

## S SALES

# Take Action to Resuscitate Flat-Line Sales and Regain Former Buzz

Your sales team is working incredibly hard, chasing every lead, making lots of customer presentations – but sales continue to be flat. You can't work any harder, yet revenue isn't growing and you can't seem to get at the real problem. Finding the right answer is feeling maddeningly impossible, even if you aren't alone. And that's because the truth is, there is no one answer.

Solving the problem of flat sales requires taking an honest, hard look at the organization and its management. The answer will usually not be found in the easy excuses: The economy is down, there are new competitors in the market, or "We need to replace the sales team."

In way too many business situations where sales are flat, the answer lies instead in the very definition of "flat." According to Webster's dictionary, there are 19 different definitions of flat and there can be just as many answers to flat sales.

Two of those 19 definitions are particularly relevant to this issue:

- Having little or no sparkle and
- Having little or no interest.

Ask yourself if the sales team, your marketing team and your management team still exhibit the same enthusiasm and energy they



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did when sales were growing. Has that lack of energy filtered throughout the company and right down to your customers? When you do the tough self-examination, do you see:

- Tired products or services?
  - Re-formulated marketing with little real energy?
  - Maxed-out, tired, bored sales reps?
  - Re-energized competitors?
  - Customers who no longer turn to you as the industry expert?
  - Customers who have stopped saying how great and innovative you are?
  - Uninspired management?
- Look first at your products and

services. How do they stack up against improvements or advancements in your industry? Do they meet the needs of a marketplace that changes almost overnight or have you merely repackaged old products in an attempt to look current?

Get out there and get in touch with the market all over again. What's the buzz at the conferences and in the industry trade journals? What are your competitors doing that you're not? Are there new features or enhanced services you must add to get that edge back? What are the new trends coming out of the university research centers or business schools?

Once you identify what's tired about your products and where you need to update or reinvent, move to the next stage: re-energizing your marketing efforts.

In this case, don't be pennywise and pound foolish by short-changing your marketing and PR budget. If you're going to get back into the game and lead, you need charismatic marketing that will tell people that you're on top. This is marketing that convinces customers and prospects once again that the old energy is back.

Complacent marketing departments that ignore new design trends

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and new delivery technology or that just plain don't see the excitement themselves must be re-energized in order to spread new energy to your market.

When your products, services and marketing are tired, so are your sales reps. No one can continue to sell lackluster products or services every day without physically leaving the company or intellectually leaving it by going into auto-pilot mode.

Sales reps may look like they're working hard and may still be asking the customer the right needs-analysis questions, but your product may no longer solve that need. Or maybe now it's only a partial solution of the need.

Despite the old Eskimo-and-ice selling metaphor, no one buys what they don't need. And flat sales can be the first indication that the need for your product is waning.

While your company was snoozing, your competitors were likely watching and cheering. While your company became complacent, they got themselves energized, their market redefined and, as a result, they surely stole business that would have been yours.

So watching out for the new kids on the block should never draw your attention from that longtime competitor who may just be gearing up to clean your clock.

How do you begin to put the excitement back into the company? How do you not only become rele-

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*"Focus every aspect of your company on your customers, from your people to your processes to your technology. When you truly communicate with your customers and focus on them, they won't let you become complacent, tired or bored again."*

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vant again but essential to your customers?

This is in fact the easy part – you ask them. If any of the problems described so far apply to your company, it's because you've lost touch with your customers. Just ask them and they'll tell you what they want. Listen and they'll tell you how to sell to them. Your customers know what's relevant to their needs and how you can reinvent your products to meet those new needs.

Focus every aspect of your company on your customers, from your people to your processes to your technology. When you truly communicate with your customers and focus on them, they won't let you become complacent, tired or bored again. They'll force you to stay nimble and to change with them.

Try calling your top 10 customers and the last 10 prospects you didn't close. Ask why they buy from you, why they didn't buy from you and what you should be doing to earn their business in the future. Then do it. Once you institute their recommendations, you then tell your customers or prospects of the roles they played. Thank them for saving you from yourself.

And finally, give your management team a kick and get them moving again by involving them actively in the process of reconnecting with your customers. Assign each member of the management team three clients to speak to. Prep your managers to ask customers how their respective departments can better serve them.

Set up innovation/brain storming sessions with your management team and all corresponding teams that service your top clients. Go offsite, bare your soul and ask for forgiveness for forgetting your customers. Then encourage them to lead you back to relevance.

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