

Don't Just Kickoff, Kickstart Your Sales Meeting

by Alison Chandless

The sales rep, already bored with training, pulled out his Blackberry and turned his focus to email. Another presenter loaded his 45-slide PowerPoint presentation—the third that morning. The rep groaned and thought to himself, “I cancelled customer meetings for this?”

Will your Sales Kickoff engage your sales team and boost sales performance, or waste their time? Strategically designed Sales Kickoff meetings can drive real change in your organization, support strategic initiatives, and enable new levels of sales expertise. But a poorly produced meeting can drive your sales teams to their Blackberrys, sacrifice valuable selling time and tarnish your credibility. Avoid common planning mistakes; consult the following Sales Kickoff checklist to plan a meeting with maximum impact.

1. Kickstart a Marketing & Sales Partnership

Creating a strategy and agenda without involving Sales and Marketing is the quickest way to waste everyone's time and money. Ensure sales get what they need—not what the marketing team thinks they should hear. A successful Kickoff planning team involves sales and channels management as well as marketing executives in the development of your meeting's goals and objectives. Validate your plans with individuals that represent your “typical” audience.

2. Start with the Results You Want to Achieve

A common mistake is to dive into content planning before setting goals and objectives. A typical Kickoff planning session focuses on brainstorming topics and a typical agenda ensures each division and product team gets stage time. This planning process will ensure a packed agenda but few results.

Avoid this critical error and maximize your impact by starting with your organization's business objectives. Identify the performance improvements you need from your audience to meet those business objectives, and use them for goal setting. Develop the agenda and structure of your meeting to produce those performance improvements. Strategically design your Kickoff to effectively reach every audience: pre-sales, post-sales, systems engineering, channels, etc.

3. Avoid PowerPoint Parades and Content Cram

Since the entire Sales team is rarely together in one location, meeting planners often try to pack as much presentation content as possible into every hour. The problem is audiences retain less than 20% of typical presentation. So mix up your format every hour to keep your audience engaged.

Remember the real learning happens in small, sub-group meetings where Sales teams have the opportunity to have sales-focused conversations. In these breakout sessions, make use of exercises to prompt discussions that challenge the audience to apply the knowledge they have gained during presentations.

4. Challenge Your Speakers to be Creative

As we have said, it is important to avoid the temptation of presentation overload. It is equally important to get the audience's attention and keep it. So challenge your presenters to use creative presentation techniques and to consider that people learn in different ways. They need to reach everyone in the audience, regardless of how they learn.

- Capture a process or tell a story with video
- Recruit customer speakers to validate solution discussions
- Create drama and energize your audience using story themes and storylines
- Punctuate your presentation using a creative prop
- Use music and sound effects to produce energy and accentuate key points

5. Address Issues Head On

Many meeting planners avoid addressing big problems or including controversial content, fearful that it will derail the Kickoff or shift focus to the negative. However, experts say you will gain credibility with your Sales audience by finding creative ways to address issues head on. If there is a topic your audience will be discussing passionately in the halls during breaks, it is best to frame the discussion with the facts and perspective you wish them to know. Invite honest and open feedback.

6. Tend to Details and Reinforce Success

Have you ever been to a long meeting with bad coffee, poor meals and rushed or non-existent breaks? What was your impression? How long were you focused and able to absorb information? As with any event, the small details at a Kickoff are important, and can make your meeting more memorable. Serve plenty of good food, and design an agenda that provides time to finish it. Avoid speakers at meals. Be mindful of the needs and preferences of your international audience.

7. Practice, Practice, Practice

Your Sales team's time is too valuable to waste with hastily created presentations delivered without rehearsal. Practice makes perfect—and improves impact—so STRONGLY encourage your speakers to rehearse (if possible on stage) and practice their creative presentation methods. Use coaches where appropriate. Just like a story with a bad punch line, nothing makes presenters look more foolish than if their creativity fails to illustrate their point.

8. Schedule Downtime

Your time is too valuable to waste on defocused reps so ensure time is available for them to re-energize. Set a reasonable time schedule (NOT 8 AM to 8 PM). Whether they use their free time to sleep, work out or simply call home, the result will be a higher energy level and ability to absorb more information. Plan long breaks to provide time for customer phone calls.

9. Encourage Casual Exchanges

Reps will tell you it is the casual exchange of strategy, best practices and customer information that makes Kickoff meetings valuable. Enable and encourage those

conversations by providing time during breaks, meals and break out sessions for unplanned and structured information sharing.

10. Follow up and Reinforce Your Results

Reinforce your Kickoff content in smaller group meetings or by web cast using case studies and role-play. This is also a great way to assess the impact of your larger meeting.

About the Author:

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