

# Five ways to encourage stray sales

by Gianni Anchois

*“Insanity is doing the same thing  
over and over again, expecting  
different results.” – A. Einstein*

Sounds familiar? This is how most sales organisations work.

As a new fiscal year approaches, the sales planning sessions start.

Although we know that past performance is no guarantee for future success, still we project the previous year’s sales figures into a dry formula to determine a growth rate for our business, based on more or less accurate/proxy market and client opportunities, and come up with figures that will hopefully please our managers.

Then we build sales plans that are lifted verbatim from the past. Just like in the quote from our modern physics genius, we do the same things over and over, expecting different results.

## **Shortest route**

The point is: we should not. We should look at how ants work.

Ants have a built in mechanism to find the shorter route to food. They communicate with each other leaving trails of pheromones that can be followed to reach it, and then lead the ants back to the colony. Once the route is established, every ant will reinforce it by depositing more pheromones.

Your sales teams should apply the same technique to make sure that your portfolio of products and services is exposed to your best source of food — the client — by driving the sales colony there. It doesn't matter if the path is a beaten one — a client that you have visited many times already — or a fresh one. The key is that the route to your food is marked, enforced and exploited by the community. Think client penetration rates and share-of-wallet increase.

## **Breaking the norm**

An even more interesting ants behaviour has also been documented by some researchers. A few adventurous insects will break with the rules right away, and intentionally avoid following the pheromones scent.

Instead they choose to take an alternate — longer and often more dangerous — route to the same stash of food. These ants do that to establish an alternate path to be used in the event of the first one becoming unavailable. This way, adequate food supply to the ant colony is always ensured.

I find this conduct clever, very clever: break from the norm to ensure sustainability of a resource scarce by definition.

Think of your sales teams searching for different routes-to-market or innovative sales channels to reach your clients. How many times do you, as a sales manager, foster the breaking of the rules at the very beginning of your fiscal year I bet you only do it — if ever — when your numbers are not adding up and it's probably way too late to make any impact.

More probably, you just rely on the good old way of doing things, the one that always served you well in the past. Well, in case you haven't

noticed, the world has changed. Your customers, and the way they purchase goods and services, are calling the shots.

### **Team teaching**

Finally, ants are also unique as they may be the only group apart from mammals where interactive teaching has been observed and documented.

Some species go on food quests using a process called “tandem running”. A pair is established, consisting of a leader and a follower, where the follower obtains knowledge through its leading tutor. Both leader and follower are acutely sensitive to the progress of their partner, with the leader slowing down when the follower lags, and speeding up when the follower gets too close.

In sales terms, this is of course the none-too-often used methodology of tutoring young sales reps by pairing them with your more senior and expert professionals. Truth is, with the current sales churns, urgency on generating short-term revenues and manic focus on quarterly — if not monthly — results, young sales reps never have a chance to be properly guided through the best route to your best clients. You are fine until your senior sales executives jump ship.

### **Drive innovative sales**

By applying some of the techniques above, I truly believe that you as a sales manager could drive significant innovation, improvement and achieve better results too.

If nothing else, just ask yourself: “How do I make sure that an alternate supply of revenues is made available just in case the main one gets dried up too soon?”

Then, encourage your sales team to be creative:

1. Choose your best route. Identify early on, ideally at planning stage, an alternate path to test new products or services, to sell indirectly something that your company has traditionally always sold direct only (or the other way around) or to introduce and launch any new product. If you discover a cheaper way to deliver great value to your clients, don't be tempted to keep everything for yourself as better

margin. Pass most of the savings on, grow your top and bottom line.

2. Drop your pheromones. Exploit word of mouth. Even in the enterprise space people talk and are influenced by others' feedbacks and recommendations. CEOs and CIOs do talk to their peers often and quite candidly too. Start a client centred social media program to cater for your key customers and users, and use it to delight them. Deploy your best sales resources, and don't forget to let everybody else know.
3. Get marketing to write more and better stories. Success stories are overrated, make them un-success stories. Failure stories, scaring people into action. It actually works! Clients can learn a lot more from their peer's (or their industry's) failures than successes. Make those stories easy to re-tell.
4. Let failures drive more action. Failure in others stimulates our own pride: "I'm sure I could have pulled that off, and I'm gonna show the world how!" Success of others can cause envy and self doubt: "My company is too big/too small to replicate that success", "Our market is too small/too big", "Our product is too complex/too simple", "I'm not good enough", "My team is not good enough", "Our leadership will never approve of this". The list of excuses is endless. Use the leverage of failures to make more things happen. The more radical, the better.
5. Reward the how. When managing your sales teams' performance, do not only reward the absolute sale value but reward also how the sale was completed. Good sales open doors for more business, bad sales shut them down and leave behind corpses and bad feelings.

### **Stray sales are good sales**

Eventually, by encouraging what I call "*stray sales*" you will be able to overcome the rigidity of an outdated sales planning model and of an aged sales behaviour, and start driving your sales teams toward creative and innovative ways to success.

Mimicking the behaviour of ants and applying it to technology is of course not a new notion. In fact, leading technology companies are using it to develop products like network routing algorithms and cyber security software.

But I think that the application to sales and sales teams is even more interesting, intriguing and relevant. Give it a try.

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