

Help **People Buy**

# Your Sales Reach

How to know  
how much better  
your sales could be ✨



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# Your Sales Reach

**Average reading time:** 15 mins

**Pay-off:** a clearer idea of how improving sales performance could impact your bottom line

Do your salespeople consistently maximise value to their customers, to your business and to themselves?

And are they working smarter at this rather than harder?

These are worthwhile questions.

## Are you seeing things as they actually are?

Perhaps it appears that your sales team are ticking along fine. And maybe so. But often the inefficiencies and flaws to their approach that customers see are hidden from you. After all, with jobs, performance, reputations and personal pride hanging in the air, it's common for sales teams to try to project the positive image internally that all's going fine.

But, even if your sales targets are being hit, it doesn't mean that some tweaks to their approach won't make significant impact on future sales results.

I've written this article for sales leaders who don't have continuous sales performance improvement currently on their radar.

My intention is absolutely not to try to persuade all sales leaders to prioritise performance improvement. In fact, if you're serious about improving sales performance then you must address it properly, with the right attention and resources, so now might not be the right time.

But I hope to help you make that decision consciously and strategically.

And my main intention is to help sales leaders look beneath the surface of their team's sales performance and to question how robust their 'sales muscle' really is. Particularly to question if they are strong enough to take charge and succeed in the months and years ahead. This should lead you to consider how the right support could translate into a significant business benefit, and what that might look like.

## Objectives of this article

The ideas in this article will help you get closer to answering the questions:

1) Even if they appear to be doing fine, how would I know if my sales people are leaving good business on the table?

2) What could the value of these missed opportunities be? (Or how much further could they realistically stretch their performance and results?)

3) How much will our future sales success depend on improving our team's sales capabilities?

First we'll look very briefly at the obvious indicators that a sales team could measurably improve. These need no discussion.

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Then we'll go deeper on some of the less obvious signs that your team aren't performing at the level they could. How strongly you feel about these signals should help you decide where sales performance improvement should sit in your priorities.

It's also worth noting that if you do see these signs, some of your customers are probably feeling it and buying elsewhere, without necessarily telling you their real reasons. This is a solvable problem with a potentially high return.

## Obvious indicators for improvement

Let's look at some of the more obvious indicators that sales performance needs more attention and support:

- targets aren't being hit
- you believe intuitively that they could be doing better
- you've heard some negative feedback from observers or buyers
- you're sensing that your competition are winning business that you believe would be better handled by you
- you're less confident about results over the next few years
- your conversion rate of leads/opportunities hasn't increased for a long time (it was 30% last year, and the same this year...)

- besides basic product training you've not provided your sales team with consistent formally designed sales performance training/coaching

Sales teams don't perform well with a 'set and forget' approach. Yet this approach is all too common. Most salespeople are left to sink or swim. The attitude sometimes seems to be, "we employed you to sell, so sell!" But if you want the sales blood (or cashflow!) to pump through the system then you need to keep pumping it. This is a sales leadership responsibility.

The points above may lead you to consider the value of providing ongoing support to your team to continuously improve how they sell, making it easier, more enjoyable and more rewarding.

These signals are directly related to a missed opportunity cost for your business (and consider the lifetime value of a lost customer who goes to your competition - and their contacts that they take with them), and the magnitude of that could grow. In the battle between chaos and order, chaos tends to grow when we fail to attend to the problem.

## Less obvious indicators for improvement

You may decide that the above points aren't signs that you're seeing. So, what are the less obvious indicators that suggest you could be sitting on a costly sales problem that needs attention?

Let's look at some in no particular order...

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## 1. Demand is good. But you suspect your sales people may have turned into 'order takers'.

Sufficient demand turns the best intentioned sales people into order takers.

Buyers are already emotionally-charged and ready to buy. They tell the salesperson what they want, and the sales person gives them just that. Anything for the quick, easy sale. (After all, the salesperson has targets to hit and a boss breathing down their neck. They may feel it's best to get this one in the bag!)

Everyone's apparently happy - for a moment. Except the salesperson just potentially deprived the customer of further value. And removed the opportunity for the customer to trust, respect and gain confidence in them such that they would become the customer's trusted advisor and such that the customer would buy again.

