

In order to maximize membership sales in chambers, it is paramount to build an internal culture focused on membership sales and service. Building this culture starts at the top. "If the CEO is passive about the sales effort, it will wind up being just *one* of the things the chamber does," notes **Harvey Schmitt, CCE, president and CEO of the Raleigh (NC) Chamber of Commerce** and past president of the ACCE Board of Directors. "A strong and consistent commitment to the sales effort is what sets apart the chambers that are great in membership sales from those that are mediocre."

Ron Allen, a senior account executive from **Commerce Lexington (KY)** agrees. He says "it starts at the top with great leadership. If the CEO, VP Sales and Marketing, Membership Director and associated staff members are fully on-board and committed to growing their membership by providing their account executives with a positive work environment, tremendous support and encouragement, it becomes an easy task to recruit new members." **Ray San Fratello, president and CEO of the South Lake (FL) Chamber**, characterizes this as "an organization-wide focus on customer service that permeates everything the Chamber does and is clearly visible in its marketing efforts."

This translates to chamber operations as the need to "take a corporate or for-profit approach to membership sales," says **Matt Pivarnik, IOM, CCE, senior vice president for the Tulsa (OK) Metro Chamber** and chairman of ACCE's Board and Membership Division.

There is good, yet challenging news for chambers that are taking a more private-sector approach to membership

sales. Author and political consultant Mark J. Penn, in his book *"Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes,"* highlights research that shows employment in non-profits is growing at a higher rate than either the private or government sectors. In addition, he claims that young people, many just out of college, are the age demographic most attracted to non-profits. That is the good news for chambers. The challenge is that the talent pool available to chambers may not be bringing experience in corporate sales to the table. The implication is that more focus on creating an organizational sales process, establishing clear goals and providing in-depth training for employees are requirements for growing and retaining membership in your Chamber.

KNOWING WHEN TO TALK AND WHEN TO LISTEN

It is echoed by the majority of chamber professionals that one of the greatest challenges in membership sales is the intangible nature of the chamber product. **Mark N. Eagan, CCE, chairman-elect for ACCE and president & CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of St. Joseph County (IN)**, and Pivarnik agree strongly on this point. Both characterize a chamber membership as "something you can't see or touch," which therefore must be sold artfully. San Fratello says that it is important to be able to "articulate the intangible benefits of membership involvement in a business world that is more and more interested in 'what's in it for me?'"

As Schmitt points out, a chamber membership salesperson "must know the Chamber and its products. They must believe in what the Chamber can do, and they must be able to relate" ▶

Improving Your Organizational Sales LEADERSHIP



By Joan Cozart,
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the Chamber's benefits to the needs of the prospect." In order to accomplish this, the Chamber employee must, according to Allen, "Let the prospect talk! Ask probing questions."

The concept that a business which said 'no' a year or more ago is not a good prospect is a myth.

The ability to listen and really hear what a prospect wants and connect that to the value proposition of the chamber is a skill that requires "a well-trained staff," says **David Hinderliter, president and CEO of the Kankakee (IL) Regional Chamber of Commerce**. He goes on to add that "the communication skills of the chamber staff can make the difference between successful membership sales and struggling membership sales." These "communication skills" do not necessarily require talking a lot, but rather the ability to listen and connect.

Dawn Moliterno, president and CEO of the Walton County (FL) Regional Chamber of Commerce, has increased membership in her Chamber significantly by making sure that she has a good organizational sales process as well as the right people, with the right skills, in place. She says that her membership development team knows that "if you listen more than you talk, prospects will tell you what they need from their Chamber."

Pivarnik believes that the ratio of listening to presenting in a 30-minute sales call is to "listen for 25 minutes and present for 5 minutes." This requires an in-depth understanding of the

chamber's value proposition and how that can be connected to the needs of prospects in a diversity of industries. The confidence of every chamber employee when it comes to speaking to prospects and answering questions about the value of chamber membership is something that must be driven through the culture by training, practice and repetition. **Paul Laskowski, vice president of the Chamber of Commerce of St. Joseph County (IN)**, believes this "requires dogged determination and persistence. Everyone who comes into contact with a potential chamber member should be able to credibly market the value of the organization."

In a 30-minute sales call, try to listen for 25 minutes and present for 5 minutes.

A MEETING OF THE MINDS

One key to propelling your membership sales efforts to another level is to leverage the technology and knowledge that you have to track and manage the vast number of prospects you and your staff continually come into contact with. Many chambers have a database full of prospective members who may have been contacted once or twice without joining, at which point the chamber staff moved on to other things. Harvesting these prospects and enlisting the entire organization, including board members and other volunteers, could very well result in a windfall of new members who were just waiting to be asked to join.

A fundamental approach to prospect management that involves the entire organization is to institute a regular meeting with key chamber staff to review the prospect list and to prioritize the list for future sales calls. Very often key decision-makers in businesses change and the new decision-maker could be the biggest fan of chamber membership that your team has ever met. The concept that a business which said "no" a year or more ago is not a good prospect is a myth. Many businesses are just waiting to be asked one more time to sign up for membership and are surprised that it took so long!

