



**THE SALES
LEADER'S GUIDE
THROUGH THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

SALES ACTIVITIES NEED TO BE ADJUSTED TO THE PANDEMIC SITUATION

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the resulting measures of social distancing confront sales leaders with huge challenges: both on human aspects and in terms of adapting the sales system!

Nevertheless, this situation might also give you the opportunity to not only strengthen customer relationships but also to enhance team dynamics and to further develop sales effectiveness.

For the next 8-10 weeks or more, sales activities will change massively. On the one hand the means of customer interaction will be limited due to travel restrictions, while on the other hand existing customers will need “intensive care” in order to keep their business running.

Together with the disturbance or even disruption of supply chains (incl. services) and high volatility of demand it is obvious that there can be no business as usual in the coming weeks, if not months.

This SALES LEADER'S GUIDE THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC offers pragmatic advice to help sales leaders and their teams not only to manage this unprecedented crisis but also to spot new opportunities. We will keep the guide up to date with the situation's rapid evolution.

THE CHALLENGE: SUPPORTING CLIENTS WHILE KEEPING THE MOMENTUM IN SALES

In times of crisis it is important to focus on the most important topics due to the situation's fast evolution.

From our perspective, there are four areas to focus on:

1. Re-focus your short-term objectives and energize the sales team
2. Take actively care of your customers
3. Adapt your management rituals to the situation
4. Prepare for sales acceleration after the crisis

RE-FOCUS SHORT TERM OBJECTIVES AND ENERGIZE THE SALES TEAM



Being forced to stay at home will imply private and professional difficulties for each employee, including salespeople. On the private side, many concerns tackle family health, safety, and well-being. On the professional side, there is pressure to keep things going and uncertainty about their job security.

Additionally, it will probably take a lot of effort to make your customers life as easy as possible, putting additional burdens on the shoulders of your sales team.

In this situation, strong and energizing leadership is crucial. Therefore, Sales Leaders should:

1. Initiate activities and projects aiming to cope with the impact of the crisis on customers (immediate focus) and preparing your team for the time after the restrictions are lifted.
2. Evaluate what sales capacity is needed to take good care of their clients and their problems (see below) before deciding a reduction of working hours.
3. Increase the frequency of your contacts with the sales team by phone and/or video conference. Make sure you stay close to your team and interact with each team member according to their needs and situation. Be very transparent about the situation of your company in order to build trust. Support team members as much as possible in difficult situations with customers.
4. Contact the IT department in order to make sure that the teams will be able to work. In times where home office is democratised, server capacity, VPNs etc. will be strained.
5. Show confidence that this crisis will be overcome thanks to the professionalism and engagement of everyone.

6. Help your team to keep social connections within the whole company via phone and digital means. Create advice and exchange platforms together with HR in order to support salespeople in structuring their daily routines while being at home and make sure help is available if problems arise.

Of course, people can be offered to take time off. It seems logical to do so, since sales activity level is expected to be intensified after the crisis in order to recover from lost business.

On the other hand, being isolated at home is not really a vacation for many people and taking care of customers is crucial during the crisis.

Last, but not least: acting as a role model and leading by example is especially recommended during times of crisis.

TAKE ACTIVELY CARE OF YOUR CUSTOMERS



Increase Customer Intimacy

The pandemic's exceptional circumstances require more recurring and distinctive customer interactions than as per usual. Even though face-to-face visits might not be possible, contacts by phone and videoconference are.

Even if it is not yet the case, many of your customers are or will be facing difficult times – both professionally and personally. For some, rising demand will increase pressure on their supply chains thus increasing the requirements towards their suppliers. At the same time, your company may also face delivery problems and you will have to discuss this with your customers.

In other industries it is the other way around: your customers have sales problems and are not able to accept your delivery.

The reverse situation is also possible, your customers might have sales and cash problems and or are not able to accept your delivery.

In any case: frequent customer communication creating transparency and fostering trust is paramount in difficult times.

If not already happening, your sales team should call (at least the Top 20 of) their customers immediately for a short-term review of the actual and expected impact of the crisis. This call should cover the whole business relationship such as open orders and or contracts, planned orders, supply issues, potential payment issues or services that might be disturbed. The sales team should also show interest and care about the well-being of their contacts and their families.

Be a trusted advisor with a positive attitude

The goals of customer contacts should shift from sales to consultancy and problem solving. Sales teams should pro-actively contact their customers, finding out how they might be of help and/or collaborate in solving potential issues of any kind.

