

The 'Secret' to Sales Success

It's not the number of sales you close, but the types of accounts you win, nurture, and retain. **By Mike Schmidtmann**

MY FIRST SALES MANAGER told me, "Your success will depend on how good you are and how hard you work." It took me 20 years to realize he was wrong, wrong, wrong. Why?

It didn't sound like bad advice. In fact, it seemed like common sense. So when my boss challenged me to work hard and master my craft, I jumped. No one worked harder to learn the products and applications, and no one made more sales calls.

That meant learning the products and applications to the point where I could train like a trainer, support like a customer service rep, and even do minor service work. I studied the competitors' products to understand their strengths and weaknesses. I tried to read every expert's opinion on the market, trends, and new technologies.

That also meant signing up for every selling class I could find, and reading every major sales book. I remember reading Tom Hopkins' *How to Master the Art of Selling* again and again, and memorizing his closing questions word for word.

My sales manager challenged me to visit, on-site, every business in my territory. At the time, that was all of Hollywood, Fla., and the southern half of Fort Lauderdale—a metro area of approximately 300,000 people. For months I made at least 20 on-site prospecting calls a day until I had visited every business in my territory.

After about a year of brutal work, studying, learning, and prospecting, I looked up at the sales rankings and noticed an extremely troubling fact. I wasn't at the top of the list, or even near it. If I was the best closer and the hardest working guy, why wasn't I at the top?

Figuring It Out

I had been on a mission to learn the elusive secret of success. Little did I know that the answer was hardly a secret. Finally, I figured it out. Top performers weren't closing lots of sales, they were selling to a few big, loyal accounts.

A big account isn't necessarily one large site. It can be a chain of retail locations. It can be a network of affiliated companies or a small company that buys huge amounts of technology or applications. It can start as a branch office that reports to a corporate HQ. A great account simply needs to do enough business to move the needle on your sales quota!

The Secret of Top Performers

In an informal survey I conducted of 28 IT solution providers, the average top salesperson generated over \$1



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million in gross profit and earned close to \$300,000 in income. None of these salespeople made the highest number of cold calls or closed the most accounts. Instead, each one managed to win and retain a number of large, profitable accounts.

So my old sales manager was well intentioned, but he offered poor advice. Success is not a factor of how good you are and how hard you work. It's far more important to focus your activity in an optimal way. And that means targeting and winning great accounts. As the famous management consultant Peter F. Drucker wrote, "To be effective is the job of the executive." That's not doing things right, it's doing the right things.

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