

ARTICLE SERIES

The People You Know:
Social Networks and Tomorrow's Sales Force

MILLER
HEIMAN®
The Sales Performance Company

Relationships. Salespeople rely on them and spend significant time cultivating them.

Building these all-important assets, however, can be a challenge, particularly early in a sales career. In fact, getting new recruits--even promising ones--to stick it out long enough to build relationships before seeking seemingly greener employment pastures can be tough.

However, young people already make regular use of social networking sites on the Internet--like myspace.com--to kick-start personal relationships, and this skill can be leveraged to enhance their sales strategy. A social networking site allows users to build personal profiles and interact through these profiles with other users on the same site. What do these experienced social networkers have to teach us? And can similar, more secure networks designed for business get newbies engaged more quickly--as well as take networking skills of established salespeople to the next level?

Antony Brydon, founder and CEO of Visible Path, and Paul Pellman, executive vice president of Hoover's, believe they can. Look to the following conversation they had with the Sales Performance Journal to understand why.

Sales Performance Journal: What made you begin considering the possibilities of online social networking for sales?

Antony Brydon: Sales is all about relationships. Sales executives go to their networks for their core job tasks--unlike some professionals who perform their jobs without ever invoking a relationship. The main impact of social networking for sales is helping them gain access and accelerate opportunities through connections they have but that they might not know about.

Paul Pellman: The Visible Path business model started by thinking about the enterprise, of finding relationship capital. It's not a "myspace.com." It has privacy standards built in. But integrating the "who," Hoover's contact information, with the "how," Visible Path

company mapping, seemed like the perfect marriage.

Sales is about creating the right solution for the client... meeting the pain point of your targeted company. Then it's about the right contact information. Finally, it's about a brokered relationship through a trusted source. This creates a high-value sales call.

We have the stats that show the benefit of that trusted contact. Visible Path research has shown a trusted introduction means a salesperson is 12 times more likely to get a meeting. It's four times more likely they'll have a call returned.

It's really self-evident. We don't all keep our Rolodexes updated regularly. For a salesperson to be able to passively build a network is powerful. It doesn't replace sales methodology, but it complements it.

SPJ: But doesn't online networking just show who knows whom? How can you call that a "trusted" contact?

AB: You've hit on an important point. The existence of any relationship--the kind of contact you might normally get from a first generation networking site--in our experience doesn't necessarily help the sales process. You want meaningful relationships. Everyone's had the negative experience of going out on a limb and tossing out a name they hope will help, only it's someone the target knew 10 years back.

Visible Path helps find the best path, the strongest relationship with the most prominent people. Think analogous to Google. You type in a keyword; you used to get any old webpage. Now you get the most relevant ones first. Visible Path uses a similar technique. It looks at emails, Vcard storage, meeting patterns--and determines where the most relevance lies and gives you your best choice.

PP: It's very important for a salesperson to understand all the different influencers and decision makers vs. gatekeepers. How are you going to find that champion to support you? The more you can leverage different relationships, the better able you are to find the right

path into the organization.

Hoover's has been helping salespeople get the deal going for years. Once you're in, though, you start trolling your network for other contact points. As Antony said, just dropping a random name, saying "I see you know so-and-so," isn't as valuable as finding people willing to interact. Social networking will help you better understand the universe of people involved so you have a successful outcome.

SPJ: You've mentioned benefits getting meetings and new ways of seeking out multiple touchpoints. Could you talk a bit more about opportunity acceleration?

AB: Social networking allows salespeople to qualify an opportunity much more aggressively. This acceleration is probably the most measurable improvement: the time it takes to reach a sponsor, get a call returned, get to the table--these fundamental building blocks of the sales cycle get collapsed. At the end of a cycle, there are likely gains, too--actually increasing the probability of close by finding people known in common, by building trust, reducing risk... but early in the cycle the data that measures the acceleration is conclusive.

PP: This idea of determining your best contact to leverage to get into an organization works seamlessly with the Hoover's database. When you're ready, your contact pops up in a sidebar. You fire off a request to the person in your network who can get you connected.... It's integrated into an existing workflow and reinforces what sales is already doing.

AB: Once salespeople start using the relationship capital they have more systematically, they'll get more context on targets.

Adoption may initially occur in younger members of a sales force. They are hungry to build up relationship capital quickly. It will help them install a base to sell into. But I think you'll see the time of adoption for the entire sales force shorten. The question used to be how quickly experienced salespeople would adopt

PCs. Then it was Blackberries, the Internet. Like these other examples, this technology has real potential to revolutionize selling. It brings insight, access and contact information together in one nice punch.

PP: Salespeople are not going to waste one ounce of effort on something that doesn't help the call. We feel social networking will help drive success and close rates by helping manage the pipeline. We've seen it before: those who use company and contact data from Hoover's are more successful than those who don't. Organizations that leverage Miller Heiman selling strategy are more successful than organizations that don't. I think we're going to see similar results.

About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, grow key accounts and build winning sales organizations.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by visiting the company's website at: www.millerheiman.com.