

# The Future of Selling 2017—

Four ways that selling will be different going forward. Based on insights from Daniel J Weinfurter

SUPPORT WHAT IS ESTABLISHED AND EMBRACE WHAT IS EMERGING



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**WHILE THERE IS MUCH TO REPORT ON THAT IS ENCOURAGING AND EXCITING IN THE WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL SALES, IT STILL REMAINS A FACT THERE IS MUCH TO DO TO ELEVATE THE PROFESSION OF SELLING TO BE EQUAL IN STATUS, IMPORTANCE AND RIGOR TO THAT OF OTHER DISCIPLINES SUCH AS FINANCE, ENGINEERING OR MARKETING.**

As evidence of this, most surveys show that fully a third to a half of all sales professionals in the US did not make quota in 2016, and overall, sales organizations on average achieved 80% of their plan. I think we all know the impact of a 20% revenue miss at the enterprise level. Turnover continues at rates exceeding 25% per annum, meaning a typical company replaces their entire sales force every four years (or more likely, replaces some subset of the company each year, every year). Yet, despite these statistics, and despite some pundits talking about the death of the salesman, selling in 2017 remains the principal method in which many to most organizations execute their business strategy. There are however, some trends emerging on how selling going forward will be different.

#### **ROLE SPECIALIZATION**

It was not that long ago when most organizations had essentially one selling role. Promotions were granted based on tenure and success, as a person could move from an Account Representative to a Senior Account Representative to a Strategic Account Manager, but the role itself was quite similar. The cultivation of leads was the salesperson's responsibility; they took a list and figured out a way to get a meeting or to somehow engage someone at the prospect company to begin the conversation. Marketing's role in supporting the salesforce was to create thought leadership pieces and sales collateral that could be used during the selling process.

Today, many organizations have rethought the go to market structure in its entirety. It is far beyond inside and outside sales. Today's organizations often have significant granularity in both inside and outside roles. For example, inside sales may consist of three or four different types of professionals, including individuals whose role is very specific—limited to reacting to inbound web site hits, others that only make outbound calls and still others that only set appointments for the outside team. Outside roles have evolved considerably as well, reacting to

requirements based on products or services, size and sophistication of the prospect organization, and still others to work the channel.

The multiple roles that exist in today's sales organization do provide career opportunities for many different types of skill sets, yet the rigidity that exists in some organizations does limit the learning that might otherwise occur when someone is exposed to a wider set of situations and different types of customers and customer needs.

#### **INCREASED HIRING RIGOR**

Based on the historical tendency to fail to apply the rigor and discipline the sales recruitment process deserves and the resultant pain that comes from this, as well as the recognition that the many different sales roles require different sales skills as well as different behavioral competencies, it should come as no surprise that most companies are working on establishing enhanced approaches for building sales teams. These processes recognize that the skill set for reacting to inbound leads is quite a bit different than the skills required for someone who has to do outbound calling.

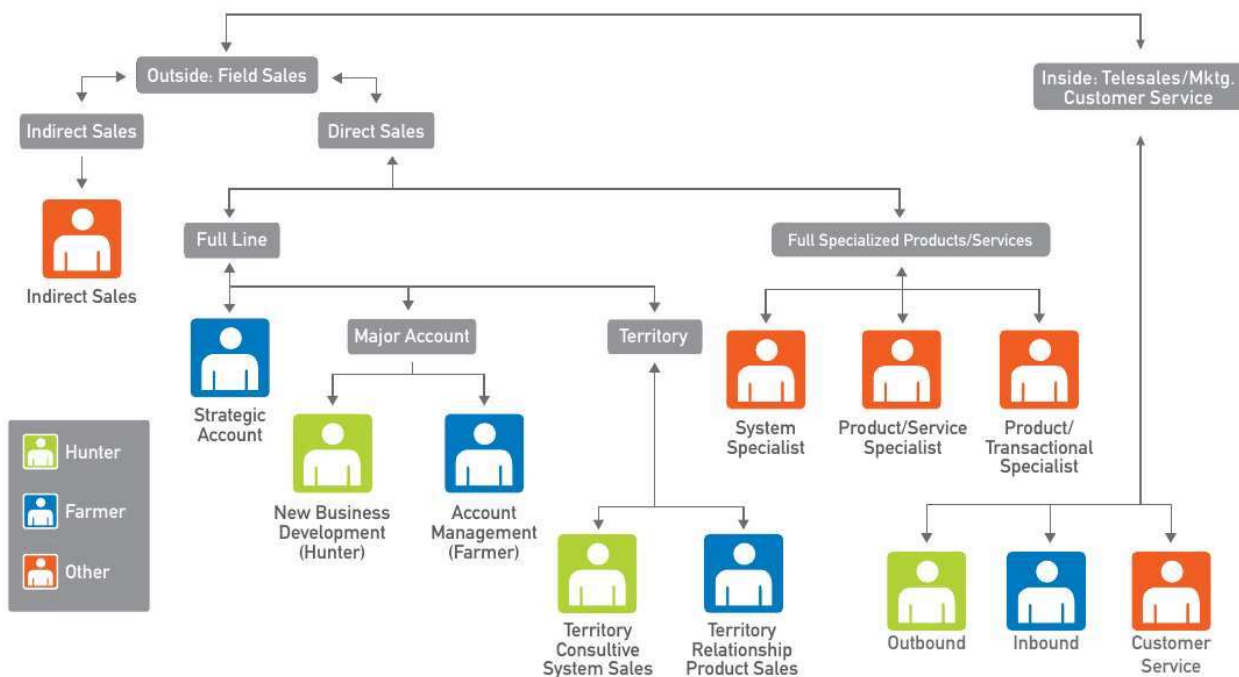
Further, firms are finally recognizing that each sales role in each company is different. Sure there are some similarities between firms and industries. Everyone knows that there are differences between the makeup of hunters and farmers, and that some roles in a sales organization require more of a hunter orientation, and some require a farming mentality. Most understand the difference between a transaction sale and a consultative sales role. But more recently, many firms have begun to consider the deeper, but important subtleties that impact success in a role. The nature of the product or service impacts the fit for the role, as does the size and sophistication of the customers they will be calling on.

