

Motivating Your Sales Team: How to Get the Best Performance

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1. Why does motivation matter?

A reliable stream of revenue is crucial in tough economic times. Companies need the lifeblood of sales to keep their organisation active and it is sales professionals who have to deliver.

As a result, the question of what motivates a sales person to perform at their best – and what it takes to keep them there – is one every organisation needs to address.

For some, it is simply a case of who pays top dollar. Money makes the world go round, or so the saying goes, but while remuneration is an important factor in any job, it is not the be-all and end-all. With top talent in greater demand than ever, we examine the full range of factors that motivate sales professionals.



2. What motivates a sales person?

Remuneration

A career in sales offers a potentially lucrative return. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that financial factors play a large role in the decision to enter a career in sales. According to a survey of sales professionals by Xactlyⁱ there is a clear financial incentive at play: 15 per cent said they choose the career for the salary, 11 per cent for the bonus and 12 per cent for commission.

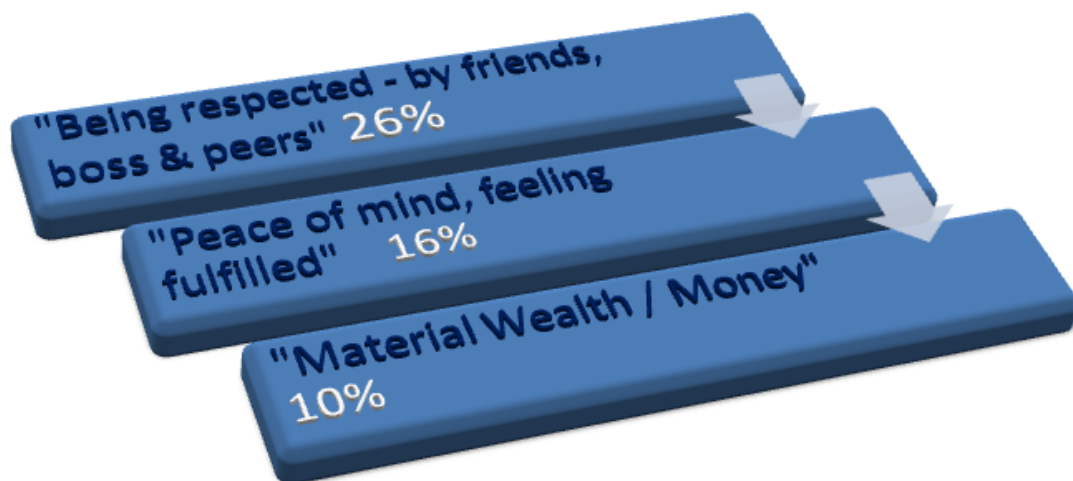
Yet if a sales person is to reliably hit the top level of performance – and if they are to stay in a job – they need to be motivated by more than just money. In Aaron Wallis' industry-wide survey, 'The State of Sales in the UK'ⁱⁱ, sales professionals were asked how they measure their success, with some eye-opening results, dispelling the myth that motivation is simply about putting more money in the pocket.

Respect & Recognition

Just ten per cent of respondents said that money and material wealth were the main gauges of their success. Instead, it appeared that the greatest motivating factor for sales professionals was earning the respect of their peers and managers – cited by more than a quarter of survey participants.

The feeling of fulfilment was also important, cited by 16 per cent of respondents, which suggests that the sense of having done a job well, and being recognised for it, is an even greater source of satisfaction than pay.

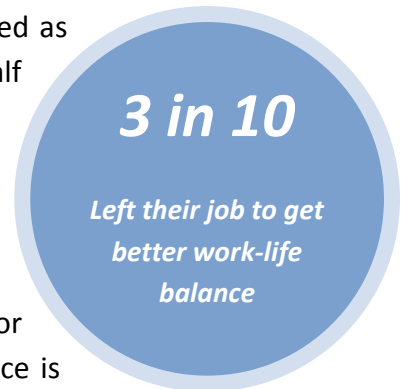
How Do Sales People Measure Success?



Work-Life Balance

That is not to say that salary is not an important factor, but the survey highlights the diverse range of influences on motivation.

Achieving a good work-life balance cannot be underestimated as a factor in job satisfaction. Research carried out by Robert Half Internationalⁱⁱⁱ earlier this year revealed that three in ten organisations in the UK cited work-life balance as the primary motivation for employees leaving their company for other opportunities.