Managing the uncertainty together with your customers and working on joint forecasting is beneficial for both parties and increases the value you can provide to your customers.

It is more important than ever that you and your team radiate a positive “can do” attitude. Make sure your team avoids amplifying uncertainty and fears.

Limit the impact on your customer's business

The most important task of sales teams these days is to make sure that existing customers are still served and that the impact of fluctuating demand, disturbed supply chains and closed sales channels remains as limited as possible.

This implies institutionalised and close cross-functional interactions between sales and other departments (such as supply chain, manufacturing, purchasing, marketing, and corporate communications) on several hierarchy levels. This can be done in the form of task forces, working together on problems on daily basis, deciding on buffer stocks or prioritising deliveries if goods are in short supply. The sooner this is implemented the better.

Use new business opportunities as they arise

In case you can deliver but your competitors cannot, it might even be a good opportunity for new business, contacting prospects and leads in order to help those companies as well.

ADAPT YOUR MANAGEMENT RITUALS TO THE SITUATION



Manage your team closer than usual

Social distance, uncertainty and the “intensive care” mode in relation to your customers increase the need of interaction, both from a human point of view and from a trouble shooting point of view.

Giving clear guidance and tasks to your team without micromanaging them stabilises the team and gives you the opportunity to keep the spirit up.

Increase the frequency of your fixes and team meetings

A closer management mode than usual implies more frequent interactions with the team. Challenges with customers should be brought up and solved quickly. Institutionalised virtual meetings and Jour Fixes provide a framework for remote social interaction which is very important in times of isolation.

Change the content of your fixes and team meetings

As your team’s focus will shift from actually selling to an “intensive care” and consultative mode, usual sales topics will become temporarily less important. Therefore, you should focus more on

- discussing customer’s challenges and establish solutions
- how to positively communicate with your customers
- how to work effectively together with your customers

Praise outstanding achievements and engagement

Being positive is not always easy. Especially, when combining professional pressure, containment and worrying about one’s own family. Therefore, initiatives and role model behaviours from individuals and/or teams should be praised and communicated as best practices.

PREPARE FOR SALES ACCELERATION AFTER THE CRISIS



Prepare offers that help customers to reduce costs

In many industries, the crisis' negative impact of the crisis on the top line will force them to reduce costs and strain their cash reserves. This will probably hit your customers as well. Therefore, strategies need to be developed quickly on how to support them in this respect. Examples are:

- Switch from sales to rental / Leasing / XaaS
- Offer financing options together with banks
- Make offers that help them to reduce process costs

Update your (key) account plans & budgets

The crisis impacts different industries and customers in different ways. Therefore, key account plans and budgets should be carefully revised, based on the exchange with the customers mentioned above. Also, keep in mind that a crisis time must be handled as an opportunity to get even closer to your truly strategic customers. Lead your Key Account Managers to take appropriate action on this specific topic.

Re-Prioritise your customer visits

Based on the learnings, re-evaluate the priorities in your customer visit planning. Revenue, potential and / or credit worthiness might change throughout the crisis. Therefore, it is necessary not only to investigate and evaluate these changes but also to change your priorities.

Re-evaluate your pipeline

You might also want to re-evaluate the new business pipeline with your team: customers might be short on cash, projects might be postponed, priorities changed, etc. This needs to be taken into account as soon as possible and requires close contact with your prospects as well.

Research and prepare for new business

Once travel restrictions and social distancing will be relieved or even lifted, and as business comes back to normal, sales will be expected to recover as much revenue as possible. Therefore, time at home should also be used for

- Researching potential new clients
- Making phone calls and new business appointments via phone / videoconference. These contacts should be easier to reach as the number of meetings will be reduced

CONCLUSION

In times of crisis leaders are expected to act decisively, tackling the double challenge of being limited to less personal interaction and the need to switch to “intensive care” mode.

They need to be a role model, encouraging and energising their sales teams to act and take pro-active care of their customers.

Actions to manage the team closer than before action give confidence and clear guidance. In this context, building a clear “5-10 points plan” with top priorities being to actively manage the crisis and to get out of it stronger, will be tremendously helpful.

This “SALES LEADER’S GUIDE THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC” is intended to give you some solid inspiration to successfully manage this unprecedented situation.

We are happy to support as much as we can also outside of any projects or assignments. Please do not hesitate to contact us. You find the contact details of the authors at the end of the document.

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