Now the customer can't even tell their business contacts that the salesperson did an amazingly valuable job, because they didn't. It was just transactional. Their value-adding capabilities were buried in a quick attempt to take an order and get a sale.

Salespeople always have opportunities to build value for their buyers that go way beyond the product or service itself. It's an opportunity to differentiate themselves and have a unique edge over their competition. But most salespeople miss the opportunity.

But there's a silver lining - an opportunity for you to seize here. Since most salespeople perform averagely - your competition included - all your people have to do is stretch a little beyond the competition to become the better trusted advisor. (The guy running from the lion doesn't have to outrun the lion, he just has to outrun the other person with him.)

And so getting ahead is not the tall order it might appear to be. Small incremental improvements add up and show in your sales results.

Back to 'order takers'...

'Order takers' unhelpfully learn that they don't need to switch on proactive sales capabilities. So they often fail to create the right business rapport, qualify better, explore and create buying drivers, help customers think differently and more usefully about their buying decision, create well aligned options, and earn deeper trust and respect from their buyers.

And none of this stacks up well if their competition are skilfully leading with these high-value sales behaviours. (What if it is they who has the slight edge over you as you both run from the lion?)

So these salespeople lose buyers more often than they should, and all that they are left with is an excuse (that they actually believe themselves): "the customer told me ours wasn't really the right solution. It just didn't quite meet their needs. Sorry, boss".

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Like leaders and just about anyone for that matter, even salespeople convince themselves that they're doing fine when their performance hits the limitations of what they know. (For more on this see "[The Dunning-Kruger Effect](#)" here - because it costs sales teams significantly!) One solution to this is to expand the limits of what you know about selling and the psychology of how people really buy. All learnable. [Get in touch](#) if you're interested to learn more.

'Order takers' are well intentioned salespeople in disguise. Their success depends on external circumstances. When they succeed, they take credit and celebrate their sales ability. When they don't, they point the finger at something else.

Luck or fortunate circumstances erode their valuable skills. Sales teams lose sales muscle. And when the market shifts, or competition sharpens up, they're weak and struggle to compete. With the struggle overwhelming them, they often end up leaving. There are lots of costs attached.

A smooth sea never made a skilful sailor. But consistently stretching the reach of your sales people and supporting them to succeed at doing this does build skills and sales muscles and makes a true and valuable sales professional.

## 2. You're experiencing fairly high sales employee turnover.

Well, first up, if you're not let's hope you're not just retaining untrained sales people who are probably underperforming or 'order takers'! (See above).

It's common to think that high turnover of sales staff is normal. The problem with thinking that, is you'll accept it, and the problems that cause it. The very thought sets the standard and you're unlikely to address the more costly problems that lurk beneath.

Sales is a really tough job. It's why the best people get paid really well. It takes great skill to help a buyer trust you enough to help them find a solution that they value above all their other options and then convince them to confidently part with their money.

Sales leaders have to help their salespeople learn how to *continuously* do that. Or else they'll struggle, they'll fail, they'll feel bad, and neither you nor they will see their future career surviving with you.

Sales is one area where it becomes too costly to let people learn at "the school of hard knocks". Too many opportunities and lifetime customers will slip through the net. In sales, "the school of hard knocks" costs a lot to attend. It's more cost effective to learn sales from the right specialist provider who can stop you making costly mistakes immediately.

To reduce sales employee turnover, employ the right people with the core required traits ([get in touch](#) if you'd like to learn more about what these are) and ensure your new recruits *want to learn to continuously improve*. And then support them in the right ways to do so. Help them succeed in their sales career with you.

When people get better at selling, they tend to enjoy it more. And when they enjoy it more, they tend to get even better.

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This is a powerfully positive cycle for you to introduce your sales people into. You help them step into it by simply helping them to get a little better than they currently are. Help them enjoy the results of that, and the cycle begins.

If your sales people aren't surviving or thriving in your business, it's a strong signal that your recruitment or employee development have some costly cracks that need attention.

### **3. The level of energy across your sales team is low.**

Positive energy comes from belief that ones efforts either will, or are paying off. A lack of consistent energy across the team may tell you that your team are losing belief in their efforts - or that something else needs addressing.

Again, the positive loop mentioned above creates positive energy; people enjoy more what they get better at, and get better at what they enjoy more.

