



Training Fish to Fly? Tips to Convert a Sales Force to Key Account Managers

Has your company caught the account management bug? Virtually all companies are pushing hard to pump up revenues by focusing on the 80/20 rule. Providing value added services and dedicated account managers to the few major accounts that make up the majority of revenue and profits. The reasons are well known: decreasing product margins, tough competition, customer interest in business solutions rather than the "latest box", a desire for deeper customer relationships, and the like.

Although many companies have demonstrated success in designing and implementing account management strategies and processes, the sales force typically fails to get fully behind the new program. Changing veteran product-oriented sales representatives (and their managers) into solutions-oriented, strategic minded, account managers often seems like teaching fish to fly.

How difficult is the account management transition? It depends on commitment from the top down and a willingness to support and encourage a transformation from a quick fix, short term mindset to a more long term, strategic focus. Account managers need time to research their customers, the competition and the market and to be able to think and plan strategies. The need for us all to move with less, faster nowadays creates a culture that encourages actions that are "fast and simple". Account management is a complex process, and building trust and adding value can take time and patience.

Success ultimately comes down to the individuals, however. To increase the odds of success, the following guidelines should be part of any transformation plan.

- Don't simply make demands-provide the right skills. Provide account management coaching that is carefully tailored to your issues and your sales force's needs. Remember, you're trying to change behaviors and attitudes-anyone who has teenagers can appreciate how difficult that is! There are 3 coaching priorities: knowing the customer's business, better understanding how you can add value, and better understanding the relationship dynamics. If economically feasible, group training combined with individual coaching sessions is still the most effective approach. No e-learning tool can replicate the intensity and emotive levels that quality face-to-face coaching can attain.
- Provide value proposition support. Coaching should address the number-one barrier to account management, articulating the business value to clients. Make sure that the account managers understand and can explain the value proposition that your marketing staff have so brilliantly developed.



- Have the right processes in place. The second biggest barrier is working with the other members of the sales team. Account Management typically requires much more complex organisational coordination than traditional selling. Make sure that your processes are effective to you and acceptable to your customers.
- Provide success stories. If Tiger Woods were to start wearing his golf hat backward when he putts, you can bet that most other professional golfers and nearly all amateurs would start doing the same thing. It's the same with your sales team. If some of your account managers are seen as being successful in applying the principles and skills of account management -and being financially rewarded for doing so- you'll see the rest of the team begin to follow suit.
- Provide continuous support and measurement. Even "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" contestants get lifelines, phone a friend, 50-50 breaks, and audience support. What are you doing to support your account managers? Do you have an effective coaching program in place? What account planning tools have you developed? Are the tools being used? When are they used? How are they used? Can the account management team see that each tool can be used to deepen a customer relationship or merely close a sale?

You won't convert everyone. In fact, it's okay to accept that the bar has been raised too high for some. Establish metrics to assess performance, use them, and then act swiftly on the results. Some companies are quick in pushing out ineffective people; others struggle with letting anyone at all go. But taking a sales force through this process is not for the weak of heart. Expect some casualties.

If you keep these tips in mind as you rebuild your account management capability, you'll have a much higher probability of finding the Holy Grail - higher total revenues per account, happy major customers, retention of talented account managers, frustrated competitors and higher total margins.



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