



Mastering Technical Sales

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So You Really Want To Be A Salesrep?

Be Ready To Go All-In

This is a continuation of the SE Career series and represents the advice I have given other SE's in my capacity as being a VP of Pre-Sales, a CIO and as a real, honest-to-goodness salesperson.

Admit it. There are times when you watch a sales person set up a meeting, shake hands and introduce the agenda, talk about the company for a few minutes and then retire to the back of the room to catch up on BlackBerry email. And you think "I can do that!"

How hard can it be? The answer is that it's much harder than you can ever imagine. But if you want to cross over to the Dark Side from Pre-Sales and assume a quota here are some ideas for you.

First Understand Your Motivation: Hang onto your pre-sales training a while longer and ask yourself exactly why you want to pursue a career in sales. Is this something you have been thinking about for a while because you love the thrill of the win? Or is it an act of frustration because of your current position or because of the salespeople you work with? Perhaps you are driven by the monetary rewards and the prospect of hitting it big and doubling or tripling your salary? Whatever the motivation, it is important that you clearly understand it. Are you running away from being an SE or running towards a sales career opportunity?

Prepare For The Change: You need to make a plan; months or possibly a couple of years ahead of the event. Objectively list all the sales-related skills you feel that you have and that you will need. Then ask several of your colleagues, your manager (who should already know of your plans) and some friends to give you feedback on those skills. Compare the list and note the differences.

Start to question the salespeople you work with about the "sales" portion of the deals. This would include prospecting, setting up contracts, legal and finance, negotiations and a host of other activities you have probably never even thought about. I learnt more about

the sales process by volunteering to help the sales person create and complete the paperwork on small transactions. It was truly an eye-opening experience. You'll actually find that you have a sell a deal twice - once to the customer and then a second time internally to the "sales prevention" department.

Find A Mentor: Someone is going to have to help you make the transition. Ideally you need an experienced but patient salesperson to be your mentor. You need to set this up well ahead of time and I'd recommend that you find a sales manager as well as several other reps to add to the mentor mix. Much as you may desire a life in sales, a sales manager somewhere is going to have to take a chance on you. Selling them is your first sales hurdle. Sales is definitely a profession where you need to learn from the mistakes of others, because you may only have two or three quarters and therefore cannot afford to make them yourself.

Set Your Expectations. As an SE you were responsible for the technical part of the sale, as a salesperson you are responsible for the entire sale. It is your head on the chopping block when it comes to forecasting and closing a deal. Before you even get close to closing a deal, you'll need to adjust to the fact that people will treat you differently. As an SE your product knowledge is valued and trusted, as a salesperson your product knowledge will not always be trusted. It is possible for you to know too much. You'll also need to prepare for a constant stream of "no's" and various forms of rejection. Just remember they are rejecting your company or your product, but not you.

Now throw in the fact that you'll have to build account and territory plans, start up a pipeline and then start to forecast your deals on a weekly basis. Even experienced salespeople feel anxious when having to remove a deal from the quarterly commit. Doing it as a rookie rep is nerve-wracking. Trust me on this.

How To Make It All Work: Being on quota is a constant measure of performance - there is no equivalent when you are an SE. **The 2-year failure rate of SE's moving directly into a direct quota carrying sales position is 70-75%.** That stunningly high rate can be reduced in several ways. Firstly look for an established territory to take over instead of a hunter-killer patch. It is easier to build relationships and actually sell stuff to existing customers. Secondly, seek out an overlay-type position instead of moving directly into the front line. Overlay means that you are responsible for a particular product or solution line within the portfolio and act as the sales specialist on behalf of the sales person.

You will also need the unquestioned support of your friends, family and spouse/significant other. If they are not behind you to support you when the stress mounts and the doubts start to creep in, you'll never make it.

And Don't Forget Your Friends: You got to where you are now by being a good SE. So don't forget all the SE's you worked with in the past. Give them room to work and don't start stepping in front of them to answer technical questions. Some companies pair rookie salespeople up with new SE's - in which case your technical knowledge may be useful as a last resort. Other companies pair you up with experienced SE's - in which case just step back and marvel at their skills.

You should be willing to be continually asking questions of your entire team to solicit feedback about what you can do better. Remember you literally have a burning bridge under you. If you don't sell much in your first few quarters, you may not see the next few quarters as a salesperson.

Remember that you are going to move from near the top of class as an SE to almost the bottom rung of the sales ladder. Just as you carefully plan a complex demo or a Proof Of Concept, you will need to plan out your transition into sales. Are you ready to go all-in with your career when faced with the prospects of what is at best a 50-50 success proposition? Once you cross over into sales it is very difficult to move back into pre-sales. Your former management team may not want you back once you have lost your technical edge and may even feel you have been disloyal in chasing the money once they invested time and money into your technical capabilities.

So sell everyone on the move ahead of time so they feel a part of your move. The more people vested in your success the better. Unlike Vegas, you can change the odds.

*"If a man smiles all the time, he is probably selling something that doesn't work."
George Carlin*

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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