

# An Uncertain Economy Doesn't Equal Poor Sales Performance

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**WE** are in the midst of difficult economic challenges and no one can predict when the economy will turn around. Many industries have been hit hard, and the insurance/financial services industry is certainly not exempt.

Companies have laid off staff, reduced expenses, put promotions on hold and yet they haven't changed or reduced their sales and revenue goals. It may be true that there hasn't been an increase over last year's goals, but I haven't talked to anyone yet who indicates they are cutting back their projections or sales goals. In an uncertain economy, your choices are certainly different than they would be during times that are more affluent, however upholding a sales team through the full spectrum of market conditions is the mark of a successful sales leader and a flourishing company.

So it's only natural to question how to:

- keep your sales force optimistic and buoyant when they aren't certain that it's even remotely possible to make their numbers;
- instill in them new ways of thinking and approaching sales;
- help them understand that their beliefs are a factor in their results and that our moods and emotions and pre-conceived expectations impact our actions and therefore our results.

What's the key? What's the one thing you can tell them to help them stay focused, positive, upbeat and optimistic over the next year as they hit the streets and face the challenges that are ahead of them? Frankly I don't know the key for each and every situation, but I do have some ideas. None of these ideas are panaceas or silver bullets. They are just ideas—ways to get you to think differently than you may have in the past. Don't forget, in the same regard as your sales people, how you show up—your optimism (or lack thereof)—your ability to stay focused and your ability to be creative and find new ways to sell and share those methods with your sales force will have an enormous influence on them. It will impact their results.

So where do you start?

It's important to help your people understand that the old saying is right; we reap what we've sown. The first place this is obvious is in how we feel and our emotions. I'm not talking the touchy/feely emotions (I know most of you don't want to go there with me), I'm referring to emotions like resignation, optimism, pessimism, hopefulness... I'm sure you get the point. We've all known people in our lives who seem to have a black cloud following them around. They feel victimized and they're convinced that there's nothing they can do about it. Of course, they get exactly what they believe...poor results, poor opportunities and a black cloud that follows them around. Their emotions (resignation, resentment, bitterness) influence the actions they take, and consequently the results they get.

Compare this to the person who is forever upbeat, excited, hopeful, grateful and sees possibilities... The actions this person takes are also influenced by their emotions, and their results are impacted. But the results this individual gets are very different from those of their counterpart—Mr. Gloom. Since their 'come from' or their emotional presence is opposite, their

end results are likely to be opposite as well. Every emotion has us move towards something or away from it. Mr. Gloom is moving away from success; his mood has predisposed him to do so. His counterpart sees possibilities, and is predisposed to move towards those possibilities...and success always results when we believe in possibilities. History has repeatedly shown us that losing attitudes produce losing results. It's true in sports; it's true in business. Our predominant thoughts and attitudes determine not only what we make of and get from our working experience, but they also influence how others respond to you and how far and high you go. Now, attitude isn't the *only* factor in success but the impact of attitude, emotions and moods is a huge influencer on outcomes. Remind your sales people (and yourself) that "*attitude influences altitude*". You don't have to go far to find examples of

winning (or losing) attitudes that will resonate for your team.

An uncertain economy marks the time to focus on sales skills. When times are good it's easy to pick the low hanging fruit and be successful, after all there's a lot of low hanging fruit to be had in affluent times. Why climb the tree when there is fruit within easy reach? I'm not going to argue whether this thinking is right or wrong, it simply is. And while it may work very successfully in a trouble-free economic climate, it works less well in a challenging economic climate. Now is the time to really focus on core sales skills. We need to go back to the basics...maybe even a boot camp approach. What are the goals of a sales call/presentation? How do you handle objections (even define what is an objection), pre-closing, gaining commitment, closing? You need to look at all of the core skills that are part of success-

ful selling. Practice these skills with your team so when they are in the middle of their sales calls, they have the strength and skills to move easily. Remind them that selling is more than just picking up the phone and making nice. Selling is about identifying needs and helping others see a need even when they might not have recognized it. Selling is about listening, not talking. It's about caring more about the other person than just 'making the sale'. And it's about trusting that the sale will come. Selling is a lot of things, and it takes practice, dedication, training and hard work to be a first-class sales professional. During challenging times superb sales skills are more critical.

Get creative. What worked in the past may not work any more. We all become used to doing things a certain way. The method works, or works well enough, and we be-




come complacent. We aren't often complacent at a conscious level, but old habits die hard and doing things they way you've always done them might be a death sentence to your productivity. Challenging times require different ways of thinking; different ways of doing things. You need to stretch yourself and your team to become creative in their approach, take risks, not be afraid to make mistakes and to try, try again. Just because an approach doesn't work with one client doesn't mean it won't be successful with another. If one idea doesn't pan out or produce the results you'd hoped for, that doesn't mean you should go back to your old ways. Mix it up, try new things and get creative.

Think about selling and the sales process in ways you've never considered before. It's a new world out there and that requires us to think, act and be different. Remind your team that now is the time to be adventurous. You have nothing to lose and the upside potential is unlimited. And let's be honest. Trying new approaches, getting jazzed about a new idea and thinking differently influences our moods and emotions—which we've already determined has a huge impact on our actions and accordingly, the results.

During economic downturns, most companies instinctively start to tighten up spending, downgrade their training initiatives and put a hiring freeze into operation. The

truth is, however, that implementing these actions are likely to do more harm than good. It's a tough world out there for sure. I could throw out lots of adages like "when the going gets tough the tough get going", or "only the strong survive" or "necessity is the mother of invention"... but they won't help you or your team. What will help is focusing on three core areas—attitude, sales skills and creative thinking. I'm not suggesting these will guarantee success but one thing I know for sure, you will produce better results by giving them the attention they deserve than if you ignore them.

Don't panic, don't run, don't give up, don't forget and don't get distracted by the noise. 



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