

How to Become a Top-Selling K-12 Sales Rep in a Rapidly Changing Industry

Dayton Johnson, President, Dayton Johnson Executive Search and Consultancy — Friday, May 17, 2013

In the past, a successful K-12 sales rep relied on a Rolodex, conferences, and networking lunches for leads, then spent much of his or her time on the road trying to turn those leads into customers. A sales rep could be successful just by unearthing prospects and logging many, many miles.

But the industry has changed. Staff cutbacks and increased job pressures mean it's harder to get an appointment or even a return phone call. School districts are restructuring, and school district decision makers are on the move. Budgets are being cut, and big purchases have to produce results—or jobs are on the line. The pressures of educating an increasingly diverse student population are climbing. School officials have been burned by broken promises and no results and are turned off by the onslaught of sales reps pitching the Next Big Thing.

The old way isn't working anymore.

But there's good news. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistic's most recent outlook on job growth, the U.S. will need about two million sales and sales-related positions by 2020. Industries ranging from health care, manufacturing, and software to K-12 and higher education are radically remaking the model, shifting from ineffective field teams to specialized sales experts with consultant-like skills.

It's a leaner, faster world...and here's what it takes now to become a top-selling K-12 sales representative:

Technology Expertise

Social media communication tools, such as Skype, and virtual meeting software, such as WebEx, are drastically reducing phone and travel costs, making it faster, easier, and cheaper to communicate with prospects. Today's K-12 sales rep combines Internet/phone prospecting and online product demos with face-to-face meetings to land the customer.

Customer Knowledge

Excellent Internet and phone prospecting strategies are key. Sales reps must listen to the customer carefully, speak the customer's language, and ask astute follow-up questions to drill down to the customer's needs. It's imperative that the sales rep understands the customer's priorities and pressures, which allows the sales rep to offer customized products and services specific to the customer's needs.

Product Knowledge

A strong grasp of the product, its ROI, and its uses by educators is essential. This is where face-to-face customer meetings and presentations are still a critical step to sales success in K-12 and higher education, because in-person meetings are more effective at moving the pitch to a close. In person, the K-12 sales rep can share his or her smarts, credibility, sincerity, and passion for improving learning outcomes to win over the prospect.

Territory Research

General knowledge and broad territories are giving way to in-depth knowledge and more narrow territories. Successful K-12 sales reps study market data and evaluate data analytics and needs specific to each customer, as well as assess his or her product's efficacy and become an expert on where the money is at the federal, state, and district levels. Industry estimates show that each qualified lead generated by a sales rep who leverages market data with skilled phone and Internet prospecting can cost ten times less than the traditional field salesperson approach. And since school districts are now often limited in how large a purchase they can make without getting other bids, today's sales rep must be able to identify RFPs and gather enough information to ensure he or she isn't underbid.

Interpersonal Skills

Today's successful sales rep has to earn the trust of the customer who's more educated about products and services than ever. The customer not only needs pricing and feature information, but also if they've diagnosed their challenges correctly in the first place to make sure the product or service is exactly what they need. And the sales rep isn't only selling. He or she is the go-between for the customer and the company, so a successful sales rep gathers customer information and feedback and takes it to the company to improve market monitoring, business analysis, product development, and brand messaging.

Sales reps with these resources and skill sets aren't only setting themselves up for outstanding sales numbers; they're setting themselves up as top recruits for the best jobs.

Hiring decisions will either make or break an education company. Building the right team is essential for success in K-12 and higher education, and recruiting the best sales talent is the cornerstone for increasing revenue. Hiring the right people to create a profitable, leading-edge organization allows everyone—employees, customers, and shareholders—to reap the rewards. And that's certainly good news!



Dayton Johnson, President of Dayton Johnson Executive Search and Consultancy, has been the go-to resource for innovators in the fields of elearning, educational technology, and publishing in both K-12 and higher education for the past decade. Dayton and his team are well-known for their successes in accelerating sales for education companies by delivering game-changing sales talent. In addition to sales professionals, Dayton and his team recruit the strongest players in the industry for leadership positions, including CEOs and VPs in sales, marketing, product development, and implementation.

Dayton's credentials include his achievements as an educator, State Department of Education Technology Director as well as Senior National Sales Leader and Strategist with IBM, Scholastic, and six K-12 start-up companies. He has co-authored several publications in educational technology, has been the recipient of numerous achievement awards, and holds a master's degree in education. He may be reached at dayton@daytonjohnson.com or www.daytonjohnson.com.