

By Amy Bingham



The **staffing industry** has spent the last couple of years hunkered down in **survival mode**, but the earth has stopped shaking, and like the people of Haiti and Chile, we have an opportunity to **rebuild stronger**. Though the recession left destruction in its wake, it's clear the industry has **turned a corner** and **better times lie ahead**.

According to Staffing Industry Analysts' 2010 Staffing Firm Survey, 69% of firms will **hire to fill an internal sales position** during the next twelve months, reflecting **growth across all business sectors**.

So it's time to **climb out** from under the rubble of the recession and turn our attention to **growth** - from planning through execution - to **take full advantage** of the upturn. Sales effectiveness is the foundation for success in **emerging from "the Great Recession."**

Now what?

Capitalize on **Post-Recession Growth**
by Shoring Up Sales Effectiveness

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Return to **Strategic Growth Planning**

The sales effectiveness of an organization is dependent first and foremost on ensuring those who interface with prospects, and clients can articulate the company's value proposition in a way that enables the buyer to visualize a healthy return on their investment in your services.

During the recession, "strategic planning" was limited to figuring out how much more could be carved out of the budget each month after the books closed, just to keep treading water. If this describes your firm, it's time to invest energy in redefining your vision, mission and destination this year, in three years, and in five years.

As you approach the strategic planning process, here are three recommendations to consider:

- Employ the "KISS" method relative to the type of plan you will develop. That's **Keep It Strategically Simple!** There are a plethora of fancy templates and processes available for strategic planning. Keep in mind that what's most important is that the final plan: (1) addresses the areas of focus for growing the business, and (2) is realistic enough to execute by all essential stakeholders. The more complex and elaborate the plan, the less likely it is to be implemented well.
- Devote time and resources to researching staffing trends before you decide which markets and service offerings you want to grow. It's much harder to sell services where demand for them is low. Minimize the risk of costly mistakes like investing in markets in which the economic trends aren't conducive to growth in your sector. For example, if the banking industry has collapsed and is not expected to rebound any time soon in a market your firm has a Clerical & Administrative office in, is it realistic to expect that opening a Finance & Accounting division in that market would be successful in the near term?
- Involve both internal and external subject matter experts in the strategic planning initiative. Internal resources are key members of your leadership team – those who will own executing the plan. If they help build it, they'll own it. External resources are subject matter experts who help you understand current best practices and bring an objective view to the process. For example, a consultant who specializes in the staffing industry and has helped others through the process successfully can be a valued partner throughout this exercise and into implementation.

Once you can check off this step as complete, you're ready to evaluate the enablers of sales: marketing, technology, and reward and recognition, which when combined with disciplined sales management, will drive results.

While it's understandable to be hesitant to invest in marketing, technology, and reward and recognition until robust growth returns, it will be clear to you where such investments are critical to meeting the objectives of your strategic plan once the effectiveness of these functions has been evaluated.

First, is sales enabled by marketing with the tools to build the brand, acquire leads and close new business? A holistic marketing plan is critical today more than ever because it's no longer just about having a business card, brochure, Website and standard email signature. Social networking is quickly evolving from an optional to an essential component of marketing strategy. Your firm should have a presence on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, and be represented in the blogosphere as a thought leader in your space. If you don't have an internal marketing department and don't want to build one, consider outsourcing the work to a staffing industry marketing firm equipped to represent your brand. Use caution in delegating the management of your Twitter blog to a staff member whose writing competencies have not been evaluated. Since what is written on the Web lives on forever, one blog containing inappropriate slang and typos could seriously damage your firm's reputation. It's well worth the investment to engage outside experts to develop and manage this function, and now is the time to make such an investment.

Next, is reliable technology in place to track sales efforts and provide sales leaders with visibility into the company's pipeline? Your front-office system may have these capabilities, but if not, try to research salesforce automation and customer relationship management, and then consider making a capital investment in this area. Technology is a key enabler of sales effectiveness. You can most effectively manage when you have clear visibility.

Finally, is a comprehensive reward and recognition plan in place? Compensation plans that drive the right behavior are a first step, and they should be supplemented by less formal sales programs providing employees with the opportunity to earn gift cards, gym memberships, digital cameras or simply sales-leader-of-the-month awards. Combined, these will help sustain the motivation for your team to exceed expectations.

Execute with Discipline

A critical component of the strategic planning exercise – and one often overlooked – is developing a detailed implementation plan. This very tactical project plan lays out the actions required to move the organization from current to future state. Simply put, who will be responsible for completing what, and by when?

Treat the execution like a project that encompasses the work required of key stakeholders in sales, operations, marketing, human resources, IT, etc.

Follow this process for implementation success:

- Assign an executive sponsor to lead the initiative. This should be the individual with the greatest attachment to the outcomes, typically a CEO or COO.
- Assign a project manager to keep everyone on task. Just as you should avoid delegating writing the company blog to an insider, you should also avoid relegating this task to someone on your team with a “day job.” Effectively managing the execution of your strategic plan will be a full-time job for at least the first few months. Consider outsourcing this to an industry consultant with expertise in strategic plan execution.
- Develop a project plan, complete with objectives, tasks, resources and deadline. The project manager should draft the plan for stakeholders to approve.
- Have the project manager coordinate routine status calls to ensure objectives and to obtain regular updates from stakeholders, identify and resolve constraints, and, ultimately, ensure objectives are met within desired timelines.

Finally, apply the same approach to pipeline management – the ultimate driver of accountability to sales effectiveness. With technology providing visibility into the pipeline of each producer, conduct weekly pipeline review calls to track progress on deals expected to close within the quarter. Identify and resolve constraints to support the sales leader in closing each deal.

The emergence from a downturn brings unique opportunity for staffing companies to enhance their sales effectiveness. Returning to strategic planning, diagnosing the current state of sales support, making the necessary investments and executing with discipline will ensure your firm is positioned for success to capitalize on the opportunities. **si**

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