

“Difference-Maker” Attributes of an Effective Sales Leader

By Ted Gurevitz

You know how important building and maintaining customer relationships are. But how do your customers really view you as a sales leader? Are you doing enough to make a direct impact on their business beyond being visible as a sales leader? These are a few passionate concepts that make great sales leaders the “differentiator” in many a transaction.



“I want my supplier to know the value before I know it. They win by knowing what I need.”

- Senior Vice President,
Fortune 50 company



Make me a winner

- **Field a team that is focused on our business.** Have a strategy for discovering customer business drivers. Who in your selling organization should have responsibility for each key person in the customer organization? Effective sales leaders know that even the best proposition may go unsold if the right customer players are not identified and thoughtful value propositions are not established with each player in the buying organization.
- **Provide a team that stays with us. Retraining them is difficult.** Knowing what to ask of your salespeople and knowing the gaps between what is asked and what they can get done is a central tenet of successful sales leadership. Be diligent in defining the skill set critical to success with customers, assessing your individual contributors, providing personalized access for skills improvement, and establishing career paths and succession planning. These best practices not only optimize business operations, but keep the focus on delivering value to customers.
- **Invest in mutually beneficial endeavors.** Work on developing different kinds of relationships at different levels in your customers’ organization. Learn about their business and industry beyond the areas which you are currently exploring with them. Get to know others at your customers beyond your direct contact. This is a way to uncover greater value since these contacts may have some unknown influence or point you to an opportunity.

Make sure we are being treated fairly

- **Confidentiality is important.** The importance of confidentiality before, during, and after a sale cannot be overstated. A confidential process that fosters trust and the efficient exchange of sensitive information is one of the most important foundations of a credible and respected sales leader. By upholding confidentiality, you generate—and preserve—your customers’ loyalty, good faith, dependability, and trust.
- **Your team must be focused on the long-term as well as the short-term.** Customers look to effective sales leaders as a value resource. Sometimes your customers can’t see the forest for the trees. Use your bank of institutional knowledge and intellectual capital to find opportunities that they have overlooked.
- **Make sure your company “does the right thing.”** Remember Apple’s “Antennagate”? Not many people do. It’s because Steve Jobs did the right thing. He apologized to his customers and took a small financial hit to make sure they remained happy. Remember, your personal brand is shaped each time someone from your selling organization interacts with your customers. Role model the character, personality, and values you want them to take to market.



Keep your team energized about our business

- **We need your people to be excited about working with us.** Are your salespeople energized and excited about their work? Do they have the freedom to go the extra mile on behalf of their customers, to take extraordinary initiative to shape their customers' success? Sales leaders have to make the selling journey exciting and compelling for those who travel it. Sometimes the key differentiator between you and your competitor is something as "soft" as your enthusiasm and demonstrated commitment to your customers' interests.
- **If you feel we are being unreasonable, tell us.** In their zeal to "run the play faster," many customers charge toward what they think is the finish line on the basis of skewed assumptions. Share your successful experience with various customers working similar initiatives to help them see the heart of the issues, validate their information, and reduce the risk of false assumptions.
- **Get your sales teams to be thought leaders.** Critical Path Strategies was recently engaged by a client to interview 10 of their most important customers. One of the questions we asked was, "What else might this firm (sales leader) do for you and your business?" The response was immediate and clear: "Be proactive with your ideas." "Challenge me." "Help me change." "Help me stay in control." Once you understand your customers' goals and objectives, your job as a sales leader is to help achieve them through thought leadership, creativity, and innovation.
- **You and the team have a "place at the table." We can count on you, especially in tough times.** High-value buyers present great opportunities for high-value sales leaders. Take "George," a senior VP at a Fortune 50 company. George expects potential suppliers to assign their best account managers to his account, and have their best salespeople working on his most important initiatives. He wants them to have broad knowledge of their company's overall capabilities—in order to serve his interests. George says, "I want my supplier to know the value before I know it. They win by knowing what I need."

ABOUT CPS. Critical Path Strategies helps clients improve the effectiveness of their sales organization. Our portfolio of services addresses the strategic, organizational, and relationship issues that impact selling performance. Our powerful processes enable clients to transform their sales culture, enhance their competitive position, and accomplish strategic business initiatives. Our clients—emerging companies and members of the Fortune 500 alike—typically measure 100 to 500 times their CPS investment in revenue growth.

In every company, people who sell, deliver, and develop customer relationships are its most important assets. They are the conduits to the company's ultimate asset: the customer. But critically important is the sales leadership, the organizational owner of this collective asset. These difference-maker attributes serve sales leaders well as they build for future opportunities and rewards while consistently delivering near-term wins.



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