

Virtual Sales Teams: The New Way to Leverage Scarce Resources

With corporate collaboration on the rise, more sales teams are comprised of members from different companies and different geographies. Here is how widely dispersed sales organizations can build—and profit from—a virtual team.

By Deborah Asbrand

With its potential to trim corporate costs while boosting revenues, it is no surprise that online collaboration has won over many companies to its strategic point of view. Savvy companies are getting leaner and more efficient by contracting out business functions to remote partners, in addition to making their own in-house staff more productive by using online collaboration.

For sales reps, however, the emphasis on partnership strategies is presenting a new wrinkle. Already juggling the challenges of different time zones and cultures within their own companies, virtual sales teams are now learning to shape cohesive virtual workgroups with employees on other companies' payrolls. To compensate for budget cutbacks, many sales reps today are skipping the business travel and expensive off-site gatherings that have traditionally helped them get acquainted. Instead, they are relying on technology that lets them share, get to know each other, and boost the top line.

A Key Component of the Sales Culture

It is the nature of salespeople to reach out, whether to clients, prospects, or co-workers. Top sellers know how to network their way through product development, technology, or licensing issues and to adjust their pitch to whatever the selling opportunity demands. But they cannot do so in a vacuum—they need help.

“Virtual teams are a key component of a sales culture,” says Todd Cohen, founder of Sales Leader LLC, a Philadelphia-based consulting organization. “If you cannot build one, you will never drive your revenue forward.”

With partnerships on the rise, however, so too is the complexity of virtual sales teams. It is not unusual today for salespeople to communicate online with virtual team members who have diverse product, marketing, and finance backgrounds. Many of these colleagues may work at other companies—and that means different styles of communication and different ways of working. Add in the elements of differing languages, cultures, and time zones, and a potent mix of challenges soon arises.

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– TODD COHEN
FOUNDER
SALES LEADER LLC

Figure 1

Making Virtual Sales Teams Work

Establishing ground rules is key to successful virtual teams. Without them, duplication of work and misunderstandings can occur. Here are a few expectations team leaders should consider setting.

- **Establish availability and acknowledgement procedures.** When will team members be available and accessible? How can they be reached? This point is especially important when members hail from different time zones.
- **Define what communication methods will be used.** Members need to specify how e-mail, instant messaging, telephone, intranets, portals, conference calls, and Web conferencing will be used.
- **Decide who gets what communication.** For large teams—those with over 20 members—what team subsets can be created?
- **Appoint a project manager.** Who reviews what portions of the work?

Source: Nemiro, Jill, Michael M. Beyerlein, Lori Bradley, and Susan Beyerlein, Editors. *The Handbook of High Performance Virtual Teams*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons. 2008.

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“The more complex the collaboration, the more effort it requires to make it work,” says Jill Nemiro, one of the editors of *The Handbook of High Performance Virtual Teams*. “For those types of teams, the challenges are even harder. There is more room for misunderstanding and conflict.”

The upside is that creativity can thrive among such teams. “The more diverse the teams,” adds Nemiro, “the more diverse the ideas.”

New research on virtual teams shows that a partially remote team may be even more productive than one housed in a single building. This research found that including one member who works remotely from the rest encourages better communication. The teams studied embraced off-site individuals, effectively reaching out to them to make team communication more thorough and explicit, according to the research conducted by Michael Boyer O’Leary, assistant professor in the department of organization studies at Boston College, and Mark Mortensen, professor at MIT’s Sloan School of Management.

Technology Can Close the Gap

One reason virtual sales teams are productive may be because they enforce a degree of organization sometimes lacking in other group settings. The concept of central workspaces, for example, can shrink the distance among far-flung teams that must work together on shared documents under tight deadlines. Contact and pricing lists and proposals are equally easily shared. Hotlinks to other portals make for quick clicks to access information. Meanwhile, calendars, meeting notes, reports, and photos can be readily posted by anyone.

Rich interaction through the web conference, video, and voice conveys a sense of closeness among people who are located far apart and may never have met—and that is the point, says Jaclyn Kostner. Kostner’s training and consulting firm, Bridge the Distance, teaches companies how to use Web conferencing effectively.

“No matter what group we are working with, we have to feel comfortable enough to share openly,” Kostner says. “The challenge is to create openness with people in distant business locations that we may have never met.”

Getting to Know You, Slowly

Online conferencing tools can help break the ice. The ability to cast votes and post comments anonymously can ease team members’ reticence about contributing to virtual meetings that still lack some of the physical cues people respond to in a face-to-face meeting.

“In a virtual environment, we can share our thoughts anonymously, and that encourages more participation,” Kostner says. She recalls

“The more diverse the teams, the more diverse the ideas.”

– JILL NEMIRO
EDITOR, THE HANDBOOK OF
HIGH-PERFORMANCE VIRTUAL TEAMS

Figure 2

Perfecting the Online Sales Pitch

The following tips from Jaclyn Kostner, virtual team expert and founder of Bridge the Distance, can help you succeed with your virtual presentations.

1. **Remember that presenting virtually is different.** You cannot read the non-verbal cues, and frequently you are the only person speaking. How many of us lose the sale because we spoke too fast?
2. **Focus on the customer, not the information.** Since you cannot see customers and read their body language, asking questions and requesting feedback are even more important than in an in-person meetings. Adapt your presentation accordingly.
3. **Create engaging Webinars.** To attract viewers and leads, Webinars have to be more than sales presentations. They need to educate participants about issues, trends, or best practices.
4. **Add pizzazz.** Include builds and annotations on your slides. Stay away from clip art. Use fresh, new material to make your points.
5. **Create a system for follow up.** How will you contact prospects after the session?

Source: Bridge the Distance

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recently posing a question to a virtual team session she facilitated. No one responded. When she reminded participants that comments would be anonymous, “all of a sudden, the answers came in.”

Taking time to master the advantages of Web conferencing has important payoffs, especially when the technology is used with customers (see chart, “Perfecting the Online Sales Pitch”).

“It is the live interaction of one human being with another that makes this work,” says Kostner, “as well as learning how to accelerate communications through a poll or text onscreen or talking back and forth. It is so richly interactive that it is going to make a difference.”

Medway Plastics Corp. has used Web conferencing to reshape its business and selling style. An injection-molding plastics company, Medway’s business is logistics-intensive. The Long Beach, Calif., company frequently ships mold prototypes to Chinese manufacturers. Before implementing Web conferencing, engineers traveled regularly to the company’s affiliates, manufacturers, or customer sites. Snafus were costly. Development and manufacturing delays often occurred while parts were in transit. Employee travel was expensive, and it lowered productivity.

Today, Web conferencing lets Medway bring together text, video, and other images “in a way that helps audiences understand what we are talking about,” says Medway IT Consultant Jay Magness.

Detailed manufacturing reviews for which 10 Medway employees might have traveled now can be completed quickly online, where the models and parts are scrutinized in a live video streaming session. As a result of these and other improvements, Magness estimates that Medway has accelerated time to market by 60 percent and now closes sales up to 30 percent faster.

Virtual sales teams are finding many creative ways to make the most of their opportunities, often under challenging conditions where resources are scarce. In so doing, many are succeeding at streamlining costs and exploiting the new advantages offered by online collaboration tools. Most importantly of all, they are setting teams down the path toward more sales—and that is a win/win for salespeople and management alike. ■

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One company closes sales up to 30 percent faster than to web conferencing technologies.

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This research project was funded by a grant from Microsoft.

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