



BEST PRACTICES –TALENT ASSESSMENT

BELLWETHER FOOD GROUP, Inc.

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This is the final article about fixing what is broken with the sales efforts inside many companies today.

Your organizational talent — the skills available to execute your business plan, is your single most important resource when it comes to generating and sustaining revenue, especially truly new business. Success or not, is often a function of how well the sales team and the individuals on the team, execute.

In sales, talent is the competitive differentiator. There is no other function in the business that is so critical to success in generating and sustaining revenue. You can have the best products in the world, yet if you can't sell them, you still have them!

In some ways it almost seems counter intuitive — with all the emerging technology, information at the finger tips, etc. Today, almost everyone has all the same tools, technology, insights, and information, otherwise they wouldn't survive. Legitimate product advantages have dwindled over time. Everyone has good products.

So ultimately, it comes down to how well you manage the resources and capabilities that give you an edge. The driver of the edge throughout your organizations is talent, at all levels. Our focus for this discussion is around the sales talent — the face of your organization to the customers and prospective customers, those that will sustain your future.

The challenges/realities are:

- For most manufacturers, the primary relationship managers, the sales team, is the face of the company to the key customer contacts
- As such, the individual skills, talents and capabilities of each really matter in managing the complexity of customer organizations
- If you have talented people doing this, you have an advantage over the other vendors that customer works with. This applies across the board, not just in your specific categories

- If you don't have as good a talent as other suppliers, you will suffer and probably won't find out until you lose a key piece of business. Your customers have an opinion about the talent on your team and therefore your organization. *They decide* how competent your sales team is, in part, by providing access to your sales team or not providing access. Accessibility or, the lack of, is a key measure of how much confidence customers have in your team.

Adapting to the new reality

The number of credible, well qualified opportunities for new business is simply smaller than it was a few years ago. As we all know, the industry is flat overall and in some segments (family dining), it is actually declining. This simply means that you may not need as many in the national account's group or sales team; or those resources can be redeployed more effectively.

The smart companies have realized that their sales investment might better be spent in having a smaller, more talented, experienced team. This would be one comprised of sales professionals who are students of the craft — a different level of professional, those who embrace and take very seriously, working on their own game. This works best when fewer people means more dollars for individual compensation, so you get and keep the best talent.

Your sales talent is a major part of your competitive advantage or disadvantage. If you are not investing in that critical resource, then you are falling behind, and the customers are beginning to notice. We hear this time and time again from our chain restaurant clients — there is now a major difference in the vendors who have the inside track and competitive edge. It is almost always about the skill and talent of those who manage the relationships.

Like all the most talented professionals, in any industry, the best performers want to work for the best leaders. These patterns are most evident in the entertainment, professional sports and investment banking industries — there are some leaders and organizations (it is usually the leaders) who have a drive to work with the best in their respective fields. Foodservice is no different.

The best sales talent, will ***interview you*** during the recruitment and selection process. The best people want to better understand the company, the culture and the individuals they might be working with, to learn more about how they can develop and enhance their own skills, talents, and financial rewards.

You will notice a significant difference in the interview styles of the best performers — they will have done their homework about your business, your customers, your organizational culture. This is most often done with excellent, well thought out questions, combined with great listening and clarification skills.

Sales Process

Your sales team must use an effective sales process, one they believe in and are willing to work within consistently. If they don't know how to, or see the value in the sales process, especially the needs assessment process, you are at a disadvantage. The days of random, arbitrary capabilities presentations or ideation sessions, with no overall direction or strategy, are over. Those exercises are ineffective and customers don't have time or the resources for that. Any sales person who resists the sales process, or insists "my market is different", is out of touch with the times. Anyone who has lost interest in learning lacks the right mindset for today's market.

Furthermore, if your sales teams and their managers don't see the value in, and the need to continue to develop their team's skills and talents, then you have to ask — what are they thinking? What profession anywhere in the business world today, is reliant on skills that haven't been updated in 10 – 15 years or longer?

