

# Selling Today and Customer Expectations

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Are there any “true” sales” jobs remaining in our industry? It has been a long-time since the primary sales mission was to go out and meet with potential customers, sell products, and deliver profit dollars back to the organization. While the ultimate sales goal has been and continues to be delivering profit dollars to the company, the job of selling today is much more complex. It goes far beyond promoting the features and benefits of a product.

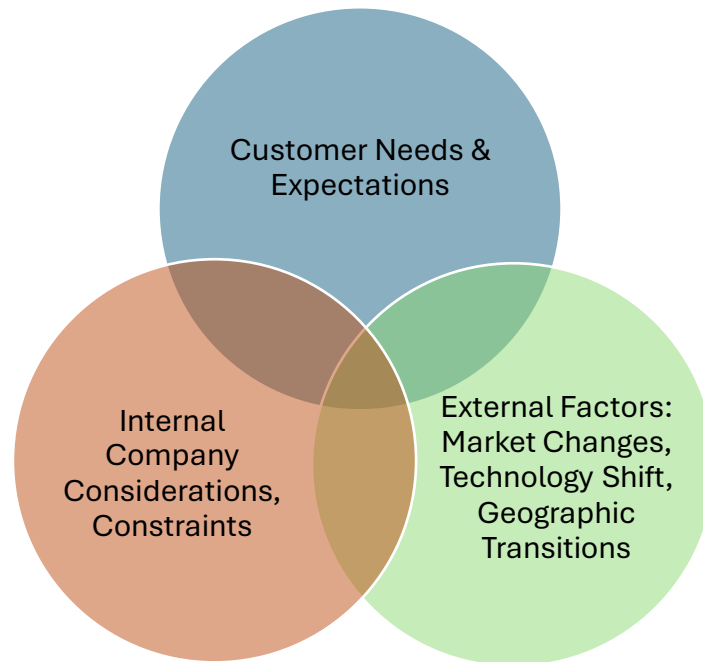
Successful selling involves listening to customers (and to potential new accounts) and then responding to their needs in a timely manner. Taking an active part in bringing added value to your customers helps set your company apart from other competitors (**Table 1**).

**Table 1: Additional Values Important in the Sales Process**

- **Multi-tasking-** Assistance with technical support and customer service requests.
- **Market adaptability-** Helping customers adapt to changing industry conditions, emerging market applications, and shifts in technology.
- **Assistance in coordination of outside sales and support services-** providing a communications bridge to outside sales and support services. This includes distribution, independent representatives or active partnerships/ alliances that are linked to the company’s selling strategy.

There are three inter-related areas that influence the way in which companies structure their sales strategies. These include:

**Figure 1: Elements of Influence on Sales Strategy Development**



### ***Customer Needs & Expectations***

Customers today expect significantly more from their sales representatives than product representation. Of all the things that result in a successful sale, helping to address the needs and expectations of customers is #1.

Customers place a high value on suppliers that can provide easy, direct access to “actual people” that can answer their questions or help address problems. Direct involvement from their suppliers in assisting customers with maintenance programs or improving manufacturing efficiencies builds strength in the business relationship. Recorded messages or call-backs, when you need help, are unwelcome and remembered.

Chemical management takes the selling process and the importance of its link to customer service and technical support to a different level. It represents an agreement between a supplier and the customer to provide services and support under contract.

In addition, the supply contract often involves a commitment by the supplier to place their own personnel at the customer plant. In return, the supplier obtains a commitment for long-term product sales.

### **Internal company considerations, constraints**

The sales process and selling strategy for any company is significantly influenced by **internal** company constraints and management philosophy.

One of the most important items influencing the sales effort is compensation. The behavior of the sales force is guided by the personal & job-related goals and measurable deliverables individually set by the company. The results and accomplishments are then linked to salary and incentives.

If the compensation plan targets year-over-year revenue growth, then the focus is on selling to the larger target accounts. It also focuses the sales effort on protecting the company's sales position at existing key customers.

When the compensation plan focuses on certain product lines or markets which are strategically important to the future growth and profitability of the company, it significantly alters sales force behavior. The shift in strategy is intended to align the sales effort with long-term strategic business goals.

The challenges of maintaining and supporting a direct sales force as a sole of revenue, however, are many. The value and importance of employing distribution as a sales and customer support business partner has become an essential element in the selling strategy of most companies.

Distributors are an extension or a complement to the company's direct sales force. In certain circumstances they are relied upon to be the primary (or sole) sales entity for the company.

The use of distribution cost-effectively increases sales coverage across a wider range of geographies. It helps companies reach many smaller-size customers and target accounts. They also complement the company's direct sales effort, by providing customer service and technical support.

Distributors that are a "good business fit" for the company will integrate and support the company's sales and revenue growth objectives. The function as a true extension of the company they represent.

The biggest challenge for a supplier is to identify and establish a business relationship with the "right distribution partner." **Table 2** provides a list of issues important to identifying good distribution partners.

**Table 2: Challenges in Establishing a Distribution Sales Support Network**

●	Will your company's products be treated as a principle source of supply by their sales group or as a line-card addition? Will your company's products given priority in their sales effort?
●	How capable is the distributor in understanding and supporting your products? Do they have technical sales and support services capabilities?
●	Does the distributor's compensation plan for their sales personnel fit with your company's sales/revenue and business objectives?
●	Do they use accounting and supply chain software systems compatible with your own?
●	Do they provide warehousing capabilities that fits with the markets and geographies important to your business?

**External Market Factors: Market Changes, Technology Shift, Geographic Transitions**

A successful sales plan today requires the company to be flexible with the ability to adapt to changing market conditions. The structure of a company's sales effort is guided by the markets which represent it's major sources of revenue.

As the market reach of the business extends nationally or internationally so does the difficulty of establishing a suitable sale plan. Regional differences in language, product preferences, and geographic concentrations of key accounts are among these challenges.

Industry transitions involving next-generation technology (e.g., electric vehicles) require the company to adapt their sales strategy to take advantage of the opportunity.

Industry consolidations through acquisition or mergers often create a disruptive force in the market. It alters the competitive landscape and can require changes to the role of the existing sales force and support services.

As the complexity of the business and the variety of markets it serves increases, the importance of having a strong distribution network becomes an essential complement to direct sales representation.