



AdvantageThinking™

The Newsletter of Contrarian Thinking From
ExecutionAdvantage Partners, LLC

The Sales Force Needs Test Pilots Not More Pilots

The relationship between the world of sales and the world of pilots may not be obvious but it is real. Companies would do well to think about the world of pilots as they assess the performance of their sales team.

When a new product is developed (a new plane, a modification of an existing plane or new devices to assist in flight) the first step is assessing the product's performance is computer simulation followed by simulated environmental testing (wind tunnels). Success at this stage moves to real live product testing at the hands of test pilots. Continued success leads to pilot training via simulators and live check out flights. A lynch pin in this process is the assessment by the test pilot

A test pilot differs from a regular pilot in his/her special talent to identify early signs of problems that if left unchecked could, at a minimum, reduce the effectiveness of the new plane or device; and at a maximum cause a major disaster. Test pilots are tuned to the technical side of the product and as the same time use an understanding of the intended end use as a filter for making their assessment and recommendations. Taking a product from a simulated test environment directly to the real world is highly risky business.

While the drama of planes falling, out of control, from ten miles above the earth would never be associated with the sales process, the parallels between the world of pilots and salesmen are uncanny.

New products or product enhancements are developed along with the messaging designed to engage the marketplace and attract buyers. The messaging is the sonic boom of the business world. It has to attract attention and hold interest. Messaging is developed by the marketing team and put through simulated marketplace testing (focus groups/quantitative surveys). If enough people raise their hands in focus groups or check the "definitely will by box" on the quantitative survey the messaging is prepared (ads, collateral material, sales aids etc) for launch.

At this point there is the hand-off to the sales team via the Sales Kick-Off. Marketing presents the messaging, the competitive points of difference, the counter arguments to customer push-back. There are breakout sessions to help the sales team understand the value proposition spin for each market/channel/target audience. Then the ignition button is pushed and the launch begins.

While it sounds through, the test pilot phase of the sales process never occurs. Just take a look at this comparison table.

	Aviation	Business
New Product/New Message	Engineers	Marketing
Testing	Wind tunnel	Focus groups
Environmental Testing	Test Pilots	NA
Broad Training	Simulator	Sales Kick-Off

The need is apparent. The sales teams need test pilots. Those salesman who understand marketing, the nature of strategy and message development who can fly the positioning and its proof points into the real world of the sales environment and get a sense of the only real research results that count—how many people opened their checkbook based on the messaging they were serving up? If the response is positive the messaging gets rolled out for sales training. If not, the feedback from these messaging test pilots provides invaluable direction for adjusting the messaging to overcome real world obstacles.

The traditional sales orientation will not serve these marketing test pilots well. It is more about learning than about sales. Unlike other testing approaches the potential for a sale is real. The unique characteristics of people who can best do this job are subsumed by the phrase *Diagnostic-Sales Professionals*. Sales people with a real understanding of the marketing process and a working knowledge of how to communicate the early sales experience so it can better inform the marketing communication process. The companies who are first to embrace the concept of Diagnostic-Sales will significantly increase their ability to execute gaining disproportionate competitive advantage.