The qualitative characteristics are key — the product or category knowledge is no longer as important as it has been in the past. Someone who has the talents, skills, and right characteristics, can learn the category, segments, new channels, or whatever else they might need to learn.

Realistically, for success today in the sales role, you want someone genuinely curious. You need talented, smart, driven professionals who are sincerely interested in improving. Absent all of these characteristics, traits and behaviors, your team will get outworked, and out thought by the competition.

Think very carefully about hiring someone from a competitor or within a certain category. This approach may make things simpler in the short run, but more often you end up with a group of people who all think the same — which isn't good for developing strategy, pushing the envelope, or really working on improving.

Reevaluating the Sales Talent criteria

We still see many companies using an outdated model for recruiting sales teams. The old school important criteria include — who they know, their contacts, industry knowledge, product-specific category knowledge, can they play golf and will they fit into our pay scheme. This is an outdated and incomplete list — some of these elements matter while others need to be reevaluated.

The companies we have seen exceed the current market conditions would suggest that you should look for sales talent with these skills and competencies:

- Students of the craft — they are invested in and work on their own skills as a matter of course, it is not a special event.
- Excellent questioning and listening skills
- Great at pattern recognition
- Excellent framing skills
- Understanding the industry and the customer's business, so they can engage the customers in what matters to them, and then decide accurately where or whether what you have to offer, fits
- They are rigorous and disciplined at identifying, targeting and setting priorities, and comfortable letting go of opportunities that don't fit well

This is not to suggest that having contacts and knowing some of the key players doesn't matter — it absolutely does. At the same time, those contacts are only one consideration, and are often based on historical patterns with previous companies on both sides of the relationships. Often times, these relationships don't transition from one company to the next as well as everyone hopes they will.

What is as important, in our view, is the ability to enhance current relationships, and to establish new relationships. The industry is in a state of change and that means many of the players are changing and shifting roles and responsibilities. Some have more power than in the past, while some don't have the power and autonomy they did previously.

The Lost Skill — Cold Calling

Most sales people would rather go for a root canal than do cold calling! Yet, it is a skill that is coming back in vogue. Everyone needs new business, with new customers — ones they don't know today.

To get new business, with new customers, or you need to establish more strategic relationships within an existing customer (marketing or the "C" suite), then someone has to reach out to someone they don't know today. Yes, that is cold calling, as ugly as it sounds! This is the role of the sales talent and no one else's — this is what sales people are supposed to do.

To establish new relationships, time and energy must be invested in connecting with these individuals in a way that is compelling and meaningful to them. As a first step, learn enough about their business so that you are comfortable reaching out to them to start a conversation

about **their business**, not yours. Admittedly, that is a unique skill and not everyone has it or is willing to do the work to develop it. Those who can connect with, and develop relationships with those they have worked with in the past, while being smart about not investing too much in those contacts that aren't worthy, are highly-valued professionals. Regarding the time element, that is a long-term investment. As such, that work must be done and aligned with the overall strategy, using a rigorous, disciplined process. To be sure, there is flexibility in the sales process, as there are boundaries.

For the record, please don't over invest in having someone make an introduction on your behalf or heaven forbid, actually pay a third party to make introductions. (We have heard of this.) That **never works out** for the one paying for the introduction.

Finally, the command and control model of managing sales organizations is no longer effective. The business is changing too quickly, the pressures your customers are under are different, how they make decisions and how they are measured has changed. Those in the field must have more autonomy to be effective, which means the skills, talents and competencies must evolve as part of that.

Founded in 2007, Bellwether Food Group is best known for our growth strategy and professional sales skill development work for manufacturers, Restaurant Brand Architecture work for Chain Restaurants, and pre acquisition due diligence work for private equity firms who invest in those industries.

"Silent Selling, Listening for The Sounds of Success", is Mac Brand's book describing our unique approach to sales. See more on our website: www.bellwetherfoodgroup.com

A client adopted the Silent Selling approach. Following the workshops and field work, over the next 12 months, they sold 46 new regional chains vs. 22 in their plan. The national accounts group tripled their target for sales growth (in dollars) in new business during the same time period, which resulted in over \$3 million in new revenue.

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