

NOTE: This article appeared in the January-February 2002 issue of **Cara Magazine**, the in-flight magazine of Aer Lingus, Ireland's national airline. The author is Deiric McCann, Profiles' National Director in Ireland.

The sky is not falling

Whatever the gloom merchants say, you can ensure your company's survival in the current economic climate by keeping a positive attitude and putting a bit of extra time and effort into your sales drive. Deiric McCann offers ten steps to maximum success. Illustration by David Rooney.

What's happening to us? It seems that all of the hype surrounding the apparent downturn in economic conditions has turned a larger than normal percentage of the world's business population into latter day Chicken Littles – all running around in frenzied proclamations of the end of the commercial world as we know it.

If you're a guilty part of this fowl movement then STOP! STOP NOW! before you contribute to this potential for self-fulfilling doomsday prophesy. Upon quizzing one of my suppliers, a one-man band, on his prediction as to the likely future effect of the downturn on his business I got a simple answer: "None! Because I'm not taking part in it." Of course, that's pretty much impossible, right? Wrong, what he has is the correct attitude – you can ride this out if you work a little harder and determine that you'll minimise any adverse impact on sales. But how?

Here are ten points, all of which your sales organisation needs to put into action sooner rather than later. Some of these actions are specifically aimed at your sales management level, others at every salesperson in your organisation. To maximise your chances of success you need to implement every one of them to help you balance out some of the current negative effects of consumer confidence on your sales volume:

1. Cross- and Up-Sell in Existing Active Accounts

Active purchasers/users of your products and services who are buying from you currently may have a need for something else you do – and you don't yet know (and neither do they, likely as not). Get out and find out. Look at ways of up-selling and cross-selling into all of these accounts. How could they blend one service/product they currently use with another they've never used? What would be the benefit to them of doing so? What financial or other incentive can you give them to do so? Think about it first, formulate as many cross- and up-sell strategies as you can for everything you currently provide. Look at packaging sets of goods and services, so that you add value and revenue to every single sale you make. With a little imagination you'll find that you can up the value of every sale, and create brand new sales, with little additional sales effort. It doesn't have to result in a doubling of the value of every sale you make or in the take from every one of your existing accounts. Even modest margin increases on every sale you make will add up substantially over time. Look at how McDonalds and Burger King approach every one of their admittedly individually modest sales – "would you like fries with that?" or "would you like to go

large?" Do it now: talk to all customers currently buying from you and seek to up the value of every sale into every one of those accounts, one way or another. Go large!

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2. Awaken Hibernating Accounts

Review the records of everyone you've ever done business with – you'll find that there are some on that list that, for whatever reason, have had no contact from you or your sales force for some time. Good times are like that – we all tend to chase the "low hanging fruit." There will be some clients who have had excellent experience with you but who haven't done anything with you recently because you simply didn't ask. Get out and see everyone. Things have changed since you saw them last – for one thing you're much hungrier and, if you've actioned the first point above, you now have so many "packaged" offerings that you must have something they'd be interested in.

A key point when you undertake these last two steps is to avoid the temptation to "come clean" and confess that things are a little tight. Do that and you put your most valuable assets in a situation where they may feel pressured to come up with something they can do for you, particularly if you've traditionally had good personal relationships with the account contacts. Be upbeat and treat this as an account development meeting – seeking more ways you can help these valuable clients to meet their objectives, thereby helping you to meet yours.

3. Revisit all recent leads

In good times there is always some easy money to be made, and therefore sometimes prospects who express an interest in what we do and then either don't fall in with our timescales, or don't return our calls quickly enough, are allowed to fall by the wayside. Review all of your recent leads (last several months – or whatever timescale makes sense in the context of your sales cycle). Filter out those that came to nothing – but where, for whatever reason, you never got to a "no!" or to a decision on your part to qualify out. If these folks contacted you looking for information, or attended a seminar, or requested a brochure, then at that point in time they had a qualified interest. Reanimate these leads and chase them to ground, once and for all. You'll find in at least some of them that they never got around to making their purchase – because they were just too busy and there was no salesperson driving their decision-making process. Be that salesperson.

4. Seek Referrals

This is classic basic sales advice – but it is never more important than when times are tough. In every encounter with active clients or hibernating accounts, and with anyone else you happen to speak with over these coming months, get into the habit of asking for referrals. Look in existing accounts for referrals to other contacts within that account, or for referrals to their suppliers and peer organisations. Speak with everyone you know in business and ask them to think of anyone you should be speaking to. It will get results. Simple but effective.

