

The Shape of Sales to Come

By Wayne MacPhail

Roundtable Participants:

**Mark Girvan, Chief
Commercial Officer at
FreshBooks**

**Josh Guttman, Regional
Vice President at
Salesforce.com**

**Conrad Mandala, Regional
Vice President of Sales at
OpenText**

**Shimona Mehta, Head of
Sales Enablement at
Shopify Plus**

**Kyle Norton, Vice
President of Sales at
League**

**Naseem Salooje, Senior
Vice President of Revenue
at Top Hat**

**Tim White, Vice President
of Enterprise Sales at IBM
North America**



WHETHER IT'S THE OLD-SCHOOL WILLY LOMAN WHO CARRIED A BAG IN *DEATH of a Salesman* or the present-day account executive trying to harness social media, being a sales professional means adapting to change. These days, change and disruption just keep coming. Consider these: Increasingly sophisticated buyers. The need to recruit and develop a new generation of sales professionals. The promise and threat of artificial intelligence.

To better understand these challenges, [Jim Hamilton](#), Distinguished Faculty Fellow of Sales Management at Smith School of Business, convened two roundtable discussions with some of Canada's most seasoned sales executives. Here are several key issues they identified.

:: The Increasing Complexity of Sales

Sales used to be a simple machine: the lever, fulcrum, and obstacle were all in the hands of a single sales professional. The sales professional followed leads, forged relationships, and closed the deal. Now that machine is as complex as a Swiss watch. All along the sales funnel, myriad gears, regulators, and springs need to precisely mesh to make the mechanism tick.

Parallel to that mounting complication is growing buyer expertise. That means sales professionals must become ever more familiar with the customer's needs, business, and politics. And they need to rethink their role as the public face and breadwinner of the company.

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We talked to our roundtable participants about how the complexity of the sales process is shifting the sales identity.

“The sales cycles have become more complicated and the salesperson has to understand how the entire organization is going to affect your particular interaction with that customer,” says Mark Girvan, Chief Commercial Officer at FreshBooks. “As a salesperson, you actually have to understand what’s going on. Why are we segmenting? Why are we calling that person in particular at a specific time?”

Josh Guttman, Regional Vice President of Salesforce.com, agreed. “I found that the consumer can come armed to the conversation much more educated, almost with a decision in mind. They’re just seeking that final bit of validation from the vendors. In the past, the sales representative and the executive played a lot more of a role in educating the customer. I feel like the evaluations now are almost self-guided.

“If a buyer even senses that there’s a sales pitch coming on, he or she is turned off. The sales professional must earn the status of a trusted advisor. The buyer has to feel comfortable seeking advice from this person and less of the salesperson going for the close.”

Conrad Mandala, Regional Vice President of Sales for OpenText, says effective sales professionals bring well-developed business value propositions to clients. “You can’t walk into a sales office anymore and just start spewing at them,” he says. “You actually need to come to them with a prescriptive, provocative value proposition that brings value to the organization.”

Tim White, Vice President of Enterprise Sales, IBM North America, is acutely aware of how big sales are tied to deep knowledge.

“In order to close seven-figure transactions, which is what we’re looking for, you have to know the industry inside and out,” White says. “You have to know the political landscape of the client. A lot of folks coming into the business think if you get product, fit, and need, you’ll close the sale. That is so far from the reality now it’s unbelievable.”

Josh Guttman takes that thought one step further. He encourages his staff to leave product completely out of the sales equation. Salesforce, in fact, has a training program, dubbed Stand and Deliver, that helps salespeople hone the value pitch to a client. The focus is on what value the product delivers to the client rather than on the characteristics of the product itself.

“All account executives must record themselves doing the dialogue without the product mention, and then they’re graded on it,” he says. “The best recording typically gets a meaningful prize, like lunch with an executive or a gift card.”

Interestingly, all the sales executives encourage staff to make use of web-based software tools to navigate the sales process. To them, it doesn’t matter if it’s LinkedIn, Hootsuite, InsideSales, or some flavour of CRM. What matters is the discipline sales staff bring to the process of using that software.

“For some folks, the tools are pretty easy to learn,” says Shimona Mehta, Head of Sales Enablement at Shopify Plus, the e-commerce firm. “But it’s more about how you actually use them in a way that drives conversions or better performance or be more productive every day.”

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Guttman agrees. "It's more about the discipline of productivity, the discipline of collaboration. I don't think you need to focus on a specific technology because who knows what that's going to be like [in the future]."

As for that future, all our participants are lukewarm on artificial intelligence and Big Data analysis as viable sales tools right now. "It's really early days," says Kyle Norton, vice president of sales at League, an employee health benefits firm. But, like other participants, he is confident of one thing: "In the future, thanks to AI, entry level jobs will probably disappear."

