

Beyond Selling: How Sales Organizations Create Exceptional Customer Experiences

It's a pervasive reality: The sales profession has fundamentally changed throughout the years. Consider these dynamics:

- Competitive pressures have increased.
- Customers are smarter and more demanding.
- The exponential expansion of internet commerce across the globe has made product and pricing information more transparent.
- Alternative solutions that did not exist a decade ago are now available to customers around the world.

In an effort to understand how these events impact the process of selling, as well as the skills and behaviors required to succeed in a new age, AchieveGlobal invested in extensive primary and secondary research on the selling environment.¹ Our findings point straight to a new strategic focus for sales professionals: creating—and even **owning**—an exceptional customer experience.

Owning the customer experience is a unique sales strategy, the purpose of which is to create a consistent, comprehensive experience for customers that exceeds their expectations. The sales organization must first design a strategy to uncover and understand the needs of customers. It

¹ Our research efforts included in-depth literature reviews, focus groups, nearly three dozen interviews with sales organizations on four continents, and an online survey of more than 1000 sales professionals from 17+ countries.

then must develop and train employees to deliver positive defining moments at each customer touch point. This series of defining moments—or interactions with the customer—creates a long-term experience that delivers value. Our research uncovered critical sales skills that are required for owning the customer experience, as well as the key roles played by organizational support and leadership commitment.

Strategic Value: The Be-all and End-all

Delivering real value to today's demanding, savvy, and frankly fickle customer requires a corporate-wide redefinition of sales, service, and leadership. The core strategic goal is not just meeting obvious customer needs, but digging to discover and meet unknown needs. Once a customer's needs are identified, the next logical questions are "What sales behaviors will meet or exceed these needs?" and "Are there additional hidden needs I can uncover?"

We uncovered the sales activities that are most critical to sales success in each of six sales phases, from prospecting to post-sale follow-up. We analyzed these responses by sales performance, company size, deal size, and position in the organization, among other variables. The high-level findings are recapped here to demonstrate the link between the key sales activities in each phase and success with creating exceptional customer experiences.



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Developing the 21st
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Successful salespeople, when compared with lower-performing salespeople, are more likely to demonstrate the following top-rated sales behaviors:

- Have a complete understanding of products/services being sold (70 percent of high-performers)
- Configure solutions to meet unique customer needs (64 percent)
- Clearly explain the links between solutions, benefits, and customer needs (63 percent)
- Ensure that the organization delivers what was promised to the customer (62 percent)
- Offer ideas and insights that prospects have not considered before (59 percent)

These behaviors, displayed by successful sales professionals, are strategic in nature—as opposed to more tactical approaches—and focus on uncovering needs and delivering value. Interviews with focus groups and AchieveGlobal clients confirmed this concept: salespeople who consistently deliver value to the customer are:

- Prepared and do their homework
- Knowledgeable about their products and their client's business
- Always working hard for customers

Being prepared appears especially important for larger deals. Our research found that, compared to salespeople closing smaller deals, salespeople closing larger deals were more likely to say that “conducting in-depth research of the prospect organization” was critical to their success.²

Beyond the skills and behaviors required to uncover and meet customer needs, sales professionals revealed an additional critical success factor: trust. Creating trust instills the confidence in customers that salespeople will look out for their best interest, do what they say they are going to do, and work hard on their behalf. These personal traits are a critical factor in delivering value. When we asked respondents to tell us what personal selling attributes were most important, the more successful sales professionals said the following³:

² 10.7 percent versus 42 percent

³ 66 percent Be direct and honest in all communications; 58 percent Treat prospects, customers and partners with respect; 55 percent Maintain high ethical standards.

- Be direct and honest in all communications.
- Treat prospects, customers, and partners with respect.
- Maintain high ethical standards.

The bottom-line is this: Having the right skills to uncover and meet needs, being prepared, and building trust ultimately leads to credibility. We believe that engendering credibility at every defining moment is key to owning the customer experience.

Beyond Front-Line Sales: The Magic of Organizational Support

Organizational support is critical in being able to truly **own** the customer experience. Training and coaching, effective technology platforms, support from non-sales roles, and effective compensation plans and reward systems are all part of ensuring sales efforts are supported.