5. Cast your net wider

When things are good the advice is simple: refine your target audience. That means knowing your customer base and marketing to them to the exclusion of all others. It also means being fussy – only going for the high ticket, high margin deals that you deserve. Things have changed – it's time to get a little less fussy: go for some of those smaller sales/projects that you would have sniffed at in Q1. You'll find that lowering your sights even a little will substantially broaden the target base you have to work with.

Be careful, however. What you sell to one class of prospects may not appeal to another, perhaps, smaller purchaser. Look carefully at your offerings, and at the new additions to your target base, and repackage what you do to specifically appeal to them. Is there a way that you can "modularise" what you do, breaking it down into smaller individually priced elements that smaller clients can use on an as needed basis? Can you provide financial payment terms that make it easier for the client with shallower pockets to work with you? What can you do to broaden your appeal?

6. DON'T Reduce (or increase) Costs

...but DO increase value. The moment you start the "bargain basement" approach your existing clients, and all around them, will imagine they smell "blood in the water" and this may shake their confidence – driving them further away than ever from doing business with you. No prospect or client ever ran away from more "bang for his or her buck," however. Look at how you can deliver more – better service, higher quality, better payment terms, whatever – for the same money. Do this by looking at what your targets value and what your competitors deliver. You'll find that you can very often up your value proposition by 100 percent and still only elevate your true cost of sale by a fraction of that percentage. And, need I say it, don't even consider pumping up your prices – now is just not the time.

7. Invest More Time & Money

... in marketing and promotion. You've heard it all before: sales is a numbers game. And right now the ratios are very different to those you enjoyed four or five months ago. If you were working a 100-10-1 model previously (100 suspects producing ten suspects, which in turn produced one sale) then you know that you're going to have to ramp the input to this funnel to a much higher level to compensate for the slowdown. Do you have to double it? Triple it? Whatever the multiplier you'll find that you need to have your prospecting machine running continually, in parallel with all other activities, seven days a week. Look at what you can realistically aim to sell your (new?) target base and set about designing as many ongoing

prospecting activities as possible. Ramp up your PR, run value-added seminars and road shows, engage in co-ordinated mail and fax-outs – do whatever you have to do to get your message, and ultimately your sales team, in front of as many prospective clients as possible. If you haven't already done so, then consider dedicating some of your team to prospecting alone. Now is not the time to stint on the promotional budget – now more than ever you should be investing in chasing prospects out into the open.

8. Build Lifetime Clients

In general, the easiest and most profitable business to win has always been that won from existing satisfied clients. This is the time when everyone needs to be mindful that now, perhaps as never before, delivering excellent customer service is absolutely essential. If you are a direct part of the sales organisation or effort in your company then you are one of those with ultimate responsibility for development of profitable client relationships, and with client retention. No longer can you pass the buck for implementation or delivery to someone else in the organisation; to ensure your future sales you must take complete ownership and responsibility for the success (as perceived by your client) of all of your sales. This means taking a perhaps unprecedented interest in the successful and quality implementation or delivery of every project, product or service you deliver to your clients. It means ensuring that everyone involved in delivering what you sell understands why you expect them to "go the extra mile" to spectacularly satisfy your clients. Ensure that all of your sales result in delivering the success and benefit the client set out to achieve – that way you start making headway on tomorrow's sales today.

9. Ask the Troops What They Think

Before you charge into putting all of these suggestions into action, see if your team have any more to add to the action plan. Call for input from every department in your company on what they think you could do to up revenues and drive sales. Don't confine this to your sales and marketing people – frequently your technical and administration people have a keener awareness of what your clients would really like, or would be willing to pay that little extra for. Besides drumming up new ideas, this process will make everyone feel an important part of the organisation's positive drive for increased success – people will much more effectively implement actions they feel they helped to formulate than ones they feel have been imposed upon them.

10. Keep Your Chin Up

I'm no Pollyanna, I'm not a positive-thinking-in-the-face-of-ridiculous-odds nutball, but I can assure you that unless you stay optimistic you're dead. Everyone's in the same boat just now, and anyone who tells you otherwise is either deluded – or in undertaking! Don't feel that you or your business is unique in its suffering, and that all is lost – it's that kind of thinking that's fuelling the current confidence crisis.

Too many people have already folded up their tents and headed for home. Don't be one of them. Decide what you need to do to ride this storm out, and then focus all of your energies upon doing it.

The sky is not falling, unless we collectively wish it down on us.