The functional role of the prospect also matters; for example, you need a different competency orientation if you are calling on IT vs HR or Finance vs Marketing decision makers. These nuances have begun to be spelled out in hiring profiles. Further, sales leaders are beginning to understand that the stage a company is in, i.e., early stage, growth, or mature, dramatically impacts the type of person who is likely to be successful in a role, and these differences are being spelled out in the position descriptions as well.

Additionally, to improve the odds of hiring success, firms are increasingly making use of predictive assessments



## SALES SPECIALTY MAP



during the hiring process. This has long been common practice for executive roles, and tests have been used for many years for determining the level of skill that a person might have in a given discipline. Many firms are now coupling skill checking tools along with assessments that provide insight into some of the hard wired behavioral DNA that makes up each person's natural resting state inclinations. Used as part of a comprehensive process, many firms have discovered using assessments improve the likelihood of placing individuals into specific sales roles that they are well suited for.

### INCREASED FOCUS ON UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER ISSUES

The notion of arriving at a better understanding of what customers really want is not new. Going back some 30 years to the thinking around the concept of the Trusted Advisor and continuing more recently with concepts such as Insight Selling and Challenger Selling, we see an increased focus on the desire to equip sales organizations to be able to have the right type of conversation with prospects and clients—and to do this in a way that improves a potential buyer's ability to understand the value message that is inherent in a firm's product or service offering—of course



customized to the buyer's specific issues and challenges. Today's buyers are more digitally engaged than ever before. They are leveraging social networks and online sites to both find unique solutions to issues they know they have and to find vendors who can deliver. This requires a granular focus into how buyers are engaging digitally, and then have sellers who are able to use this understanding as a jumping off point for a face to face conversation.

The net of all this is that the skills required of today's successful salesperson have been amplified. Product and industry knowledge must be at a reasonably high level, as this is a prerequisite to aligning your product or service to actually solve the issue a buyer faces. But the successful salesperson of today must increasingly possess skills common to the consulting profession. This means the seller must be able to determine where a potential customer is on the purchase journey, and then come to a deep understanding of issues impacting each specific customer or prospect through highly effective discovery, which necessitates great business acumen, analytical capability, both through research and through face-to-face discovery skills. Then the real talent is to be able to craft the story about how your product or service solves the customer issue in a way that is both different and better,

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in a way that resonates with the buyer both from a business and personal perspective. Not an easy task.

### DEMAND GENERATION

When I first started as a sales representative for GE, I was given a defined geographic territory, a phone book, and a phone—along with the encouraging words “good luck to you” from my sales manager. But in that day, it was indeed possible for a determined individual to work the phone hard enough to get enough meetings such that over time, you could fill your calendar with sufficient numbers of meetings and build a pipeline that could result in meeting or exceeding quota.

Today, with the death of land lines and the near ubiquitous presence of caller ID, it is VERY difficult for a sales person to cold call his or her way to success. Instead, successful organizations use a combination of demand generation techniques coupled with individuals who have the capability to leverage social networks to get introduced to individuals and firms who might have needs related to the product or service of the vendor firm. Some people are quite good at this, having worked very hard to build the kind of network that can be leveraged for gaining introductions that work for the product or service they sell. Most sales people who are skilled at networking recognize the reciprocal nature of this; they must be willing to provide introductions back to others who would benefit from them.

In terms of demand generation, this is a rapidly emerging field that uses a variety of channels, both digital and traditional, to try to engage prospects to learn more about a vendor’s product or service.

Demand generation tactics can include digital advertising, SEO marketing, targeted email and snail mail campaigns, webinars, speaking events, ad retargeting, and even the mailing of specific items to a prospect to attempt to engage him or her in your product or service. To do this all correctly requires significant expertise on the use, timing and appropriate methodology that are likely to generate the best return. The goal ultimately is to turn over qualified leads for the sales force to pursue and hopefully to close, meaning the capability and skill of the sales organization remains the critical success factor in driving revenue growth, even with newer tactics such as demand generation deployed in a highly evolved fashion.

There have been studies that suggest the number of individuals who will enjoy a career in sales is on the decline. We do not subscribe to this theory. We recognize that the role of sales professionals will change, and a career path will not be the same as in the past. Increasingly, formal university sales education and talent will be highly valued, and the old stereotypes of gregarious and back-slapping as the models of successful sales people will vanish. We can’t help thinking this cannot happen soon enough. ▲



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## OLD STEREOTYPES OF SALESPeOPLE WILL VANISH