

Exceeding Expectations as a Chief Sales Executive is Becoming a Herculean Task

Higher sales and production targets are the rule, not the exception: It's not uncommon for PE/VC sponsors to demand 50% - 80% YoY growth (or more).

An increasingly complex selling environment makes hurdling high goals all the more challenging: Geographically distributed and inexperienced sales teams, increasing competition, and resulting vendor fatigue on the part of prospects, all make achieving aggressive sales targets all the more difficult.

Leaders at world-class commercial organizations have responded by deploying an innovative, four-part gameplan to drive sales success:

- 1) They create and publicize a thoughtful 6-12 month strategy that will govern their approach to exceeding goals and revisit this plan (at least) quarterly to tweak and adjust as necessary.
- 2) They infuse the commercial organization with cutting edge tools, tight processes, and predictable operations, to ensure salespeople have the support they need to thrive.
- 3) They craft a unique culture that continually inspires, motivates, and rewards their team and makes salespeople proud of the key role they play in their company's success.
- 4) They over-rotate on training and partnering with high-potential salespeople to find superstars quickly, and then personally invest in those stars to drive outsized growth.

One lesson has become clear in our work accelerating sales and go-to-market efforts for ~20 companies, across multiple industries: In order to succeed in today's tough sales environment, focused, consistent attention is required on all four of these priorities – not just one or two. Below, we break down each category, and supply practical tactics that you can use to drive A+ commercial performance and exceed the goals you've been asked to achieve.

Category 1: Institute Strategic Sales Leadership. Focus sales efforts on the terrains, products, territories, and customer-types that are most likely to yield outsized sales growth – and invest in the tactical workstreams to recognize results.

1. Create and use a “power formula” to project likely business performance on a quarterly and annual basis, and to set territory size, penetration levels, and salesperson goals. Constantly evaluate how your team's performance is tracking compared to the assumptions you've made.



Quick Tip: Construct a formula based on the main variables responsible for commercial success. As a simple example: (Number of sales meetings) X (Conversion rate) X (Average price) = Expected sales. Then, determine which variables you must hit/infect/modify in order to hit desired sales goals.

2. Develop and use quarterly account planning meetings to confirm each salesperson has a viable path to goal for the following three-to-six months, and the support they need to succeed. When sessions reveal likely underperformance, develop an immediate action plan for improvement.
3. Be ruthless in segmenting and re-segmenting territory to ensure your best salespeople are matched with top account opportunities – even if it causes friction. Use extra incentives if necessary to smooth over concerns about inserting star performers into deals outside their formal territory.

4. Deploy aggressive marketing approaches (digital, social media, thought leadership, etc.) to produce high-value leads. Create goals based on interim outcomes (i.e. sales meetings scheduled, key contacts engaged, etc.) not revenue; put a single marketing leader on the hook for success.
5. Create a formal upsell program that enables account management/client success teams to contribute 10%-20% of annual, new sales via upsells; focus efforts on specific modules and product extensions that are natural to raise in scheduled client check-ins and renewal conversations.



Quick Tip: Don't just include upsell goals as a component within existing account manager incentive plans or this responsibility will likely get short-shrift; instead, purposefully create separate, motivating upsell incentives and focus your energy around a small group of account managers who are excited about the opportunity.

Category 2: Deploy Best Practice Sales Operations and Process. Routinize and standardize the execution of key sales tasks to remove variability and increase performance.

6. Use sales math (i.e., in-funnel conversion rates, sales cycle time data, etc.) to identify sales challenges early.
7. Develop a clear, scalable, pipeline projection approach for every month and quarter based on a combination of CRM data and deep intel about each unit in the pipeline. Get your hands dirty by verifying details of key deals to ensure they are truly positioned to close as projected.



Quick Tip: Even the best salesperson inputs in your CRM may be inaccurate, with projected close dates and other details often too optimistic. Make a rule that no opportunity can be placed at a certain (elevated) closure stage until a deep-dive, live conversation of its true likelihood-to-close occurs.

