

# VOICE FROM THE INDUSTRY

## Is Your K-12 Sales Team Ready for Prime Time?

*Dayton Johnson, President, Dayton Johnson Executive Search and Consultancy — EdNET Insight, Friday, December 06, 2013*

Although the education industry is rapidly changing, timing is still everything when selling products and services to K-12 school districts. Long sales cycles, multi-level decision-making processes, and short periods of rapid seasonal purchasing define the K-12 market—and the prime-time selling season is just around the corner.

January through May are the most important months for qualified sales calls, product presentations, and committee meetings because they lead into the most active period of spending and decision making for districts: the start of the school fiscal year. June is a key month for capitalizing on “use or lose” discretionary fund reserves before the next budgetary cycle begins. Come July 1, a flurry of new spending begins.

Successful K-12 education sales leaders understand that having the right selling strategy, infrastructure, and team is the key to ensuring that their products and services will be included in critical, seasonal purchase requisitions based on the school fiscal calendar and state and federal funding cycles. Laying the groundwork with focused, active efforts during peak selling season ensures that your deals close on time, your offering is included in new fiscal year budgets, and your team is positioned to capitalize on low-hanging sales opportunities during the rest of the year.

Is your organization ready?

Balancing sales and marketing expenses with revenue is the biggest challenge for education companies when evaluating sales distribution models. Depending on the product and service, a company’s sales strategy could include sales distributors and independent reps with or without a dedicated internal sales team. The product or service offering itself should drive sales staffing decisions and marketing plans.

To ensure strong return on investments made in specific marketing strategies, events, briefings, conferences, and social media—and to effectively leverage inside sales efforts, webinar teams, resellers, or a company sales team—these decisions must be well-aligned with the offering. Selling basic supplemental products typically requires a different approach than complex, comprehensive education solutions.

For exceptional sales results when selling comprehensive products, services, and recurring revenue offerings, maintaining a well-trained, dedicated internal “A-Team” of territory sales professionals continues to be the most effective approach to achieve sales goals.

Here are the essentials to ensure success:

### **Sales Strategy and Infrastructure**

Customer market data and customer research is the first step in understanding where to focus sales efforts. Determining the *factors affecting the probability of a sale* for your products will provide a focused approach to specific states and districts to target.

Large opportunities with growth potential require proficient *hunters* with exceptional consultative selling skills. Ideally, the *hunter* or several *hunters* are paired with an inside sales rep who works the phones and Internet to capture leads, build the pipeline, and conduct webinars, while working as a *farmer* to ensure renewals of subscription products from your account base. To reign in staffing costs, it can work well to use trained resellers, inside sales reps, or independent reps in lower-priority geographies while investing in internal territory selling teams in high-priority areas without creating channel conflicts.

Effectively leveraging established customers and reference sites through testimonials, articles, white papers, and conference presentations should be part of a smart sales and marketing strategy.

Sales and marketing strategies must be seamlessly integrated and timed to the K-12 buying cycle.

### **Hiring the A-Team**

Successful sales leaders understand the critical importance of having the right professionals on the sales team. Hiring decisions have never been more important. And every member of the team must possess essential intrinsic skills and attributes: courage, intellect, drive, enthusiasm, passion, and the right attitude, as well as astute technology, listening, and organizational skills, are essential for success in K-12 sales.

If members of your sales team are not measuring up, it's time for player trades.

### **Building the Team**

Hiring the best is a no-brainer. Unfortunately, many K-12 companies then fall short by failing to provide effective onboarding and training, set clear expectations, and build an inspiring culture. Companies that make an ongoing commitment to sales training and support are better able to retain and leverage top talent.

Successful sales teams are comprised of experts in product knowledge, competition, funding opportunities, and the pain points of their customers. They deliver outstanding product presentations, effectively address objections, and are experts in closing skills. They continue to sharpen their skills through role-playing customer calls and developing advanced consultative sales techniques.

Sales managers should provide relentless support and plenty of latitude while demanding accountability to established metrics. If a sales manager is micromanaging a field rep for an extensive period of time, something is wrong with the rep or the manager.

### **Motivating the Team**

The most effective sales teams are *hungry*. Compelling commission plans drive the hunger. Commission plans should start rewarding reps for new business from the very first dollar and scale with commission accelerators as greater successes are achieved.

Establishing the right quota is the key to performance results. For established companies, quotas are usually determined using the prior year attainment and territory intelligence. For a new company, setting the first year's quota is challenging and may include benchmark bonuses and Management by Objectives (MBOs) to gain traction.

Regardless of how it is derived, the quota must be attainable. The most impressive results are obtained when the rep believes the number is reachable and is motivated to persist through commission accelerators. In fact, some sales managers have achieved their best successes by establishing quotas

within clear reach rather than too much stretch. Quotas that are perceived as unrealistic significantly inhibit sales success. Other strategies, such as establishing team contests for monthly sales results, can be compelling motivators that keep your team engaged and performing.

For the best results, never cap a commission plan and pay commissions promptly on a monthly basis.

## Summary

When your products and services are ready, nothing is more important than sales results. Building a premier sales team that is ready for the prime-time selling season is essential to the achievement of sales goals. Executing the right strategy with timing and precision will set the stage for impressive results.

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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 educational 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](mailto:dayton@daytonjohnson.com) or [www.daytonjohnson.com](http://www.daytonjohnson.com).