While remuneration was found to be the top reason for employees to leave their jobs (32 per cent), work-life balance is hot on its heels, and actually the main factor among London-based respondents, with 38 per cent indicating this.

This broader sense of balance was also evident in the Aaron Wallis survey^{iv}, which found that one in five sales professionals feel that having loving relationships with their partner, friends and family are indicators that they are 'successful'.

Ambition

Alongside balance and fulfilment, however, is the role of ambition. Sales professionals strive to meet challenges and, frequently, seek them out.

Seven per cent of respondents to the Aaron Wallis survey said that feeling continuously challenged was a true measure of success, while constant learning was cited by one in ten respondents.

The attraction of sales as a challenging and influential role is something which is another powerful force. In the Xactly report^v, 71 per cent said they believed sales to be one of the top three most important functions in any company.

If we know what motivates and fulfils sales staff, the challenge is to keep them engaged and retain the best performers.

3. How can you sustain performance and boost motivation?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

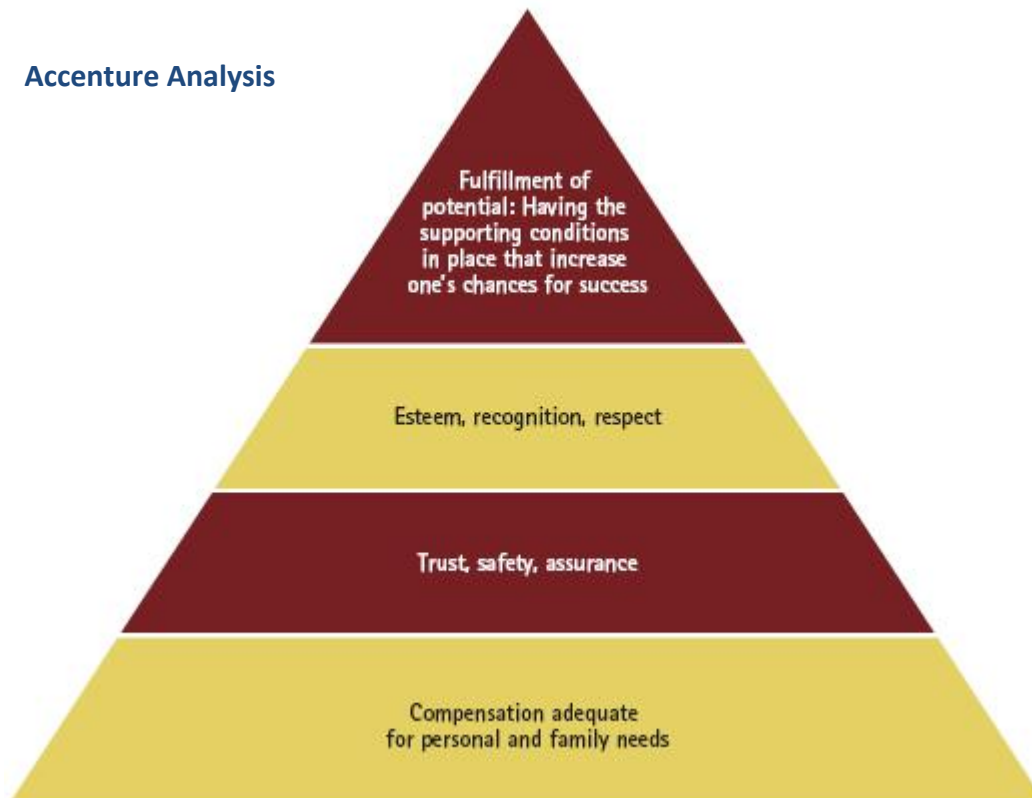
In the 1940s, the pioneering American psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced a hierarchical understanding of basic or innate human needs^{vi}, which has since been used countless times by managers hoping to get to the bottom of workers' desires and motivations.

Central to this is the principle that people are motivated to satisfy the lowest level of unmet need – the bottom level of the pyramid. If that need is satisfied it cannot serve as a source of motivation.

When transferred to the sales arena, as Accenture recently did^{vii}, the pyramid's lowest - and therefore largest - level can be seen as the need to receive compensation adequate to meet personal and family needs.

