

Monday, September 12, 2011

Mike's Ah-Ha Moment



In 2008, at our then annual Customer Centric Selling Affiliate meeting, my partners and I hired Greg Alexander, founder of Sales Benchmark Index, to be our keynote speaker. As he started his presentation, Greg put up a slide with two numbers on it: 87 and 13. He told us that the 80/20 rule was no longer so. Instead, in B2B sales, after indexing 1,100 sales organizations—including many of our clients who employed thousands of salespeople we had trained—he'd found that it was now 87/13. The top 13 percent of salespeople were now responsible for 87 percent of the revenue.

At the time, I truly believed with all my heart, that both the Solution Selling and Customer Centric Selling methodologies held the key to helping the bottom 80 percent, but his slide told me otherwise.

I stared at the slide. The net effect of decades of sales training hadn't helped the great mass of salespeople. Instead, systems like Solution Selling and Customer Centric Selling had made the best salespeople even better, leaving their peers even further behind. A few days later, it really hit me. Despite my best intentions, I hadn't accomplished what I set out to do—help the bottom 80 percent pay their mortgages, send their kids to college, take vacations, provide for their families. I realized that my confidence in our methodology had turned into intellectual arrogance.

At first, I tried to cram that uncomfortable realization back into the bottle. The 87 percent must be lazy, stubborn, or resistant to change, I told myself. If they really tried, they could learn how to do it. After all, it had worked for me. And I thought I had evidence that our training wasn't the problem. The number one complaint I heard from sales managers was that the bottom 80 percent of their salespeople quit trying to use the methodology within 10 days of the workshop, whereas the top people had an easy time putting the methodology into practice and therefore, stuck with it. It stood to reason that the few top sellers were successful because they used our methodology,

while the rest underperformed because they didn't.

At Customer Centric Selling, we prided ourselves on eating our own dog food, so I took out a pad and ran the numbers, hoping to prove myself right. No such luck. Of approximately 40 affiliates, five of them had brought in 90 percent of our revenue—and it was the same five people every year. In theory, if all 40 were using our methodology, the revenue spread would have been a lot less disproportionate. But the real a-ha moment wasn't that 87/13 was alive and well within my own organization. That moment came a little later when I looked under the hood at those top five Affiliates and considered what set them apart from the others. And there it was: they were the ones who had what we used to call "the mojo," the ability to forge real emotional connections with their customers. They weren't necessarily using the methodology they were selling. They were doing something above and beyond the methodologies to connect with their buyers.