



Anya Anderson

# Sales culture

The days when sales and customer interaction were the sole concern of those on the shop floor or travelling reps have well and truly gone. It's now well-established that all employees in a business or organisation must eat and breathe sales. That includes everyone: from the CEO, to the finance team, to the receptionist.

This is called a 'sales culture' and it means that everyone knows they are part of the sales process and they must all take responsibility for increasing sales by adopting a customer-focused attitude to their jobs.

This customer-focused attitude is important. One of the major misconceptions about sales cultures is that they are built to increase sales at any cost to the detriment of longer-range, relationship-building activities. But a true sales culture is focused on nurturing customers – by creating the best possible experiences for them and making sure they find exactly what they are looking for.

Any sales culture must start from the top. If management does not lead by example, others will not follow. If this group is not convinced, a culture change will never happen. It's like telling a child how important something is and then doing the complete opposite yourself.

For example, if a CEO visited a shop and showed more interest in how the stock was placed than sales, this could give a conflicting message. But, if he or she walked

up to an assistant and asked about a recent interaction the assistant had with a customer, that would show that the boss was serious about the sales culture.

By seeing management lead the charge, employees will quickly recognise the need for them to follow. This is why it's vital that any sales training a business considers needs to be undertaken by everyone – not just the sales staff. The necessary culture change will never happen if the sales team alone is sent on some one-day workshop.

With everyone taking part in ongoing training, they will learn what an effective sales team does and learn more about how their own roles can become more customer-focused.

This training must follow contemporary sales techniques. The traditional methods of showing a customer the features of a product or service and trying to convince them to buy are no longer applicable in 2011.

It's now about giving shoppers a quality experience and that involves asking questions.

This is the only way to find out exactly what a customer is looking for. This is also a great

way to up-sell them or suggest complementary goods they may also wish to purchase. This entire interaction is based around meeting their needs.

While this is focused on the sales staff, the same principles should apply to everyone in the organisation. For example, a receptionist could go that extra mile to meet the needs of waiting visitors.

Management of businesses with sales cultures must also acknowledge the importance of

those who are not performing and design ways to improve their performance.

Another change management must make is aligning its KPIs to reflect the new focus. These should all be centred on sales and improving customer experiences.

## Shopping on-line

The threat caused by on-line shopping is another reason why a sales culture is vital. The one thing bricks-and-mortar

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the sales staff. Head Office must be well aware that without sales, there is no business. They should ask their sales staff how they can help them, visit stores and praise the good work of those who exceed expectations. Offering rewards like 'Assistant of the Month' are also important.

At the other end of the spectrum, they should identify

businesses have over their on-line counterparts is the ability to offer a complete shopping experience. In general, women particularly like to shop. Some research suggests they enjoy it more than going to movies or eating at restaurants.

But if they don't get the experience they want, they will either move on-line or down the

road to a competitor who does offer what they want. Once again, it's important that all employees understand this threat and can play their part in creating this experience.

New Zealand has a poor record when it comes to customer service and that's not only the fault of those on the shop floor. If they have not received the training they need, they cannot be held accountable for a poor performance. Equally, if management is not leading by example, they would have no reason to believe that customer service was as important as it should be.

They may be more focused on the presentation of the shop or selling as much as possible to customers without establishing exactly what they want.

A Kiwi Host survey in 2009 highlighted that it's not only the sales staff that must buy into this sales culture. It found that the number one complaint made to telecommunications companies was finding the right person to fix their problem.

If everyone in a business was focused on the customer, far fewer complaints like this would be made and profits would rise. Systems would be put in place to prevent this happening. It's not just telecommunications, but every industry. Customers commonly hear phrases like, "We are understaffed so I can't help you" or, "As long as you wait until next week, I can get you that information."

But companies with an effective sales culture have every person and every department thinking and acting like the sales team. They are intent on creating value, problem-solving and being customer-focused. This leads to greater productivity, an improvement in team dynamics and, importantly, a reduction in complaints.

Creating a sales culture is about doing things right, finding solutions for customers and identifying future problems before they even become apparent.

## Blue sheds

A good New Zealand example of a business successfully introducing a sales culture is Warehouse Stationery. This is a business that has always had huge amounts of stock, but it never offered customer service. People would walk in off the street and if they could not find what they were looking for, they would leave without assistance.

Warehouse Stationery decided it wanted to increase its market share. To do this it would need either to get more customers, or get those in the stores to buy more. It decided a change in sales culture was needed to achieve its goals.

It recognised that everyone in the team needed to have a customer-focus to their roles. Management publicised the company's strategic plan with this new approach and spelt it out clearly to the entire staff. Everyone in the team then got access to sales training and the company set about changing its culture. It was aware it would take time for customers to see the change because they would need to visit stores a few times before they realised the new customer service policies were there to stay.

The change was led from the top. CEO Mark Powell would even ring sales people personally and congratulate them on their successes and looked at stores where things were not going so well. Word soon got around that management was serious about the change, so the whole team followed suit. This has all led to a significant increase in Warehouse Stationery's bottom line.

The need for a sales culture shift among the majority of New Zealand businesses cannot be over-emphasised. It never ceases to amaze me how so many managers don't recognise this. They will spend many thousands of dollars on marketing to get people through their doors or aware of their products and services.

While marketing is important, it is only effective if it is backed up by a responsive sales culture. It's one thing to get people through the doors, but it's quite another to give them the best possible experience and retain their loyalty. If they receive the experience they want, they will tell their friends and return, so the marketing would have been well worth the investment. But if the sales culture is lacking, they will be unsatisfied and the marketing would have been a complete waste of time and money.

This is a tough lesson to learn, particularly in a challenging economic environment. ■

□ By **Anya Anderson**, managing director of on-line sales training company, RedSeed. She is a leading sales trainer in New Zealand with almost 20 years' experience and has trained the staff of some leading local retailers in both full-time roles and as clients after she established her own company. She can be contacted at: [www.redseed.co.nz](http://www.redseed.co.nz) or call: 027 489 0967.

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