

The science of selling - Chr. Hansen applies an analytical approach

Chr. Hansen may not be a household name, but for well over a century its innovative products have improved the quality of food and health for millions of people worldwide. True to its ethos of continual improvement the Danish-owned company has also raised its level of professionalism by implementing a uniform strategic sales process throughout its operations.

The decision to adopt the Strategic Selling[®] process came after members of its Northern European management team independently attended Miller Heiman public courses in the late nineties. They realised that introducing its step-by-step procedure for qualifying business opportunities would result in better focus and accurate forecasting, as well as promoting the communications and teamwork that are essential for effective management of international accounts.

Chr. Hansen, which develops natural ingredient solutions for the food, dairy, human health and agricultural feed sectors, has a string of innovations to its name. For example, its products have revolutionised cheese production, its range of natural colours gives an alternative to artificial colours and EU-approved alternatives to antibiotic growth promoters are now available. Whilst being active in all major markets and selling to global customers, the company had no single approach to pursuing single sales objectives and to building customer relationships.

Brian Cowan, Managing Director of Chr. Hansen-UK (Ltd), is responsible for operations in the UK, Ireland and South Africa.

“We supply the major foodstuff manufacturers who, in turn, sell to the supermarket chains and other retailers with enormous buying power. Over the last few years many global customers have consolidated their purchasing power, so to meet their needs our sales approach has to be consistent right across the board,” he explains.

“Strategic Selling[®] has given us a common discipline and language that makes us more professional and makes it easier for colleagues, say in Germany and Argentina, to talk to each other. It is also helping to differentiate us from our competitors. These are important factors, particularly when you're selling into very competitive markets.”

The company wanted to send a simple message that 'selling is universal wherever you are in the world' - a task that entailed training some 270 people, one tenth of the overall workforce.

In-house delivery

One of Miller Heiman's independent consultants, Tony Ellis, introduced the Strategic Selling concept and ran the initial workshops for Chr. Hansen. However, **Chr. Hansen recognised that delivering the programme in-house would have additional benefits in terms of greater flexibility, efficient use of resources and customising the workshop content.**

In February 2001 Cowan became a Miller Heiman Client Associate by completing its Train-the-Trainer programme and has since rolled out the Strategic Selling methodology throughout the Chr. Hansen organisation, including North America, Europe, Australia and South America.

Generally the workshops were held in English. In France, however, Miller Heiman's local independent consultant was the facilitator and in Italy Cowan worked through an interpreter.

In his experience differences in cultures present the biggest challenge, particularly in Latin America, so to gauge whether the message is getting across he asks delegates to complete Blue Sheets in their own language during the workshops and observes as the momentum builds.

In Europe a Sales Project Monitoring Database has been set up - an initiative that integrates Strategic Selling's key principles into the selling cycle. Computerised records, based on the programme's Blue Sheet analysis tool, provide detailed information by country of each sales representative, the situations they are currently working on, the value of potential business and actual sales generated.

“We've adopted all the fundamental Miller Heiman concepts - the Single Sales Objective, the sales funnel, and the Euphoria/Panic scale, which is about gut feel - so there's a structure in place to help sales people to clarify their position and track progress.”

“Sales Managers in each country can clearly see everything that's going on and can get a timeline on when projects will happen, which is a big plus when budgeting.”

Sales teams meet regularly to review business opportunities and share information more easily using a common framework and language. They have also found the Blue Sheet and Gold Sheet (Large Account Management Process) very useful for generating new ideas and approaches to problems. “Introducing Strategic Selling has been good for team building and now that information is more apparent people outside the sales organisation have a better insight into our activities too.”

A professional benchmark

In addition to providing a framework for winning business consistently, **Strategic Selling has also impacted professional development, according to Brian Cowan. “Overall sales people feel they are doing a better job.** But more than that the Miller Heiman approach sets a benchmark for identifying individual strengths and areas that need to be developed, rather like an annual appraisal,” he says.

Daily use of the sales database helps to instil the fundamental techniques, but Cowan also recognises the need for constant reinforcement. To complement in-house initiatives, refresher training with Miller Heiman is ongoing, and there are also plans for sales people to attend the Negotiating Skills programme.

Any change in working practices tends to meet with some resistance, but for Chr. Hansen the transition has been remarkably smooth. It has helped that senior management attended the workshops to demonstrate their commitment and continue to promote the new process through internal communications. But another reason for the positive response to the Miller Heiman methodology is the company's scientific culture. Its sales people have to be commercially astute, but typically come from a technical background. As specialists in food chemistry and related disciplines they may not necessarily have had any previous sales training but can identify with Strategic Selling's objective and analytical approach as the foundation for building an exceptional sales organisation.