

## Include Sales Team in Product Design and Planning

By **Marie Warner**

As seen in...**Mass High Tech**

Sales Management in an emerging growth firm is like mountain bike racing. While plotting the best course to beat the competition to the distant finish line, the biker must keep a sharp eye on the immediate obstacles - roots, rocks, terrain, - which might throw the bike, slow the pace, or end her participation in the race.

Similarly, the effective sales executive must aggressively push to meet the firm's long term goals, while nimbly changing course and swerving to avoid immediate pitfalls in tactical execution.

I offer three guidelines for "victorious" sales management in the emerging growth company.

### **Guideline 1: Sales management plans must "morph" with the growing firm.**

Failure to include sales in early product development planning is a mistake made by too many emerging growth firms.

In the early 90's, I accepted a senior sales and product champion job with a small software and data integration division of a major software company. My immediate sales plan was to introduce a pilot of a new software tool for bond analysts in money management firms.

I discovered, however, that no customer development partners had participated in the design of this product, which was due to be released in a few weeks.

My coast-to-coast sales campaign revealed that the software had little to offer in the way of new or needed capabilities, and at best would be purchased by half a dozen curious "quants."

Quickly modifying my sales plan, I recommended that the product be killed before release. Lesson learned: sales management must participate in the early product design and beta testing - before first customer ship dates are scheduled.

If your product is in design, development or pilot, your sales focus should be on securing strategic development partners. The research and engineering team will have their own set of technical requirements for an attractive beta customer or development partner. Their concerns focus on systems standards and compatibility, and a willingness to give feedback on usability and function.

The sales executive, however, must focus on the customers who will buy the product. Senior sales management must have an early say in the selection and solicitation of these critical early converts. The ideal development partner should be a market leader - a successful firm respected as a pioneer of new technology. Most importantly, the development partner must be willing to be a reference for the press and for new potential customers.

Be willing to trim your prices and offer favorable contract terms to secure these invaluable "quotable" customers.

### **Guideline 2: Building the Sales Organization -with the three "C's."**

If your product release is on track, then the sales executive must efficiently build, train and develop the "sales machine".

Will the product be sold by channel sales or a dedicated sales force? Should all sales be centralized in headquarters or should offices be opened and staffed? The sales manager can be guided in these formative decisions by the three "C's" -- Complexity, Control, and Cost.

Certain products, such as consumer end-user products, must be sold by reseller partners or through other channels, since the growing firm lacks the resources (or intent) to build a 10,000 strong sales force.

If your emerging growth business builds big-ticket commercial products, however, the sales executive has key decisions to make in structuring the sales organization.

To help you structure the optimal sales organization, ask yourself: How complex is the product? If your product exploits cutting edge technology, or solves a complicated customer problem, chances are that the sales representative pitching your wares must be an experienced professional.

A second consideration is whether you need to control the entire sales process. Hiring your own field sales force gives your sales management greater control over the training, motivation and ongoing guidance of the sales team.

Control and cost are also factors in deciding whether to centralize your sales force in one location, or to open field offices located in different cities.

In general, a centralized sales force is always less costly and easier to manage and control. Whether operating in an executive suite, home office or your own real estate, the remotely located field office is more expensive to both initially set up and to operate on an ongoing basis.

What's more, sales representatives located in remote field offices are tougher to hire, train, and to manage - in short, a challenge to control.

Better for the growing firm to establish one central base for all sales reps, which fosters peer learning, and improves communication with the rest of the firm - critical tasks in a growing company.

### **Guideline 3: Keep it growing. Get and stay directly involved.**

For sales executives (and all top executives) one good day making sales calls with your reps is better than three good days behind the desk in headquarters.

Absolutely nothing beats the first hand experience of a prospective customer's reaction to a demonstration of your new product, or an existing customer's testimony of how your product helps them do their job.

So, win the race. The sales executive must be aware that both sales organizations and sales management strategies must evolve with the emerging growth company. He or she must balance the long term sales strategy with tactical actions and defensive responses. Plan to be agile and to change both your sales management plans and your sales organization as the company itself transforms in its critical emerging growth phase.

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## About the Author

Marie Warner is founder and President of Warner Professional Sales, LLC. Warner Professional Sales helps companies achieve **sales force success through people, performance and planning**. Warner Professional Sales helps companies get more revenue growth from their sales force by *recruiting* the right sales staff, 2) *training and developing* those sales professionals to consistently exceed revenue goals, and helping management to define and implement the best sales "process" and tactics for sales cycle control, territory assignments and quota planning.

Marie brings to client engagements over two-decades of leadership in the sale of technology, consulting and financial products and services to the Fortune 1000 and major financial institutions. This includes nine years of experience as Chief Sales Officer, in both enterprise-level and start-up organizations.

Marie Warner has authored articles in *Mass High Tech*, *SalesResources.com*, *SalesVantage.com*, *EyesOnSales.com*, *Software Sales Journal*, *SalesDoctors*, and *Women's Business* addressing successful sales strategies and tactics. She is a member of NETSEA (New England Technology Sales Executives Association), WITI (Women in Technology, International), Human Capital Institute, The Commonwealth Group, NAPS (National Association of Personnel Services) and participates in numerous other entrepreneurial, technology and marketing organizations.

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