

It's urgent, but is it really important?

Mark Savinson looks at how sales managers can start to make better use of their time and a practical approach to making sure that they build a solid future business for their teams.

Understanding those things that will really help drive sales success

In today's economy, focused, service-driven solutions to customers' problems are the key to sales success. As market conditions get tougher, driving the business forward (or even maintaining current levels) has brought the focus onto the effectiveness and efficiency of the sales organisation.

Transforming the sales orientation from taking orders to creating opportunities is difficult. In the new environment, the role of the Sales Manager is crucial. As the demands on Sales Managers grow, their development role as coach and mentor is frequently the area that gets neglected. In many organisations, we are seeing that these areas, critical to the success of the team, are being ignored as it becomes very hard, in the heat of the battle, to distinguish between *what is important and what is urgent but not important!* Understanding the difference is the first step towards prioritising how we spend our time.

Sales Directors and Managers are under constant pressure to achieve targets, using tools such as KPIs, CRM systems, qualification processes, funnels, pipelines, and forecasts in a general atmosphere of frenetic activity. What they should be doing is creating and managing an environment that develops and empowers the sales team to meet their objectives. They are in grave danger of prioritising what is effectively administrative work

over the key role of selling. When reacting to urgent demands becomes 'business as usual', there is little time for planning and strategic thinking; activities with ultimately greater impact in the medium and longer term. This is not easy and it doesn't help that many of the demands for short term urgent activity come down the organisation from above – and it's hard to say 'no'. The behaviour of always prioritising 'urgent' has led to a culture of crisis management which works against the transition to a planned, opportunity creation, and sales culture.

What's a Sales Manager to do?

A common complaint from sales managers is that they are too busy to carry out formal 1-2-1s, observe sales calls, carry out business reviews and coach their teams as the "day-to-day" aspects of their roles take too much time. Behind this is usually confusion as to what the role of a sales manager is, is it super salesman, admin support or "Directing Sales resources to deliver agreed sales revenue target (achieving success through others)".

The fundamental issue behind "not having enough time" is a lack of planning and prioritisation. Understanding the concepts of Urgent and Important, linking these to the role of

sales management will help to ensure Sales Managers are more effective in their role.

In our work in sales teams, we often find that Sales Managers have no clear job description beyond the achievement of targets. There is no standard formula for identifying those activities that ought to be prioritised; this is looked at on an individual basis. We start the process by asking managers to clearly define their roles and to explain the relative importance of the various aspects of their job.

"The behaviour of always prioritising "urgent" has led to a culture of crisis management as opposed to planned and well thought out strategies and activities."

How to distinguish the important from the merely urgent

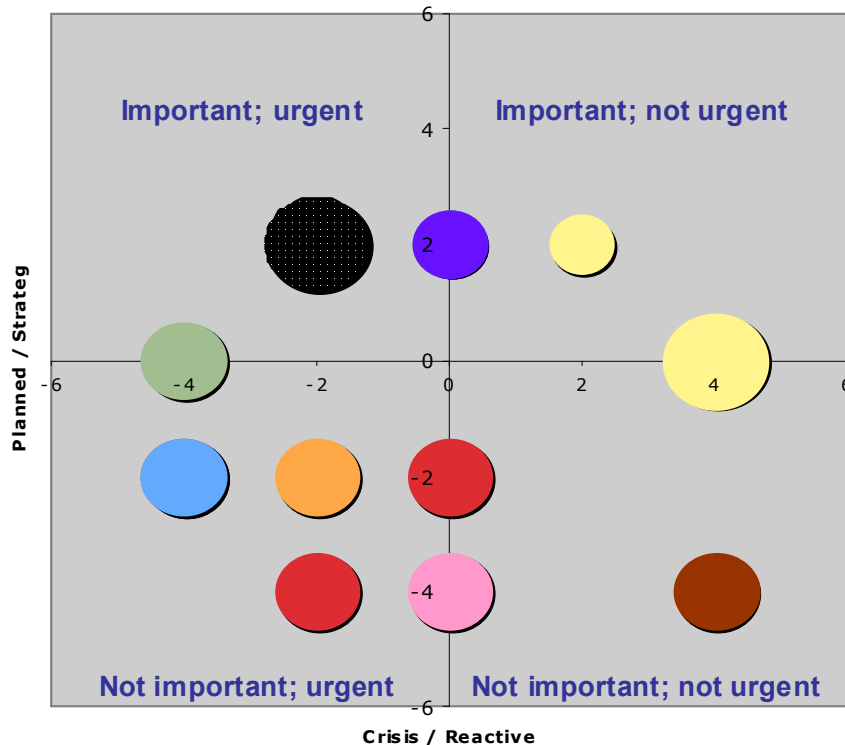
Important: Those activities which have a long term impact on the success of achieving sales targets and business plans - usually associated with tasks which are seen as strategically important or as part of planning and management.

