



## Planting seeds ... and cultivating customers

*You can't just hope and pray for stronger sales. You have to manage the process.*

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A friend said to me over dinner one night, "There's nothing wrong with my business that stronger sales wouldn't cure."

Easier said than done, right? How many business managers have spent sleepless nights wondering how to get more customers?

The problem is compounded by the fact that so many organizations treat business development differently than they do other processes.

Consider my friend, for example. She beamed with pride when I asked her to describe the operational steps her company followed to fill a customer order. They'd carefully worked the kinks out of the process and stayed on track by closely monitoring performance trends related to cycle time, profitability and quality. They were fast, flawless and profitable.

But her face fell blank when I asked how her firm cultivated the orders it received.

"That's different," she said. "You can't put a process around business development the way you can with operations."

### **Cultivating a new crop of customers**

It's true that generating sales doesn't follow the same predictable path as order processing, for example. But that doesn't mean that it should be left to chance.

Successful companies learn to manage their business development efforts with the same preciseness and structure as they maintain other aspects of their operations.

I've often heard salespeople described as "hunters" since they are the ones actively stalking the "customer." But I prefer to think of business development as farming, because new customers are the result of seeds that have been planted (through advertising, promotion or marketing), cultivated (via the sales process) and finally, harvested when the buying decision is made.

### **Three Questions For Growing Your Business**

1. What markets are best?
2. What customers are ideal?
3. What's the best way to reach those customers?



### **Waiting for just anyone to show up**

Taking that analogy further, can you imagine a farmer sitting in his farmhouse waiting to see what kinds of crops might grow in his fields?

Not likely. Our farmer friend knows exactly which crops he wants to grow (based on soil type, market

needs and profitability) and he works to maximize his yield to ensure the planting season is successful.

The same is true for successful businesspeople. They don't just wait for any old customer to show up. Managing your business development efforts properly enables you to have the proper resources in place to plant and cultivate the right "seeds" – ensuring that you harvest the right kind of customers!

### As always, begin with the end in mind

The first step – as I stress often with clients – is to begin with the end in mind. In other words, in order to successfully plan and implement a business development process that will bring you the customers you need, you first must visualize what you want to accomplish and let the process emerge from there.

Here are a few questions to get you started ... note that these work whether you are selling B-to-C or B-to-B:

- What are the best markets for your products/services? What characteristics make those markets so attractive?
- If you had a choice, who would your customers be? What characteristics make them desirable?
- What are the best ways to make those people aware that your company exists to meet a specific need they have or are likely to have in the future?
- What are the best ways to stay in touch with those people so that they think of your company when they recognize the need?

Those may seem like simple questions. But there is a wealth of detail "under the soil" there that can help guide your efforts.

For example, when considering items such as best markets and choice customers, ask yourself this: Are you currently attracting the kinds of customers you want? And are they buying what you want them to buy? If so, how did they learn about your company and why do they buy from you?

Just as important, does everyone on your team share the same vision regarding the customers you want to attract? Like a farmer choosing crops, you must sharply define what your target customers look like in terms of size, industry, buying pattern, etc., as well as what products or services you want them to buy.

### Follow up, follow through and fine tune

The next step is planning your company's relationships with preferred customers. How will you communicate? What tools will you use in your marketing efforts? Who will be responsible for maintaining contact with prospects? How often – and in what form – will those contacts take place?



Companies frequently do a poor job of following through on business development activities. For example, they plan a marketing campaign but only partially execute it. Or they establish sales practices, such as promising to check back with prospects within five business days, but forget to do so.

Be as consistent, methodical and deliberate about attracting customers as you are in producing product or providing service.

Finally, monitoring activity results and final sales volume will help you to see if you are on target, and identify areas where you need to fine-tune.

*In the next issue of The Plaid Group newsletter, we'll look at some specific ways you can better manage your company's business development and sales processes.*

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**More Information?** If you'd like to learn more about how to enhance your business development efforts, please send an e-mail to [tim@plaidgroup.com](mailto:tim@plaidgroup.com), visit our web site at [www.plaidgroup.com](http://www.plaidgroup.com), or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit The Plaid Group web site at [www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters\\_subscribe.asp](http://www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp).

**Author's Note:** **Tim Smith** is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance and gain a competitive edge.