If energy is one measure of enjoyment in the team, low enjoyment often comes from a feeling of likely failure or stagnation in ones abilities. "It's not working, so why bother?" is a thought that begins to surface.

Often it is simply because the sales people have not been helped to learn ways to sell that work for both them and their customers.

Finally, energy can be contagious too. So addressing it proactively should help lift everyone. Equally, ignoring it can gradually bring more people in the team down, together with the team's results.

### **4. The messages and words your sales people use could suggest a need for support.**

Spoken words can indicate ones mindset about sales. And ones sales mindset can tell you a lot about how they'll tackle what's ahead and their chances of success.

Perhaps I could write a whole book on "What sales people say and what they really mean". Not only have I heard it all over the years, but I've had the privilege of having sales people open up to me during 1:1 coaching and expose their deeper fears and what's really limiting their performance.

For now let's just look at one common message sales people say to excuse their lack of sales activity:

"I didn't have time."

In my experience this has to be perhaps the most common reason given for failing to engage in sales activity, or failing to do a specific action during a sales conversation.

So what does it really mean? Well, first I should acknowledge that people are busier than ever and sometimes priorities get on top of us. But frequently it's an easily bought excuse that actually means they weren't comfortable about something. So they kid themselves that they didn't have time (and they fill that time hiding behind planning, researching, updating the CRM and doing other sales admin. Anything to convince themselves that they're working productively in sales!)

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Selling and asking strangers to make buying decisions can seem uncomfortable to many people. But only if they're tackling it the wrong way. The fact is, anyone willing can learn to sell in a way that's more comfortable and valuable for all involved.

Even outside of sales, people rarely have enough time to do the things they don't want to do. Those who claim they lack time to do the more challenging stuff in sales actually lack more comfortable approaches that get better results effectively. And these better approaches are learnable, and available.

## **5. You're sensitive to bad salespeople who try to sell to you, but you're less aware of the experience your own customers are getting from your salespeople.**

You know bad selling when you're on the receiving end of it. You see it everywhere, and far too often. But how often do you think that their managers know about their poor approach with you?

I doubt many, if any of your frustrating experiences ever got back to management.

So, it's useful to consider how your customers are experiencing interacting with your salespeople and how much of the reality gets back to you?

If you frequently observe, train, coach and support them to sell professionally at a consistently high standard, then the chances are, your customers are getting a high-value buying experience.

**If not, or if you focus more on the operational aspects of your sales function rather than your people, the chances are your customers aren't getting the sales service you hoped or thought they were.**

Either way, it comes out in the sales results.

## **6. You or your leadership haven't defined what you'll tolerate.**

You get what you tolerate. That sets your ceiling.

If a sales leader doesn't set a line and hold people accountable for their standard of sales activity, they're inadvertently choosing to tolerate whatever happens. And they'll take all the excuses and self-preserving cover-ups that come with it.

Raising the bar need not put undue pressure on people so long as you equip and train them to see how they can realistically deliver on expectations.

There's an old proverb, apparently of Arab origin, that says, "Throw your heart out in front of you and run ahead to catch it".

A sales leader can do that, whilst equipping the team with the drive, clarity, confidence and best approaches to run ahead and catch it. If they believe they can do it because they've learned an easier or more compelling way to do it, then they're probably right.

What is measurable and acceptable in terms of behaviours and activities of your salespeople? What's your agreement with the salesperson as to the conversations you'll need to have with them and the actions you'll agree to take if they fall short of their promise to you? Are your sales managers boldly acting on this? Perhaps they need some support to understand how to set this up, how it works, and how to have the conversations with their team more comfortably?

## **7. "They're fine. It's not broken, so why fix it?"**

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If you think your team are ticking along fine, that's great. If you genuinely think there's no need to put sales performance improvement on your radar, there are two things you may want to consider.

First, there could be cracks forming in the team that you have overlooked. As mentioned, there may be signs of lower than acceptable service to your customers that you're unaware of.

Second, if you're right, that things are going strong right now, you may wish to consider that improving sales performance is best done proactively during the good times whilst you have resources to direct towards learning, practice, and trial and error.

Too many times we've seen sinking sales teams reactively try to get their sales people to sell more. It's not just budget that gets cut, but everyone's morale, energy, patience and self-belief to solve the problem takes a huge hit and it can become hard to turn it around.

