

The Cookie Lady is Dead!

For the past 22 years I've weathered Nor'easters in New England, Tropical storms in the Southeast, whiteouts in the Midwest, heat waves in the South and even earthquakes in the West. No, I'm not a meteorologist. I'm a sales coach and trainer specializing in hospice and homecare. I've experienced Mother Nature's wrath obtaining various "goodies" while riding with sales reps so they can hand them out to their referral sources! Neither rain nor snow nor even sleet will keep a homecare/hospice liaison from bringing treats to their customers, but ask them if they developed a sales call plan and they say "I didn't have the time". Of course not! Who would when you're battling all the elements in the distribution of cookies?

For too long homecare and hospice agencies have been relying on liaisons to bring in business by assuming they must act as mini-caterers. You're in trouble if you have ever heard the following statements by your sales reps/liaisons:

"We need more pens, pads, mugs, etc. to give out, because that's what our competition is doing".

"You can't get in to talk with anyone without bringing lunch".

"Our market is different than other places".

Or if you made a visit with them to a referral source and they said:

"Hi! Just stopping by to see how things are going. How's everything with (insert your agency name)?"

I must admit that over 25 years ago when I became a registered nurse and got my first sales job, I assumed (consciously or subconsciously) that you must "buy" your referral sources in order to get business. I soon learned that the top sales reps didn't need these various sundries to become successful. Instead they developed a plan and stuck to it. I once read a sales article written 30 years ago that basically stated "A sales rep without a plan is nothing more than a well paid tourist". I've never forgotten this.

It is no surprise to me that most sales reps lack the skills to be successful. Most companies want business growth, but do not invest the time, money or support into training their sales personnel. As a matter of fact, most hospice and homecare agencies don't even know the difference between sales and marketing. (Marketing is discovering what product, service or idea the customer wants and producing the appropriate features. Sales is a one-one, non-automated process which occurs on a personal level through cold calls, meetings, and networking. Sales people are the foot soldiers.) If the agency does offer sales trainings it maybe as little as 1-3 days long with an obligatory ride along with another rep for a day or two. Some agencies go as far as hiring a good sales manager but don't give them the tools to be successful. I was fortunate enough early in my career to work for a company that did invest the time, money and support for its employees to be successful. In turn, it became one of the largest hospice agencies in the US.

Due to the inappropriateness of a handful of homecare agencies several years ago, the state of Florida decided that homecare agencies could no longer give away anything of value to their referral sources or Medicare or Medicaid beneficiaries, including pens, pads, mugs, etc. Only educational activities which have a direct benefit to the patient - such as patient brochures and in-services - may be offered. It served as a “wake up” call to most companies. Initially, most agencies sales departments floundered. Some reps told me they had trouble sleeping at night because they didn’t know what they were going to do or say when they saw their referral sources without handing them a batch of cookies! The agencies that did succeed were the ones who decided to invest in training for their sales staff. It wouldn’t surprise me if other states follow suit on the banning of “giveaways” (It might be interesting to see the reaction of your staff if you tell them you decided to no longer fund any “giveaways”)

A short article on the need for formal sales training will certainly not answer all your needs with your sales staff; however, there are actions you can implement **now** which will help your sales reps have more focus and success. **Selling is not complex. It is just difficult to do consistently. The key to selling is discipline.**

Step One:

Have your sales staff/liaisons list the 12-15 people they plan on seeing each day. This should be done ahead of time and not on the day of the sales call!

Step Two:

Make them write the reason or objective of the call. (Invites to lunch or giving them their holiday present is not a valid reason for a sales call). They must answer the question “My purpose here today is ...”

Step Three:

Make them write 2 open ended questions they are going to ask the referral source as it relates to the objective of the call. Remember you cannot determine the needs of your customers if the sales rep is doing all the talking!

Step Four:

Have them write two closing questions which they are going to ask after presenting to the referral source. Most reps are bad at closing. Planning the questions in advance will force them to ask for business. (If you don’t ask you don’t get)

Step Five:

Require your sales staff to document what happened on the call, what follow up is needed/planned and the due date.

In addition to having your reps complete the above activities, it is important for the manager to understand that even the best reps need coaching on a regular basis. The best form of coaching is a “ride along”. This allows for what is called “curbside coaching”, giving the opportunity for positive feedback, when deserved and the time to correct deficient sales skills, when necessary. (Hint: it’s called curbside coaching because you never do it while the employee is driving!)

The best sales professionals have known all along that preparing for their calls is the most important step in the sales process - **not** buying cookies!

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