

Gaining Advantage Over Your Competitors

Excerpted from *Take Your Sales Performance Up a Notch*, by Dave Kahle.

As sales people, we love to complain about the competition. Unfortunately, complaining doesn't do us any good. A better approach is to create a system to learn about the competition. Knowledge of the competition -- not only their strengths and weaknesses but also their patterns and tendencies -- will provide you with a distinct advantage, and prevent you from getting blindsided or seriously outmaneuvered.

That happened to me. To this day, I still get a sick feeling in my stomach as I remember the day when I lost my largest account to my arch competitor. It was an account that made up 20% of my total volume. In my blissful ignorance, I was content to grow my business by calling on the end users and purchasing department, while my competition was successfully building a relationship with the administration. The result? My best account signed a prime vendor, sole-source agreement with my competitor, and within 60 days, I was almost totally out of that account. I was blindsided.

That's a lesson that sticks with me, and one from which you can learn. To become good at knowing what your competition is up to, implement this simple three-step process:

Step One. Collect bits and pieces of information

Begin by consciously collecting little bits and pieces of information at every opportunity. For example, you may have lost a bid or a particular piece of business to your competitors. Rather than just moping about it, use it as a learning opportunity. Try to find out from your customer why they awarded the business the way they did. If it was price alone, try to find out how much lower their price was than your price. If it's something else, find out what. That information won't help for that particular piece of business, but it may give you an insight into the pricing policies of your competition. Write the information down on a 3 x 5 card, a piece of scrap paper or a post-it.

Take your good customers to lunch, and casually see if you can steer the conversation in such a way as to learn something about your competition.

Keep your eyes open to the coming and going of competitive salesmen. Note when you see them, and in what account.

Be sensitive and aware of competitive literature, business cards and price quotes lying around. And don't forget to talk with the other sales people who work for your company to get their insights.

All these are ways to collect bits and pieces of information. By themselves, they won't help much. But, if you combine these bits and pieces, you may very well see trends, uncover strategies, and discover tactics your competition is using.

Step Two. Store the information.

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As you collect each bit of information, capture it by writing it down, and putting the note in a manila folder marked “competition.” Or, store it in an electronic file on your computer. You may even have a separate folder for each major competitor.

Regardless, what you’re doing is assembling a quantity of information. Diligently collect those bits and pieces of information, and file them away.

Step Three. Use the information.

After you have collected a quantity of these, you’ll be able to open that file on a regular basis, consider all the pieces of information, and discover a great deal about your competitors.

The trick is to consistently collect and store information. Eventually you’ll assemble an accurate picture. It’s like the popular game show “Wheel of Fortune.” When Vanna White turns over one letter, it doesn’t give you much of a picture of the answer. But after she’s turned over several of these small individual pieces, the whole becomes clear and the answer to the riddle is simple to understand. That’s the way collecting information about your competition works.

The back of an old business card on which you noted that you saw a competitive sales person showing a new line of widgets, by itself, doesn’t mean much. But if you filed that along with all the bits and pieces of information you’ve collected, and then pulled it all out and analyzed it, you might see an entirely different situation. Suppose you reviewed that business card note, and combined it with the note you made to yourself that you saw some sales literature on the competitive widget line on the desk of one of your purchasing agents, and then saw that you lost a major bid to the competition because he quoted a new line at lower than traditional prices. All at once you’ve uncovered a potential threat to your business. Clearly, your competitor is pushing a new, lower priced widget line. You didn’t learn that from any one piece of information, but rather from the combination of all those pieces, considered as a whole.

The key to uncovering that information, to discovering what your competition is up to, is to consistently collect pieces of information, store them, and then analyze them as a whole from time to time.

In the Information Age economy, much of your ability to make good decisions depends on you being able to collect good information. If you are going to take your performance Up-a-Notch, you must see yourself as a dealer in information as well as a seller of stuff. An important initial step is to get good at collecting good information.

About the Author

Dave Kahle (www.davekahle.com/aboutdave.html) has trained tens of thousands of B2B salespeople and sales managers (<http://www.davekahle.com/manageroverview.html>) to be more effective in the 21st Century economy. He’s authored seven books, and presented in 47 states and seven countries. Visit his [website](http://www.davekahle.com) (<http://www.davekahle.com>) or sign up for his weekly [newsletter](http://www.davekahle.com/maillinglist.html) (<http://www.davekahle.com/maillinglist.html>).

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