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Jump-start your sales for 2006 with solid planning

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

Retailers are accustomed to thinking seasons ahead, and often order fall and winter merchandise in the spring or summer months.

Are you thinking that far ahead with your sales goals? If your sales cycle averages 60 days or more, you're already laying the foundation for next year's success.

Now is the time to jump-start your sales for 2006 and get ahead of the competition. Plans take time to implement, and it's easy to lose two or three weeks with year-end activities and holiday festivities.

Begin now with a four-step sales process:

- Analyze your year (both the good and bad).
- Assess your sales expertise.
- Set your priorities.
- Develop your detailed sales plan.

Start by objectively identifying what did and didn't go well during your sales year. Think about sales in four distinct areas:

- Product, industry and competitor knowledge.
- Your will to win the sale.
- Your sales skills.
- How proactive you are in managing sales activity.

Ask yourself what elements of your expertise are keen and which need work. What has changed in your company, industry and with your competitors? Are you able to use your competitor's information to your advantage?

Is there a particular product line or market segment you need to know better? Are there new products, campaigns, technology, trends or market segments requiring a knowledge update?

Are you managing your sales territory like a sales winner?

The answers will put you far ahead of your competitors in planning for 2006.

Next, identify what selling skills you've really mastered. On a piece of paper, list sales skill sets on the left margin. At the top, label three columns: Expert, Acceptable and Needs Work.

Now go through each skill set and check off your evaluation of your skills in the appropriate column. Perhaps your strength is opening doors, maintaining relationships, qualifying or closing. Maybe you're a cold-calling expert.

Is there a way to leverage your strengths to augment less-developed skills? For example, is it possible to leverage relationships into more referrals if prospecting is a challenge? Better qualification skills can increase closing numbers, and good closing skills can reduce the time required for follow-up. Top athletes and top sales producers continually practice skill sets, ask for coaching and strive to improve.

Once your list is complete, pick areas that you want to strengthen, and identify a source to help you succeed. Make a short-term goal list with target completion dates and track your performance. Improving your skill sets each year is the best way to meet the challenge of increasing sales targets and stronger competition.

Time is your greatest resource in selling, and freedom is one of the greatest rewards. How you use your time and freedom will make or break your run for the gold.

Planning and prioritizing are paramount to sales success, and despite long hours and intense effort, disappointment and failure are frequently due to poor time management in these areas. If you're a victim of phone calls or e-mails controlling your day, now is the time to take control and manage your sales priorities. Remember that 80 percent of your business probably comes from 20 percent of your actions, so make those actions really count.

Get in control by establishing a detailed sales plan. One high producer and winner of many awards relates a story about one of his early managers.

This manager demanded completion of a 12-month itinerary for the coming year, due every Dec. 31. A geographic layout by day, week and month for all areas, including a listing of the top 12 prospects and customers (eight with four alternatives) for each day, were required, along with a plan to grow key accounts.

The real value of this intensive exercise was that by the end of the second quarter, he had so many opportunities and generated so much momentum from his efficiency, the year was already a sales success.

Start working on your itinerary and personal business plan now. Identify key accounts you want to penetrate next year and do any research required. It's not too early to start making contacts and appointments for January. What key relationships do you need to grow or start? Which customers and accounts need added protection from competitors?

Now is the time to look in the mirror and lose old, self-limiting beliefs and attitudes. Old prospects change their minds, and new issues can overcome previous objections. What attitudes, perspectives and personal beliefs might you need to challenge and update?

For example, it's easy to start believing price is always the main issue after a couple consecutive losses to a low bidder, though other competitors may continue to sell for more.

Ask your peers, a mentor, coach or manager what attributes they have observed in top sellers and how you can use them to increase and enhance your sales efforts. Making contacts with the right people, and saying and doing the right things with the right frequency, are the keys to prosperity in sales.

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