In order of the most agreed upon, the following were cited by salespeople as key organizational support factors in realizing sales success:

1. Clear company objectives
2. Sales leaders that treat salespeople fairly and equitably
3. Salespeople that meet operational requirements (completing necessary paperwork, attending meetings, etc.)
4. People in non-sales roles that provide expertise and support
5. Resources to help salespeople research and understand customers and their markets
6. Salespeople are appropriately recognized and rewarded for selling
7. Training needed to do the job
8. Valuable coaching from sales managers
9. A formal sales process to follow
10. Effective use of metrics or dashboards to manage sales performance
11. Sales force automation system that makes selling easier

The research confirmed the value of reliable support provided by nearly everyone in the organization. A number of survey findings highlight the core value

of organizational commitment in meeting customer needs and delivering value. Two of the five top-rated support activities overall focus on service:

- Support people help secure the sale and provide service after the sale (3.8 on a 5-point scale).
- The organization helps salespeople understand customers and markets (3.75).

In addition, the three top-rated post-sale activities are also customer focused: “regular contact with customers” (selected by 66 percent of respondents), “deliver what was promised” (62 percent), and “quickly resolve service issues and requests” (55 percent).

To create a positive customer experience, we learned that everyone who works with customers, or supports those who do, needs a set of core service skills, like rapport building, active listening, and defusing emotional reactions. Support staff, like salespeople, also need a clear line of sight to key customer expectations and needs, made possible only by a shared focus on the customer.

Sales professionals reiterated that to ensure a positive customer experience, they need reliable support from nearly everyone in the organization. As one top salesperson told us, “You either need to be selling or you need to be supporting someone who is!”

The Leader’s Edge

If sales and support staff all have vital roles, who has overall ownership of the customer’s experience? Clearly, leaders, by definition, drive and sustain this effort. In fact, our research uncovered the central role of leadership in a number of ways.

Further analysis of the survey data found several influential variables in sales performance, some more dominant than others. The two most important—both under the umbrella of leadership—are coaching and training.

A few highlights:

- The most successful salespeople receive coaching and training, which they rate as the most important support activity (3.7 on a 5 pt. scale).
- 28 percent of respondents receiving “high” or “moderate” coaching and training had at least a 10 percent increase in performance to quota, compared to only 18 percent of respondents who received “low” coaching.⁴
- The higher the amount of training and coaching received, the higher the average deal size, the larger the increases in personal sales revenue.⁵

Coaching and training are core leadership responsibilities and are the strongest influencer on a salesperson’s success. There are, however, other key leadership influences that contribute to effective customer experience management. The most successful salespeople in our study tended to work for leaders who also:

- Establish clear objectives
- Manage team selling
- Effectively use metrics or dashboards
- Set clear operational and reporting requirements
- Make high-tech tools easily accessible through salesforce.com or a similar CRM platform

Interview quotes reinforce the value of sales support in shaping the customer’s experience:

- “The successful sales support person understands what our customers want, and they understand what they have to do for the sales reps.”
- “Support is having a true understanding of the process and realities of the marketplace to help guide our work. It’s understanding the customer and the prospects as opposed to understanding the salesperson.”
- “If everyone was in the mindset that we need to do what’s best for the customer, then we definitely would be much more successful.”

⁴ Less than 18 percent of respondents who received low coaching reported any increase in performance to quota.

⁵ 12 percent of the respondents who received high coaching and training reported an increase of more than 20 percent in the size of their deals. This is compared to only 6.6 percent of those receiving low coaching and training. More than 28 percent of those respondents receiving a high amount of coaching and training reported an increase in performance to quota. This is compared to only 19.6 percent of those who received low coaching and training.

To manage all who own the customer experience, sales leaders also need the skills to guide, expand, reward, and, when necessary, recalibrate performance. But leadership goes beyond simply being supportive. Indeed, leaders— from front-line sales managers to organizational leaders— must be committed to reinforcing the messages and behaviors necessary to continually meet and exceed their customers' expectations.

Enabling the Organization to Own the Customer Experience

Owning the customer experience is more than simple “customer service”—a typically limited initiative that is often compartmentalized in the organization and may lack sufficient leadership commitment and organizational support. To shape a positive customer experience, organizations must take an outside-in approach by looking at their customer's business through their eyes, and then working to reshape and re-skill their own organization from that point of view. This fresh perspective can drive enormous value for customers and differentiate customer-focused organizations from competitors stuck in the old mindset of “sell, sell, sell.”

Our research confirms that owning the customer experience is impossible without the right skills, organizational support, and strong leaders who set expectations and align all systems to the overall strategy. A truly exceptional experience—presented as a series of positive defining moments that delight customers—requires both strategic and tactical skills at all levels of the company.

About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills, giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

These are things technology can't do. Think. Learn. Solve problems. Listen. Motivate. Explain. People with these skills have a bright future in the 21st century. AchieveGlobal prepares you for that world.



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