The second biggest segment is the need to receive trust, safety and assurance - which gets to the bottom of workers' desire to be recognised and rewarded appropriately – and not just in a monetary sense.

Accenture Analysis



Financial Structure

Financial reward is something which sits at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid: providing the compensation required to sustain the individual and their family. Yet it is also about esteem, respect and fulfilment – telling your staff that you recognise their contribution.

Creating the right structure and working environment for staff is easier said than done, but there are ways in which employers can foster a positive culture, and this inevitably begins with pay and incentives.

If financial rewards are to work effectively, they must be properly targeted. Clear, transparent and well structured incentives can be a powerful tool. Done wrong, and they can be counterproductive.

The Xactly survey^{viii} found that the second biggest reason for sales professionals leaving a role was unrealistic targets – cited by four in ten workers – and employers would be wise to ensure that any pay or bonus-related incentives are achievable.

The Aaron Wallis State of Sales in the UK^{ix} survey suggests that appealing to a sales person's more daring side could be a shrewd strategy.

Given the option of earning a potential £10,000 performance-related related bonus or a £5,000 guaranteed basic salary, two-thirds of respondents opted for risk over reward. Putting financial gain into context is the key.

Job Design & Organisation Structure

According to a wide-ranging Accenture^x survey, job design is another important factor in motivation. Put simply, sales professionals would prefer to be on the front line, selling, rather than having their time taken up by non-sales work. For businesses, not only does this allow them to get on with the job and boost revenue, it creates engaged, motivated – and therefore effective – performers.

As the influential writer and management consultant Peter Drucker suggests, the right structure gives the platform for managers and employees to work.^{xi}

“A good organisational structure does not by itself produce good performance but a poor organisational structure makes good performance impossible, no matter how good the line manager may be.”

Peter Drucker

Flexible Working

One area of job design that has changed dramatically in recent years is working hours. The development of mobile technology, whether it is email on your phone or reliable, cheap video conferencing, means staff are no longer chained to a specific location or time. For managers, this represents an opportunity, at an organisation and individual level.

A recent survey carried out by Regus^{xii} found that 68 per cent of UK companies are reporting that their productivity has increased as a result of flexible working, while 63 per cent have linked increasing revenues directly to flexi-working.

Three-quarters of businesses work more flexibly now than they have ever done, both in terms of time and location, with more than half of UK employees reporting that they are more energised and motivated as a result of flexible working hours.

“The more flexibility you give to employees and the more ability you give them to work with what fits their own personal circumstances and their own lives, the more it leads to more motivated and energised employees.”

Steve Purdy, Managing Director, Regus UK

Management

Top quality management is essential in any workplace, but particularly in a field such as sales, where the backing of a manager can give staff the confidence to excel, even if they have suffered rejection – in this case the failure to close a sale or deal.

The Aaron Wallis State of Sales survey^{xiii} revealed that 85 per cent of sales professionals believe they have an average or better relationship with their line manager. However, this proportion has been steadily falling in recent years, with management styles at the heart of the issue.

When questioned, 18 per cent of workers said their manager has an aggressive or dictatorial way of running the organisation, compared with only 13 per cent who prefer an inspirational or motivational approach.

In a tough economic climate, employees require every bit of encouragement they can get.

“People in sales are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the management style of their line managers”

Rob Scott, Aaron Wallis Managing Director

That means effective incentive structures and a good understanding of sales staff strengths and weaknesses.^{xiv} For organisations the results are engaged staff but also a healthier bottom line. As Dion Joannou, America president of communications giant Nortel Networks, notes, a better understanding of sales people means an increase in productivity.^{xv}

"It's important that a company's leadership work harder at really understanding people. I spend a fair amount of time thinking about the things, beyond just compensation, that are going to motivate my sales team."

Dion Joannou, Nortel North America President of Communications

Takeaway

The key to motivating sales staff appears to lie in striking the balance between satisfying their desire for a challenge and offering recognition in the workplace, while acknowledging that their life outside the office remains very important to them.

Money remains important but a simplistic, one-size-fits-all approach to motivation does not deliver lasting results. Managers must take a tailored approach and have the flexibility to adapt when it comes to getting the best out of people, and give them the space to succeed.

If you can build the right structures and create the right rewards, you provide the platform for your sales staff to flourish.

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