If your sales team lack the sales muscle because they didn't work over time to build it, you can't expect them to work smarter when the tide turns.

If it's not broken, you don't need to fix it, but you could strengthen it and future-proof it. The window of opportunity to do that spans across the good times.

**8. You're not consistently coaching, training and supporting your sales team in the right ways and at the right times.**

You're probably aware that when you shine the spotlight on something consistently, it tends to grow. Experiments have shown that putting a camera on workers increases productivity. Consistent attention towards people performance in sales gets consistent improvements.

The solution requires both targeted and relevant learning, as well as observation, feedback, reflection and reward.

"What gets measured gets done, what gets measured and fed back gets done well, what gets rewarded gets repeated."

— John E. Jones.

You can get external specialist support to tackle this correctly. But if you're serious about continuous improvement you might want to look at creating the internal capabilities to continuously improve your sales team. We can help you build a sales performance improvement engine if you're interested. And we can provide the external training and coaching to get you started.

**9. You realise there's room for improvement. But how far can you realistically raise the bar?**

Here's one way to look at it: Take current measures of sales results per person. Then hold them up against the results of your top performer.

Your top performer provides a benchmark of what's possible for an individual selling your solutions in today's current climate.



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Now, it's likely that your top performer could raise their bar too, maybe 10%, maybe more. But let's keep our estimations conservative for now and just consider the value of having the rest of the team close the gap between themselves and the top performer.

Note that your top performer may succeed because of their higher-value network, or because of other external factors that aren't learnable.

But it's highly likely that they are planning, thinking, doing and saying different things to that of the average/lower performers. These things are learnable.

There will be a strong component of skills, knowledge and behaviours that are identifiable and learnable which the rest of your team would surely benefit from.

If each of the individuals in your team could close the gap between themselves and your top performer, what would those sales translate to? What if they closed it by 10%? What if they built on that and closed the gap 25% or even 50% as an average across the team?

If so, how would that impact sales? How would that impact your revenue?

These figures are worth thinking about.

I recently coached a lower performing sales person. Within a couple of weeks his performance and results improved significantly, and he even outperformed the usual top performer in a couple of behavioural measures we were tracking.

How? I simply identified where the main leaks were, and helped him patch them up. Then I helped him understand what he was doing that was bringing the sales in, and helped him amplify those.

Obviously the skill here is in knowing what to look for, and then decoding these performance issues into incrementally learnable behaviours.

My background running an accelerated learning consultancy for years helps. But the point is, that anyone can surprise themselves how they improve if they are willing to learn.

“Mark also worked 1-2-1 with underperforming sales staff and we saw a turnaround in performance after just a couple of sessions. One particular salesperson had their own sales profit increase by an incredible 35% in the month following their sessions!”

— Sam Matharu - Head of Business Development, Building Materials Nationwide Ltd, UK

Once you have a believable estimate of the increase in sales you could make with the right support, it's worth noting that this is unlikely to end there. If you have the right consistent support, people should keep improving. And so you might want to consider the value to your business of this figure increasing over a 2-3 year period.

You could throw your heart out towards that, then run ahead to catch it.

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## So what's your sales reach?

How much better could your sales team be?

Each of these signs could suggest that your sales team are leaving valuable business and opportunities on the table for your competition to scoop up.

It's worth putting a figure on the value of the opportunities you could be losing, as well as the sales you could gain if your team closed the gap between themselves and your top performer.

And finally, I remind you to look at this through the medium to long term lens.

What's about to change in your market in the next 12-24 months?

What are your competition doing to future-proof their sales?

When the tide turns, will your sales people be clear, confident, strong and ready to do what they do best, because they're true sales professionals?

Hopefully your answers to these questions will help you weigh up the priority of putting sales performance improvement in the right place on your agenda.

Don't forget that when you do this, you need to tackle it properly. Don't just shepherd everyone onto some one-off sales training.

You could start by holding some useful internal conversations with your leadership. My guide, "10 Conversations to have before buying sales training" will help you make some time and cost-saving decisions.

And if you'd like to talk to me about this and get some ideas of what might best fit your business, please [get in touch](#).

You can also download other resources that might help from: <https://www.HelpPeopleBuy.com>.