

The System Trap – What Sales Can Learn From Football

Sales Methodologies: Tactical Systems For Sales

Manchester United's players were sneaking out of London's Wembley Stadium "perplexed, confused and traumatized" after the European Champions League final on 28th May 2011. They were utterly outmatched by Barcelona FC – a "triumph of Barcelona's tactical system" as one paper wrote. It comes as no surprise that Barcelona FC's playing style has since found many imitators.

Different tactical systems have been en vogue at different times in the world of football, and as new ones appear they are usually declared as the "future of modern football" by papers and self-proclaimed pundits. Similarly to football trainers and their teams, companies periodically seek salvation in new tactical systems, also known as sales methodologies. „We are now doing Challenger Sale, and this will really give us a competitive edge“, the Head of Sales at a multinational IT company recently told us, beaming with excitement. Whether they choose Miller-Heiman, Power Based Selling, Solution Selling, Challenger Sale or other sales methodologies, companies spend a lot of money on training their sales staff in the sales method of the day. The chosen method is quickly proclaimed as the new corporate standard, and salespeople have to follow this approach under the auspices of sales managers eager to comply with corporate policies. However, the success of these sales trainings is limited: 90 percent of the knowledge taught in the training sessions is lost within six weeks, a rapid and almost total loss of investment.¹

Flexibility Forms the Basis of Modern Tactics – In Sales As Much As In Football

Man United's local rival Manchester City, too, invested a lot of money. As the reigning English champions, the „Citizens“ had successfully proven that their tactical system works. In the opening round of the European Champions League finals in September 2014, City faced Bayern Munich football club. Stakeholders at Bayern Munich were worried: several of their key players were injured and couldn't play, and others had just returned from a long leave. Despite Bayern Munich's

problems, Manchester stood no chance against the German champion.

The football press emphasized an important aspect of Bayern's victory: Bayern Munich didn't win this match because they had the better tactical system. The team won because it managed to deploy multiple elements from different tactical systems during the match, depending on what was required in each phase of the match. Historically, teams have dominated leagues by adopting a specific and inflexible tactical system. Modern teams like Bayern Munich instead combine elements from various tactical systems, changing and adopting them depending on the specific requirements during a match.



Similar to modern football teams, sales teams should understand the advantages and disadvantages of different tactical systems – sales methodologies – and deploy these methodologies according to the requirements of a specific sales situation. What is *Power Based Selling* worth if the company's product range has gone downscale and the projects to be sold do not justify the sales effort associated with this method anymore? What will happen if *Challenger Sales* conflicts with the prospect's corporate culture and will do more harm than good? Or, what if salespeople and prospects are simply overwhelmed by it? How can *Solution Selling* be done when the ROI of a solution can hardly be quantified? The key to answering these questions lies in combining the right tactical elements in the right situation at the right time.

It is understandable that, for practical reasons, companies focus on one specific sales methodology at a time. After all, who wants their sales team to spend all its time in sales training instead of being out in the field selling? But, on the flip side, how can companies ensure that their sales teams have the right tactics at hand to comply with the require-

¹ Institute for Training and Development 2014.

ments of their specific situation – the same way modern football teams do?

Meta Knowledge for Tactical Flexibility

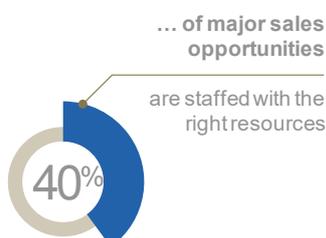
The key to resolving this dilemma is meta-knowledge. Sales executives, like modern football players, need to be able to “read the game” and its protagonists in a specific situation. Like football players, sales executives must adopt their approach to changes in the situation and their opponents’ tactics. Tactics that may work for one customer may be useless for a different customer. Something that triggers a purchase in one person may prevent another person from buying. Sales executives need to know the different tactical systems that are available, and they need to be flexible in the way they deploy them. The meta-knowledge of a sales method’s strengths and weaknesses, of typical applications, of the expected outcome and of the strategic implications is as important as the knowledge of the method itself.

