

Doug Ringer's Product Development Accelerator

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A free, bi-monthly newsletter about techniques for improving product development and product management. Past issues are archived for free downloading on our website: <http://www.dougringer.com>.

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How Product Managers Can Better Support The Sales Force

I've worked with organizations such as General Electric, Ericsson, Honeywell, Meritor (formerly a division of Rockwell International), and others in the private sector. Most of my work is in new product development and product management, and I've developed or managed over 40 product lines for both North American and global markets. My work almost always includes working closely with the sales department in the marketing and ongoing support of new products.

I have compiled these steps based on my observations and experiences working with sales teams and product managers for over a decade. These tips will help you become a great supporter of your sales force. This support will cause increased sales intensity for your products and make acquiring accurate market and customer data easier and more reliable.

Educate

This seems to be an obvious but I have overheard PM's say, "John (not his real name) has been selling this product for years, I can't believe the questions he still asks." Along with the unprofessional content of this comment, hubris is also rearing its ugly head. He might as well added, "I trained the whole sales team on this product line 2 years ago. I can't believe he still doesn't get it."

Like I said, hubristic and unprofessional.

Approach education as an opportunity to make the sales team less dependent on me by giving them tremendous amounts of practical information in a variety of forms. These different forms are intended to address similar information from different viewpoints. Since people learn in different ways, a variety of options helps educate a large and varied team.

Some examples are:

- formal training presentations at annual or other periodic sales meetings
- brief e-mails sent frequently that contain a single piece of important information and how it can be applied to customer scenarios
- traveling with them on sales call provides hours of one-on-one time for teaching and listening
- training booklets with information on common problems as well as niche-specific topics
- answer e-mails and return phone calls in a timely manner

Tell them "Why"

Decisions made about product functionality, product launches, or marketing promotions sometimes create questions in the minds of the sales team. After all, the market studies, customer interviews, and discussions with the sales team are supposed to provide clear direction. This is rarely the case. The disparate bits of information must be synthesized into a model to address the given market challenge. If you want your sales force to have faith in you and in your program, tell them how and why you developed the system in the way you did.

There may be some sensitive or confidential data that cannot be shared, but being as transparent as possible will give them confidence in the project and engender trust.

Be professional

It is unfortunate that this has to be included in this list. Treat your sales team at least as well as you do your customers. Speak well of them to others. Thank them for their assistance and for selling your products. Ask them how you can help. These simple acts, if sincere, will improve your product line performance and make the salesperson's life a little easier. If you cannot be sincere, do not try this as it will be worse than doing nothing.

Be responsive

This one is so simple and obvious that I almost left it off the list because it is part of being a professional. Oftentimes the salesperson will call you while at the customer's site, needing an answer to a question. It is not practical to answer every call when it comes in, but a timely response will help build trust between the customer and your company, and between the salesperson and you.

Return their phone calls within four hours and e-mails with twenty-four. If you do this, the other suggestions are just icing on the cake.

Doug Ringer has devoted his career to maximizing the value of product development projects and services. In roles in R&D, manufacturing, marketing, and product management, he has seen change from many perspectives and has a deep understanding of the critical importance of customer focus to an organization's success. He has worked across 20 states and in 3 continents, and has been privileged to assist GE, Ericsson, Honeywell, Meritor, Schneider Electric, and others. Contact Doug at doug@dougringer.com or at www.dougringer.com.

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