

# Great Sales Performance Starts with Leadership



by JOE RICKARD

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**S**mall printing companies are experiencing unprecedented challenges. Changes in printing technology and applications now are occurring in months instead of years. Strong and effective leadership is required to manage these changes.

Print shop owners and managers ask us for tips and strategies to improve sales performance, but our most difficult task is to specifically define what makes a great sales leader in the printing industry.

An excellent indicator of leadership is the ability to focus the organization on the successful attainment of the shop’s goals and objectives. One of the best definitions of leadership can be attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said, “Leadership is the ability to decide what is to be done and then to get others to want to do it.”

## **Why do print shop owners and managers fail to lead?**

An owner or manager’s inability to lead often can be traced to a lack of confidence. When managers lack confidence, it can keep them from addressing serious issues their shops are facing. In the current printing environment, this lack of leadership could lead to business failure and bankruptcy.

Getting bogged down with worry, day-to-day trivial and nonessential activities can be symptoms of a manager’s inability or unwillingness to lead. Our consulting business with graphic arts companies finds that most owners either exert too much control or virtually no control. Print shop owners who fall into the trap of overcompensating and praising salespeople or relentlessly hounding and harassing salespeople clearly are not leading.

The best leaders find ways to reinvent the sales team and develop new plans. Communication plays an important role in this reinvention and development because

reinvention requires change. When a manager communicates to his or her sales staff exactly why the shop needs to adapt, he or she steps up from the role of manager to become a leader.

## **What are the behaviors of a leader?**

In our observations, there are several differences between managers who merely manage and those who lead their sales staffs. Some of these differences include:

- A leader builds moral and commitment while a manager controls behavior and compliance;
- A leader encourages individual salespersons to be responsible for quality while a manager establish quality controls;
- A leaders lives his or her company’s values while a manager just defines those values;
- A leader acknowledges that he or she doesn’t always have the answers while a manager assumes he or she always knows best;
- A leader bases success on innovation and adaptation while a manager bases success on past practices;
- A leader creates a vision while a manager sets goals;
- A leader measures results while a manager measures activities;
- A leader inspires his or her salespeople while a manager controls his or her salespeople;
- A leader is customer-focused while a manager is self-focused; and
- A leader enables leadership at all levels while a manager creates a top-down strategy.

Leaders also benefit from solid experience, printing knowledge and people skills. Salespeople often show more interest in learning and improving their abilities when

provided a positive leadership experience. Simply put, learning-focused organizations will outperform businesses that only are performance oriented.

### **The leadership test**

We have created a leadership test consisting of 10 simple questions to help print shop owners and managers assess their personal leadership quotient. Often, there is a difference of opinion on how well a salesperson believes he or she is being led and what the shop owner or manager thinks of his or her own leadership abilities. To get the most accurate feedback, you might want to ask for feedback from your employees.

- **Do you get personally involved in the selling process with customers?**  
Leading by example is a powerful signal to not only your salespeople but also to your customers and other employees. Leaders talk to and call on customers with their salespeople.
- **Do you demonstrate ethics and honesty in all actions?**  
Customers and employees want to follow a leader with unshakable integrity during both good and tough times.
- **Do you encourage salespeople to better understand the company's objectives and strategy?**  
Owners and managers should have a plan for the future that identifies print market opportunities and how they will be captured.
- **Do you ensure a link between the print shop and the salesperson's individual objectives and compensation?**  
This approach will better motivate salespeople to work toward the vision and objectives of the company.

- **Do you work to improve your sales staff's understanding of the economic realities of running a business?**  
By identifying trends in the marketplace and sharing information on the financial impact of sales practices and performance on the business, salespeople will grow more aware of their impact on the top and bottom line.
- **Do you establish realistic and achievable expectations?**  
It is very important to ensure all salespeople are accountable for results. It is equally important that you set reasonable expectations for them. Think carefully about this one. Are your salespeople performing to your expectations? If not, are your expectations realistic and achievable? Are you sure?
- **Do you provide continuous feedback and coaching?**  
Salespeople will appreciate this support and grow in the business. Here is an opportunity for the print shop owner and manager to demonstrate personal credibility and sales effectiveness.
- **Do you provide a measurable process to identify good behavior?**  
Communicate and inspect what you expect. In addition to top-line sales, be sure to measure and share customer retention, rework, profitability and other key metrics that contribute to the shop's long-term success.
- **Do you assess and develop individuals objectively?**  
By monitoring individual achievements, identifying needed skill improvements and providing ongoing training, salespeople will continuously improve.

- **Do you recognize and reward good performance?**  
In addition to incentive compensation, creating a positive and constructive environment will generate long-term results.

### **Leadership, direction**

A print shop owner never can provide too much leadership, but they certainly can exert too much direction. The state of the business and the maturity of the salesperson determine how much direction is necessary. The tougher the business environment the more management direction might be required.

Is a highly directive style appropriate? At best, this approach can be useful for only a short time period. And, it is useful only if the objectives are realistic. If the objectives are not realistic, the organization will become reactive and move to eventual failure.

By carefully assessing the overall business environment and measuring performance against realistic goals, a business owner can determine how much direction and control needs to be placed on the sales force. Making these kinds of tough decisions is an important part of being a leader. In many printing companies today, leadership will be the determining factor in succeeding in a new technological and economic environment. ●

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