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DEVELOPING A HIGH PERFORMANCE SALES CULTURE

By Greg Rowe, COO and Gary Wiener, Vice President of Corporate Operations, Hardie's Fresh Foods.

Over the past two years, Texas-based Hardie's Fresh Foods has transformed its teams into a high performance sales culture. The results of this change have been phenomenal, yielding more than 20% year-over-year growth. There have been many changes made that have contributed to this culture shift, some of which are outlined below.

At the beginning of each month we used to have a sales meeting and go over each person's sales from the previous month. The main question was "did you hit your numbers or not?" One of the first changes in our thinking was to challenge this process. Looking back at last week, last month, or last year is using a "lagging indicator" of performance, and is akin to driving down the highway while looking in your rear view mirror. This process was blown up and replaced with "leading indicators."

How do you create leading indicators of future sales performance? Selling is a game of numbers. For example, I may talk to 20 prospective customers in order to get five follow-up meetings. Out of the 5 follow-up meetings, I get 1 new customer. We learned future performance is driven by behavior. The actions that are consciously taken every day will lead to the results wanted tomorrow. Hardie's started by creating a daily/weekly goal sheet for each account manager. The goals include how many prospect customers a rep will call on each week, how many existing customers they will meet with, how many customers will they ask for a referral, how many they will do new item presentations for, etc. The simple fact is that if you have been trained on the product, sales techniques, and are able to build rapport, you will be successful in sales if you follow a daily behavior plan. In the produce business, sales people are pulled off-task easily dealing with hotshots, customer issues and many other things. By having a set of daily and weekly goals, they can deal with an issue and then get right back on track.

Next, our sales managers began weekly coaching sessions with each team member to go over the previous week's goals. Did they accomplish the number of visits that they committed to? If not, what will they do in the coming week to ensure that they hit goals? It is important to note that the number of visits, presentations, etc. is different for each sales rep. A person who is new and doesn't have a lot of existing business will have more free time, so their new customer visits will be higher. A veteran sales person with a lot of existing business will have fewer prospect customer visits but more business reviews with existing customers, more new item presentations, and more referrals asked for. During the coaching sessions, the sales managers never tell the sales reps how they would have handled a particular customer meeting, but instead ask the reps how they think it could have been handled differently. This guides or coaches the person to better performance rather than telling them what to do.

Hardie's Fresh Foods implemented a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The CRM has the goals for each person loaded into their profile and as they visit customers, the rep can enter each visit in the system using a mobile app. During the aforementioned coaching sessions, the sales manager has the information at his or her fingertips to review the sales representative's progress. The CRM also states additional coaching opportunities for the manager to use. If you have two reps making the same number of customer visits and one is getting twice as many follow-up meetings than the other, we can try to help the lower performer by finding out where they are falling short. The CRM also allows others in the company to have visibility to the company's customers, prospect customer, recent visits, any issues, etc. The CRM is not a system for micro-managing a sales representative's time, but rather a repository for documenting customer touches. There are many on the market, but for more information on the one Hardie's uses, visit www.freshtechcrm.com

We also created a sales process for our team to follow. Having a process for sales is a foreign concept for many companies, just like it was for Hardie's Fresh Foods for many years. We have processes for most operational functions, so why not for sales? The sales process outlines the steps necessary for a sales rep to make contact with a customer, qualify them, initiate interest in what the company has to offer, find out any issues they are having with their current supplier, and how to build and keep rapport with them. A good process outlines information that a sales rep needs to get from the prospect at each stage so they can be sure they are moving the prospect forward toward becoming a customer. That allows the rep and their sales manager to both know where they stand with a prospective customer by seeing where they are in the process.

Lastly, we created a new sales compensation plan that rewards a rep for bringing in new "profitable" business and maintaining existing business. This plan is based on the profitability of the account and encourages the sales team to hunt new business that fits the company's profitability model. The comp plan, along with the weekly goals, CRM, sales process and coaching sessions give a sales rep the information and encouragement needed to help them achieve not only their company goals, but also to grow their income.

Transforming our sales culture to a high performance one was not an easy process, but by committing to it and sticking with it, we have managed to get our team to buy in. Now the energy created by the sales team spreads to operations and elsewhere in the company. We challenge the sales team members respectfully and in a positive way that makes them better. They understand our company's strengths and how to use them to help the customer. By following the sales process and the CRM, they are forced to be accountable to themselves and their goals, which helps them to perform better and increase their success.

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