Urgent: Activities driven by some form of external pressure, associated with short timescales, often linked to someone else's agenda. Key focus is dealing with the issue in the short term, sometimes at the expense of building a plan to ensure the issue does not arise again.

'Importance' and 'Urgency' can be mapped via a Time Management Matrix. Intuitively, activities that are both important and urgent must come first. But is this always the right approach? Stephen Covey recommends we focus primarily on the top right hand quadrant – tasks that are Important but not Urgent.

When it comes to sales management Covey is 100% correct. The behaviour of always prioritising "urgent" has led to a culture of "crisis management" as opposed to planned and well thought out strategies and activities. Organisations strive for solution selling, but then drive their sales people to be push product because of short term targets, in some cases weekly. This will not deliver long term success for organisations wanting customer loyalty through value add solution sales.

In terms of behaviour, it also drives salespeople to 'push' products and services at the expense of understanding and resolving customers' business issues.



- Management reporting
- Activity reports
- Individual forecast reviews
- Field accompaniment
- Coaching
- Dealing with delivery issues
- Month end forecast discrepancies
- Weekly forecast
- Individual account reviews
- Monthly 1-2-1
- Team meeting
- Dealing with surprise pricing issues
- Dealing with client satisfaction issues

Planned & Strategic vs Crisis & Reactive

Perhaps we need a different take on Urgent & Important; to identify what these mean in terms that make it useful for the Sales Manager's situation.

A practical translation, I suggest, is:-

Important → Planned/ Strategic activities that the Sales Manager (and the sales team) need to undertake to ensure that they achieve their objectives (on the basis that all objectives are time based and measurable). These activities are based on "best practice" and are directly linked to the behaviours the organisation wants to see in its sales team. All Planned/Strategic activities should be seen as good activities.

Urgent → Crisis/Reactive activities that the Sales Manager (and the sales team) need to undertake in reaction to an unforeseen event or request. Not all crises or reactive tasks are necessarily bad, but the more the team deals in crisis management the less effective they become.

Mark Savinson is founder and MD of **Accredit**. With over 23 years experience of the ICT industry, covering sales, marketing and consultancy, Accredit brings unique insight into the development of effective sales people. **Accredit** are passionate about creating customer-centric sales teams who focus on customer benefits as opposed to product features.

What behaviours should Sales managers display?

It is clear is that investment in time to carry out the planned/strategic activities will reduce the number of crisis/reactive activities.

- Accurate forecasting reduces the surprises on delivery and pricing.
- Account reviews allow you to pre-empt customer satisfaction issues.
- Attendance at sales calls by Sales Managers helps ensure team members are effectively managing their opportunities and highlights where coaching is required.
- Developmental 1-2-1s ensure that the sales person displays the desired behaviours reducing the need for continuous management intervention.

Start to make changes now

We are not suggesting that all tactical and reactive activities must stop but we are saying that we can all start now to understand the relative priorities of what we are doing and how we spend our time. This means, on a very practical day-to-day basis, we must understand that cancelling and rescheduling a team meeting or 1-2-1 is a very serious decision; not to be taken lightly. We must also understand that taking the path of least resistance as a manager is rarely the right answer.

Whilst we have discussed priorities in the context of the Sales Manager, it is important to consider that this will also apply to the individual salesperson or account manager. Any activities that involve fire-fighting or solving crisis problems detract from the important work of developing a strategic account relationship. Managers must take account of this when they are tempted to 'dump' " urgent" tasks onto their team members.

Based on our client evaluations, we have developed a scoring tool that can help you and your team understand the relative priorities of typical sales activities. You can see this <http://www.sales-accredit.co.uk/resources.html> and use it as a free download, together with some other tools that you might find useful.

First download and save the instructions and then download and save the spreadsheet

[Urgent vs important](#) (Excel spreadsheet)

[Quick Start Guide](#)