Fortunately, sales teams tend to have more time at their disposal than football players on a pitch. They do not have to make their decisions within fractions of a second. As a consequence we think it is realistic and practicable to shift part of a company’s sales training to the meta-level instead of focusing on one or two sales methodologies alone. The different sales methodologies should first be analyzed and trained at a high level, and a methodology toolkit should be built. Sales executives will pick from the toolkit those elements that they need for a specific customer in a specific sales situation. Knowing this methodology toolkit is as important for sales executives as knowing the company’s products, solutions and services. The right choice of elements from the sales methodology toolkit is critical for a successful sales approach.

Implementation Is Key

Will sales executives automatically be more successful when they know how to use their sales methodology toolkit in the right way? Not necessarily.

Let us look at Bayern Munich’s semi final match against Real Madrid in the 2013/14 European Champions League season. Bayern had lost the first match with one goal to nil, but it



seemed like they should be able to turn around the result during the return match. According to foot-

ball experts and the sports press, Bayern manager Guardiola had adopted his tactical system based on the experience from the first match and was using a system designed to address Real Madrid’s specific strengths. Nevertheless, Bayern Munich got smashed and lost the match four-nil. One reporter summarized Bayern’s defeat as follows: “In modern football it is seldom big things that count; rather than that, it is the little details that matter.” The team hadn’t failed because of its tactical system; it had failed because it didn’t implement this system properly.

On the surface, Bayern Munich did exactly the right thing against Real Madrid: the team used long diagonal passes to quickly shift the match from one side of the pitch to the other. In this way, trainer and players hoped to break open Real’s defense and catch the team’s defenders by surprise. The problem was that Bayern’s outside forwards dashed forward as soon as they had received the ball, not waiting for the midfield players – who were still on the other side of the pitch – to follow. In most cases they then lost the ball in the ensuing one-on-one duels with Real’s defenders.

By nature, sales executives and sales managers are forwards rather than defenders or midfielders – and they tend to be individualists rather than team players. Quite often they go ahead with a deal without having secured the right level of support from the different parts of the organization. When we talk about support we do not just mean support from pre-sales consultants and other resources that are immediately associated with the sales organization. Even departments such as Marketing should be considered. After all, the co-ordination of marketing sales and opportunity plans is a critical part of an effective go-to-market strategy. Seldom does it work, though.

Real players Cristiano Ronaldo and Gareth Bale were particularly praised during this match for actively helping with their team’s defense, despite the fact that these are hardly players who are known for tackling back. Similarly, sales executives need to be deployed according to their specific strengths, yet must also interpret their role flexibly. A sales executive who is the undisputed expert in one area and therefore leads the team on one opportunity may be much better suited to play a supporting role in a different situation. But who likes to play a minor role once they have achieved a certain status?

Only in 40 percent of major sales opportunities do companies think that they have deployed the right resources.² Our recommendation is therefore to conduct strategic role plays simulating different sales opportunities until the sales or-

² 2015 MHI Sales Best Practices Study: Decoding the Decision Dynamic, S. 10.



ganization has established a culture in which flexible team constellations are the rule rather than an exception.

Former Borussia Dortmund manager Jürgen Klopp summarized Bayern Munich's defeat to Real Madrid in one sentence: "Bayern Munich simply did a lousy job defending in set-piece situations." Indeed, team manager Guardiola has often been criticized for focusing on the "high game" of tactics while neglecting the basics of the game such as set pieces.

Even in sales we often see that the set pieces of the game – the intimate knowledge of one's pipeline, the management of

activities instead of results, or the regular coaching of sales executives in the field to name just a few aspects – are not sufficiently enforced by sales management. The implementation of a strategy first fails on management level. This is why we recommend a development approach in which sales management is in the center of any company's improvement and change effort. Broad training and change efforts make sense only when sales management's issues are resolved.

The implementation of a system decides on its success or failure – in sales as well as in football.

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