8. Develop and deploy tight, urgency-based closing language during initial sales meetings to set prospect expectations around time frame for contract signature. Adjust this urgency throughout the year to keep it fresh, and sign-off salespeople on a script to ensure they can deliver it well.
9. Create and hardwire the use of prewire guides prior to key prospect-facing conversations to gather and share intel. For critical meetings, host a strategy session 24-48 hours in advance to review materials and roles in the meeting, and gameplan responses to anticipated prospect reactions.
10. Produce top-quality auxiliary collateral, including tech guides, implementation guides, ROI projections, mutual evaluation plans, etc. Pinpoint when these materials should be used during evaluations, and consider delivering this content via short video clips.
11. Establish A+ relationships with important sales supporters in your company such as legal, product, service deployment, and marketing teams. If necessary, develop internal service standards to ensure timely return of answers to prospect questions.



Quick Tip: Include these supporters when celebrating important sales wins. By mentioning their role in public announcements, sending them a thoughtful note (with a CC to their boss), and offering a bottle of wine/movie tickets as a thank you, you lock in their strong support during future evaluations.

12. Perfect the art of managing upwards so you can properly set expectations with the executive team, board members, and other senior stakeholders. Create consistency in the timing, format, and organization of these updates to streamline communication and avoid misunderstandings.

Category 3: Establish Great Sales Culture and Incentive Structures. Consistently celebrate new partnerships and reward salespeople in appropriate/creative ways.

13. Celebrate all signed contracts publicly, with at least some degree of executive visibility. In these announcements, acknowledge key individuals in the organization who played even modest roles.
14. Create a simple, clear, motivating incentive plan for all key business development contributors on a quarterly/half year basis. Don't be afraid to make adjustments (up or down) depending on performance patterns to prevent dejection (if salespeople are behind) or coasting (if they're ahead).
15. Pay close(st) attention to your star performers: Top salespeople often crave extra, personal attention: seek their confidential feedback on key decisions, invest in their growth with unique training opportunities, and promote their wins to board members – not just the executive team.
16. Offer customized, additive incentives to further inflect salesperson behavior. Think beyond cash and involve your CEO in delivering new incentives to provide extra motivation.



Quick Tip: If achieving a group sales goal is important, rally your salespeople with a stretchy, tiered, incentive that they can reach together. Items that work well include access to a luxury suite at a sporting event, group trips to the Porsche/ Range Rover/BMW driving schools, or a cooking class at an exclusive restaurant.

17. Organize in-days that inspire staff and drive real return. Well in advance, plan out the key priorities you want to make progress on to avoid the meeting being just an expensive group rendezvous.



Quick Tip: Out-of-industry leaders with sales-like responsibilities (i.e., hospitality, events, local government) can be great speakers for in-days; they offer different perspectives on issues like client cultivation and creating buying urgency, which helps your team think outside the box about solving key challenges.

Category 4: Train New Sales People. Develop a rigorous training plan to quickly determine if new sales people will succeed and focus support your best talent even more.

18. Provide rigorous industry 101 and intensive product training: Your sales teams are unlikely to succeed if they don't truly understand the product or the industry they're selling into.



Quick Tip: As much as possible, avoid using canned videos and pre-fabricated summaries to conduct training. Your sales people deserve live teaching on key concepts where they can interact with product experts and ask questions. In follow up, use fun quizzes, Slack channel exchanges, etc. to ensure content sinks in.

19. Run formal scripting and sign-off processes to ensure sales team members deliver pitches at an A+ standard (for demos, ROI documents and other key prospect-facing conversations). Don't allow salespeople to own pursuits until they are signed-off and delivering the pitch at standard.
20. Partner with salespeople to inflect pipeline performance without coming on too strong: Determine in advance what role you'll play before double traveling or joining prospect-facing calls.
21. Run rigorous, weekly 1:1 pipeline meetings with new salespeople to ensure strong follow up on key activities occurs in a timely manner. Trust, but verify, these steps are occurring for each pursuit.

We hope these ideas and insights are helpful!

Interested in discussing these research findings? In need of a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of your sales organization to identify areas for improvement? Feel free to contact us at:



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