

[07 Sep 2006 Daily Telegraph Page 15 \(APP\) Edition 1C \(759 words\)](#)

MY BEST DEAL Why blind faith is order of the day While strong in self belief most sales staff feel let down by their managers, writes Andrew Cave

Andrew Cave

SALES professionals are having to rely on blind faith because they have insufficient understanding of the marketplace and how their products and services compare with competitors.

That's the key finding of *Blind Faith and the Bottom Line: What's Driving Sales Performance*, a report by Communication Challenge, a consultancy that brands itself as Index360.

The report finds that sales staff believe their company leaders are fixated with short-term revenue targets and fail to balance these against longer-term strategy. Additionally, they feel their leaders don't spend enough time coaching sales staff.

It says: "This leads them to rely on a blind faith strategy when selling to customers, asserting their product or service's superiority without having an evidence base to back up their assertions.

"A commission-led strategy also creates pressure to oversell, with many salespeople worrying about the ability of the rest of the company to deliver what is being promised."

The research, supported by the Institute of Sales & Marketing Management (ISMM) and the Sales Training Association, is based on a survey of 426 salespeople, managers and sales directors at 19 organisations including drugs group GlaxoSmithKline, copiers business Xerox, mobile telecom company O2 and Barclays Asset Management.

It explores sales teams' perceptions about five drivers of sales performance - leadership, motivation, skills, processes and understanding of the marketplace.

It also sets benchmarks for good practice across 60 different indicators.

The report found that sales professionals' confidence in their own skills was one area where almost all of the sales teams rated themselves as performing particularly well.

However, they felt that assessments for sales training were missing the mark and that their organisations were failing to take a long-term view.

In particular, companies were not sufficiently developing sales staff's capacity to learn from experience, share best practice and understand the significance of good sales processes and systems.

The report states: "Salespeople appear to have a universal dislike of their sales processes, seeing them as unhelpful at best, but the companies themselves may be responsible.

"Hostility to paperwork, documentation and record-keeping go unchallenged, because sales people are not being helped to see the importance of these for client relationship management and market understanding.

"This culture won't change unless companies recognise and reward good performance in these areas rather than focusing solely on sales revenues."

Catherine Sweet, director of consultancy 4C-S and the main author of the report, says: "A coaching relationship is virtually non-existent at a lot of these companies.

"What surprised me was how confident the salespeople were of technical areas of their products and services against the rest of the marketplace but then they freely admitted that they didn't know much about the marketplace.

"If I was a sales coach or manager, one of the things I would do would be to try to help increase that knowledge of the marketplace so that they have the evidence that is needed by their customers."

Nigel Slater, head of sales at Merial Animal Health, a pharmaceutical and vaccine company that was one of the businesses surveyed, said the research was "an extremely valuable exercise".

"It gave me an objective and true appraisal of the morale and feelings of my sales organisation," he added.

"In the past, it had been difficult to gauge this effectively when running a multi-team sales business. I now know more clearly where the strengths and development needs of my team really are."

Kelly Davis, sales team manager of New Horizons Training, which also took part in the study, said she was particularly interested in the research findings about her team's understanding of the marketplace. She said: "I have tasked our salespeople to research 15 of our competitors and present their findings back to the rest of the team.

"This has resulted in the creation of a library of competitors which is being updated and enriched regularly."

New Horizons has also reviewed its sales team's personal development plans to reflect the initiatives taken.

"We think this will help to drive and motivate the team," said Ms Davis.

Elizabeth Rogers, programme manager for sales management at Portsmouth Business School and research director of the ISMM, says: "This research presents a new angle and not just because, generally speaking, efforts looking at a broader appreciation of the sales functions are rare.

"This research is in use; it's not just a snapshot exercise. Index 360 are working with the participants in the research and have been able to give them feedback. It gives a summary of what is good about the sales function generally and what are its weaknesses."

www.index360.com

andrew.cave3@ntlworld.com

Picture Caption: Nigel Slater: 'It gave me an objective and true appraisal of the morale and feelings of my sales organisation'

Picture Credit: DANIEL JONES

Copyright: Telegraph Group Ltd