customers. Call customers and thank them for advertising. Call customers who cancelled to find out why. Randomly call or visit regular customers just to be sure they’re satisfied and being handled the way they want to be handled. When the “boss” pays attention to them, customers feel like your company cares and is interested in what they have to say. Because you are not trying to sell them something, customers will be more inclined to give honest feedback. Sometimes they are reluctant to share negative opinions with their reps because they don’t want to damage their relationship with them. In addition to feedback, sometimes customers will share good ideas for improving your products. Always share what you’ve learned with your reps, particularly when customers have good things to say

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about them. I recommend managers use “Survey Monkey” to conduct customer surveys. This online service allows you to conduct a number of surveys at no charge and a full membership is very affordable. Talking to customers on a regular basis is the best way to avoid being surprised with bad news

Live in a time warp—Managers should always be living six months in the future. Thorough planning eliminates problems and stress at deadline. Create a dated timeline for every major project. Counting back from the final deadline, set benchmarks and establish performance standards for your reps. For example, reps should have contacted all prospects at the 25% benchmark and should have closed 40% of their accounts by the 50% point. Take opportunities away from reps that fall behind the pace. By tracking progress and holding your reps accountable for meeting benchmarks, you gain more control over the projects on your calendar. When you know where you are, you can make mid-course corrections in the direction of the project before it is too late to make adjustments.

Make it happen!

Management guru Tom Peters’ favorite axiom is “Do it! Fix it! Try it!” Peters has made a career out of studying excellent companies and effective leaders. He has found that the best leaders have what he calls “a bias for action.” They constantly experiment and try new things. They are always looking to improve their performance. I have given you a few suggestions to try, but if you think creatively and act boldly, you will discover many more. You can’t wait for success...you need to go after it with a club!

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennsaver.

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