During this meeting, participants may discover an additional benefit to meeting in person: the ability to share collective knowledge and ideas about the best approach to sell memberships to both new and existing prospects. Prospect management meetings can be part of the strategy to "create an electric atmosphere, one that has everyone acting like they want to sell," according to **Kristen Whitener, president and CEO of the Mount Vernon (WA) Chamber of Commerce**. By comparing notes on prospects in the community, you may find that there are businesses that have never been asked to join. Since

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building a focused new strategy and process at her Chamber to increase membership sales, Whitner says, “we have discovered businesses right at our back door that say they would love to join the Chamber, but have never been asked to.” The success Mount Vernon has experienced in membership sales are a direct result of Whitner’s leadership and the team’s enthusiasm over the new sales process.

The sales process involves everything from prospect management to employee performance management. Performance management with chamber staff may involve a variety of elements: a solid training plan, weekly sales activity goals, membership sales goals, and a feedback loop that measures results and helps laser-focus the membership sales effort. The training plan is a prerequisite to performance management because it ensures that the expectations of the chamber executive are clear and that employees are being given every opportunity to meet those expectations. Having sales activity goals means that employees involved directly or indirectly in membership sales know how many contacts and presentations they should be making each week and each month. Research clearly and repeatedly shows that quantifying sales activity goals and having employees who meet those goals will increase the chamber’s membership sales. The feedback loop should include an assessment of what type of prospects and contacts are resulting in the most membership sales.

The graphs to the right demonstrate how a simple spreadsheet of results can be translated into interesting and productive feedback which can be provided to the chamber staff as well as your board of directors.

By creating a visual “map” of your sales numbers, it is easier to interpret and intuitively make sense of your sales performance. In addition, looking at your results this way allows you to focus your team’s energy on the highest return on investment area, such as referrals. The Chamber’s senior management may wish to track referrals internally, while having outside sales people (if you use them) focus on cold calls.

There is an old adage “you can’t manage what you can’t measure.” By measuring and quantifying your sales results, you will build confidence and focus within your staff and with your volunteers and Board of Directors. Organizational sales leadership is about setting goals, measuring performance, teamwork and involving all of your key staff members in the membership sales process. **Bob Chappelle, executive vice president, Mobile (AL) Area Chamber of Commerce**, sums it up when he says: “Teamwork is critical. Those organizations that are most successful in growing their membership have more than one person, or one department, contributing to the effort. The importance of membership should permeate every aspect of the organization.” ☐

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FIGURE 1 - SOURCE AND NUMBER OF SALES

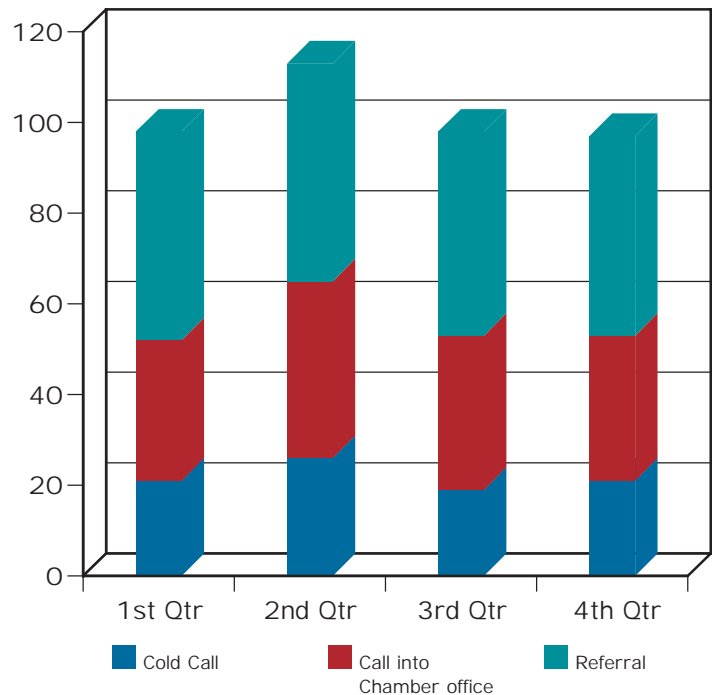
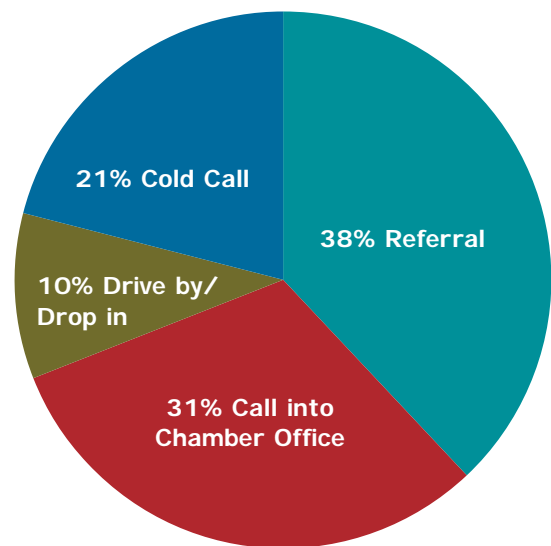


FIGURE 2 - BAR GRAPH OF MONTHLY SALES RESULTS



January 2008 Source of Sales and Percentage of Sales
Total Sales = 28

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