:: Managing Millennials

For many Baby Boomer or Gen X managers, millennials are a bundle of contradictions. They have the reputation of being both confident and emotionally insecure; socially adept online yet awkward with traditional communications; self-reliant yet tentative. These stereotypes are just that, yet it is true that today's early-career salespeople often do not respond to traditional management techniques.

In our roundtables, we heard that the biggest issues when managing millennials are their expectations, their individuality, and, oddly, their discomfort with the telephone.

"A millennial salesperson is a different beast," says Naseem Salooje, Senior Vice President of Revenue at Top Hat, a student engagement company. "If you can figure out the right formula to keep them engaged, your sales organization is going to be much more effective. That means career-pathing and constantly providing them with new skills and opportunities to grow."

You can set minimum targets for sales or calls, he says, but you must involve them in setting those goals and in the process of achieving them. "That's better than a more structured approach," he says.

Kyle Norton of League says millennials often want to be promoted long before they're ready for the next step. At the same time, he says, the gaps between positions on the ladder are getting wider as the sales process becomes more complex. Nurturing and retaining millennials in that environment is a tricky balancing act.

"If we extend the on-ramping and training period longer, that would help," says Norton. "The problem is that other companies are saying 'We'll let you be an AE. Come sell here.' You can lose good people by extending the ramp too much."

The confidence of millennials can also run headlong into the realities of the job, sometimes in surprising ways.

"We've had to work incredibly hard just to get our team to a minimal call level, both during outreach and throughout the sales cycle," says Shimona Mehta of Shopify Plus. "Probably our biggest challenge is helping them develop the confidence and the business acumen to be able to get on the phone in a more sophisticated way."

Mehta is astonished that millennial hires will use text, email, or LinkedIn with great facility and then freeze when they make a cold call. She believes managers have an out-sized role to play in preparing new hires for

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more than just sales. “When we hire new grads, we’re actually still developing professional humans outside of just trying to teach them how to sell,” she says. “They don’t know yet how to interact in a job environment. They don’t yet have business experience and acumen. They don’t have the know-how to navigate and understand how to interact with each other.”

She also sees the individualism and confidence of millennials clash with the disciplines of the sales process.

“There’s a real desire to be an individual,” she says. “They can push back when you try to teach them a certain set of behaviours or a particular way to do things, like proven best practices or why it’s important to use a CRM or why they need to block out a certain amount of time for cold calls.”

That push-back can be tricky to navigate when millennials feel they need the freedom to express themselves and do things the way they want.

“They’ll say, ‘I don’t want to be a sales robot,’” Mehta says, laughing. “We encourage them to embrace efficient practices but to apply their styles and hearts to it. We work to help them differentiate between the science (best practice behaviours) and art (their personal style) of sales.”

Mark Girvan sees an upside to some millennial traits. “I find a lot of the new grads want to do something meaningful. They want to give back. We need to respect that.”

:: Churn, Baby, Churn

One of the biggest issues sales executives face is churn within the sales ranks. The sales function is hard and often offers more frustration than satisfaction, especially for new sales reps who can be beaten down by the process.

So how do you retain promising sales professionals when the sales environment is competitive and the grass looks greener elsewhere? How do you avoid training rep after rep who then use their expertise to aid the competition?

Naseem Salooje at Top Hat sees two time frames for sales turnover. “There’s the early churn, the three to four months. The person is not right for sales. They can’t deal with the rejection and they’re not going to persist.

“Then there’s the churn point somewhere between nine and 15 months. This is someone who is actually proving to be pretty good. You start giving the person responsibilities and they hit their goals. They start to acquire skills and then they realize, ‘You know what? I’m good at this. I just don’t want to do this anymore.’”

Shimona Mehta believes that being realistic about sales from the start makes good sense. “I’m trying to get better at helping people understand that sales is tough, really tough,” she explains. “I say to them, ‘You look around the building and see developers building puzzles and other people doing other fun experiments or playing ping pong. And the salespeople are in early doing lead research, staying late, hitting the CRM. That’s what they have to understand: you get out of sales what you put into it. It’s a really hard job and it’s not for everyone.’”

Josh Guttman believes that one way to attract and retain good sales professionals is to talk up the financial benefits of the career. “I know some

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of my friends who went into accounting or consulting and their entry-point compensation was amazing,” he says. “But, they’re all still pretty much there. I think we need to stress that if sales reps can stick with it, they can get a pretty good life. We’re all cloak and dagger about who got how much on a particular deal. I’m not sure that’s done us any favours.”

An area of potential employment growth for the sales function is women. For some, sales carries the stereotype of being a boy’s club full of bravado and aggression. Shimona Mehta says that when Shopify goes through an interview process, “the HR team must work 10 times as hard just to try to level the number of female applicants.”

“Getting women into sales is a huge challenge for us,” she says. “Right now, we have a sales management team that’s 55 percent women, but that was so, so much work.”

Wayne MacPhail is a Hamilton-based writer.