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Successful sales management requires more than good selling skills. Strategic planning and execution, analysis of key business metrics, creative problem-solving and proactive support of staff performance are critical factors in achieving targeted results. Here are four key points for consideration in managing an ad sales organization.

DEVELOP A WRITTEN SALES PLAN

Ensure that your plan is aligned with the company's business plans. Most sales plans are constructed annually, and are based on research from various sources, including:

- Analysis of current advertising lineage and composition (the time frame may range from the current year to several years in the past, depending on market conditions). The analysis should take into account such variables as categories, regionality, volume, frequency, platform and churn rate.
- A similar analysis for each sales territory. Each sales rep should participate in this analysis and incorporate the findings into recommendations for growth in their territory.
- A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis for a more comprehensive view of the competitive landscape and market trends (Magazines Canada produces trend reports in major categories). Take into account specific industry or demographic shifts, your share of market, plus cyclical events that may impact your market (e.g. government policies, elections, major trade shows).
- A review of all sales tools for currency and appropriateness for the goals of the plan. These may include media kits, audience and/or market research, letter/email templates and other materials.
- Anticipated impact of any changes in the company's business, e.g. changes in editorial content, launch of new content platform, change in circulation or distribution.

Based on these analyses and other relevant sources, the sales plan and budget should articulate

achievable, measurable goals for the ad sales organization and each sales territory, supported by specific objectives and timelines. Ensure that the goals are achievable by supporting them with information you have gathered in writing the plan. If you have priorities for certain targets, make sure they're explained. Include the rationale for any significant changes from the previous year, especially if the changes require investment.

The plan should also incorporate a compensation structure that defines and rewards the behaviours that will drive successful results, such as special bonuses around new category development or stretch goals. The wise sales manager ensures that the combined sales territory revenue targets are marginally higher than the actual sales target to provide some flexibility in changing conditions.

SHARE AND WORK THE PLAN

Share your plan with the sales staff to ensure that expectations are clearly understood. Meet with each sales rep individually to review their revenue objectives and performance measurement. Recognize how their analysis contributed to their territory plan and make sure to address any significant changes or concerns, for instance, introducing a new quota on number of sales contacts per week or using a new CRM may impact a rep's selling approach; while the loss of a large advertiser may cause some worry about how to achieve a higher revenue target. Reaching mutual agreement on the goals of the territory plan is important for maintaining motivation and trust.

Individual compensation plans must be confidential and clearly tied to territory goals. However, there may be some specific revenue targets for the whole team, such as new business acquisition, frequency increases or market share growth, that can be tied to special rewards or bonuses. These can be monitored publicly, and significant progress/achievement becomes an opportunity for recognition and celebration.

Set a schedule for group sales meetings as well as one-on-one meetings. Regular group meetings



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provide a forum to review overall progress on targets, share market intelligence, celebrate successes and brainstorm for opportunities and creative solutions to recurring problems. The one-on-one meetings are useful for frank discussion on individual performance and providing guidance for improvement where necessary.

As the year progresses, keep written sales forecasts current and accurate using the same information/data sources as the original plan, along with any new information that impacts your advertising market. The plan may require adjusting for a variety of reasons, including the decline or rise of a particular category, the loss of a major advertiser or an advertiser's change in media. In the case of a significant downturn, creative ideas for generating new revenue may require you to seek support from other parts of the company, such as the content creators or distribution team.

SUPPORT YOUR STAFF

Successful advertising sales results, especially for smaller magazines, depend heavily on relationships between sales reps and their clients. Successful ad sales management requires a balance between giving reps the flexibility to operate in their own style to build and maintain those relationships while mandating that they achieve specified results and adhere to company practices. Over time, a rep may start neglecting certain parts of the territory in favour of those that are easier to manage. For example, he or she may spend most of the time servicing existing clients instead of prospecting for new business. Another rep may have difficulty meeting a quota of meaningful sales contacts or keeping proper client files. In such situations, referring back to established expectations around job performance and measurement lays the foundation for helping the rep achieve in all aspects of the work.

Be prepared for staff changes. These range from having an enrichment plan for those who want to do more, to a gap plan for when your overachiever with all the strong client relationships decides to leave, to having to manage and possibly terminate an underperformer or a bad fit. Conversely, to reduce staff turn-over, identify and reinforce the aspects of the work that promote job satisfaction and loyalty.

When hiring a new rep, have a clear plan that equips him or her for success. In addition to a function and

performance-based job description, the new hire should be given all useful information on the territory, including the sales plan. Time should be allocated immediately for any necessary training, which may include joining more senior reps on sales calls. Ensure that the rep meets all members of the sales team (including external reps) and other key decision-makers in the organization. Set up a frequent meeting schedule to monitor progress and discuss challenges until the probation period concludes.

Set aside some time periodically throughout the year for the sales team to meet and socialize outside the office. Lunches or the occasional drink after hours can build morale and motivation as well as greater collaboration on tough challenges.

Stay current on sales training methods, particularly as relevant media platforms evolve. Ensure that you plan and budget for appropriate training for staff, and where possible, a one day conference outside the office for the entire team to discuss overall performance. The latter is particularly useful prior to annual planning. Here the team participates in identifying what's working, what needs to be changed, and in generating ideas for improvements for the next sales cycle. Consider inviting other senior decision-makers in the company to join you at the end of the day to celebrate the team's successes to date.

GET OUT INTO YOUR MARKET

Set your own plan for meeting with your advertisers, complete with targets and time-lines. The goals for these meetings should be strategic, as your sales reps are focussed on the tactical. Similarly, your contacts should be at the strategic level of decision-making, and preferably senior to those of your reps.

Discuss your plan with your sales team in advance to clarify your goals and keep them informed of your progress in your sales meetings. Your team should be comfortable taking you on sales calls where they need a more senior decision-maker. They should feel confident that your meetings are supporting their efforts (not monitoring or micromanaging), although you certainly need to be prepared if an advertiser is dissatisfied with a particular rep.

When appropriate, consider involving your editor. Clients appreciate meeting content creators as well as senior managers and these discussions can be



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very productive without compromising editorial content in any way.

Ultimately you should make valuable contacts and build some powerful, profitable relationships with key advertisers.

