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Lessons From the Mud Run: What It Takes to Win the Race

by **Richard F. Libin**

Every year thousands of individuals gather to compete in the “World Famous” Camp Pendleton Mud Run, a 10K run on the marine base that includes the kind of obstacles you’d encounter in basic training – a 30-foot mud pit, five-foot high walls, tires, river crossings, sand, tunnels and tough terrain. Repeatedly the top three teams are comprised of five high school boys. These teenage runners, who beat highly conditioned military competitors, don’t simply show up and decide to run. They spend months preparing for the event, often running six days a week on routes that replicated the obstacles the course would hold. Through this, they learned a formula to help them face not only these obstacles, but also those they will face everyday throughout their lives.

So, what can we as sales professionals learn from this event and these teenagers? First, nothing stops an individual from reaching a goal except his or her own attitude and preparation. Second, the formula these teens learned embodies the four absolute necessities to achieving success:

- 1. Know the goal.**
- 2. Know the obstacles.**
- 3. Train, train, train = Educate.**
- 4. Go back to basics.**

Let's examine these individually as they apply to selling.

Know the goal. This is the ultimate first step. Without a clear understanding of the goal, it will never be achieved. In the teens' case the ultimate goal was to get through the obstacle course and come out healthy, unhurt and unscathed, and to win the race. For a business or store, the ultimate goal is to sell products or services and nurture clientele – people who will buy from you repeatedly and refer other opportunities. This goal, and others unique to each business and individual, must be clearly and consistently communicated to each salesperson.

Know the obstacles. In the Mud Run, the obstacles are similar, but can change year-to-year. This includes the physical obstacles on the course and the mental and physical obstacles unique to each athlete. The same is true in the selling. Obvious (physical) obstacles constantly change, but are similar and often cyclical. These can include technology advances, the fluctuating economy, a changing political environment, the housing crisis, changes in the weather and a host of other factors. Less apparent obstacles are unique to each salesperson. They range from attitude, prospecting skills, and using business procedures to the ability to help customers find the “perfect” product through closing the sale.

As managers, it's critical to understand both types of obstacles and their impact on each individual sales professional. Otherwise, this lack of understanding becomes an obstacle in itself, one that prevents the salespeople from addressing and overcoming all others. The challenge for sales managers is to identify the obstacles, and then consistently and repeatedly prepare their salespeople to overcome them before they greet the opportunity. The answer lies in the third lesson we can learn from the Mud Runners: training.

Train, train, train = Educate. Selling and running an obstacle course are very similar. Salespeople greet a customer; the runners go to the starting line. Salespeople introduce themselves, build a relationship and help the customer select a product; the runners take off and head for the finish line. Soon, both encounter the first obstacle. For the salesperson it may be, "I'm just looking;" for the runners, a five-foot wall. In each case, consistent physical training and mental education will prepare them to size up the obstacle, understand how to approach it, successfully overcome it, and proceed to the next part of the course (sale).

In the Mud Run, the teenagers prepared for a full year, for nearly 500 hours for this one event that lasted a mere 55 minutes. They knew the goal and the obstacles, trained and educated themselves consistently and repeatedly to meet them. Likewise, sales managers must constantly train and educate their salespeople to face the challenges presented by the prospective clients they face every day. How long do you really train and educate your team before you let them work with customers in your business? Do you inspect their work every day to look for weakness and then provide continuous training and education for improvement? Training and education never stop as long as you're still in the race.

Training and education must be goal-based and must address obstacles faced both by teams and individuals. It should help salespeople learn to build clientele, individuals who rely on the business for an entire spectrum of products and services repeatedly and who refer friends, family and colleagues, not just sell one item. To do this, programs must teach salespeople to "sell" three things: themselves, the products and the business. I call this the three finger close. Without proper training and education, every salesperson risks turning opportunities into shoppers with every interaction.

Let's talk about basics. Everybody is always looking for the secret ingredient that magically turns opportunities to clients. Some are seduced by technology – Blackberries, Facebook or even Twitter. Others become seminar junkies looking for the latest get rich quick fad. These distractions only make salespeople forget the basics of selling. When that happens, sales suffer.

The basics of selling never change. They work day in and day out regardless of the economy or industry. Selling always hinges on helping the customer select the right product or service. Period. Converting customers to clients hinges on establishing a genuine relationship built on trust. Period. Remember, in sales, everything you do either adds to or detracts from your income.

Perhaps business and sales managers should look more closely at these teens. They chose not to simply play in the mud, but to set a goal, identify obstacles they would encounter, train, and educate, consistently and repeatedly to achieve their goal. The same is true for businesses that want to avoid playing in the muddy waters created by a whole range of obstacles. Their managers must clearly communicate the goal, help salespeople identify obstacles, and train and educate them to overcome all types of barriers to win the race. One more lesson from these teens: Now that the race is won, what do you suppose they're doing? They are preparing for next year's race so they can get past new obstacles and continue to improve their performance, and win. Are you ready to win?

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