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July 5, 2001  
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***"Tell me why it happened!"***  
**Sales Call Reporting and Explanatory Knowledge**

**"The point is that crisp, regular and concise communication between field salespeople and the home office is absolutely essential in today's super-competitive environment. The really successful rep of the 21st century will be logging all key information from each call ... and sharing that information with principals."** J.W. Miller, *"The Difference Between Professional, Written Communication and Call Reports," Agency Sales Magazine*, June 1998.

**Where is all the explanatory information from the field?**

The conversation I overheard was interesting and one many MANA sales managers will recognize – a major account had withdrawn abruptly from a relationship with the firm. This sudden change of course for this account was a total surprise to the sales manager.

*"What happened?"*

*"Why didn't I know something this serious was happening?"*

*"Why doesn't anything I have here tell me what was going on with this account?"*

*"How long has this been going on?"*

*"Why didn't you tell me about it?"*

*"What can we do to get the business back?"*

*"Someone please explain to me what is going on out there!"*

**Explanatory knowledge from the field is essential to good decision making.**

Often the most revealing and significant knowledge out there is what is in the sales reps' minds, what they are thinking about, what they perceive, and what they find irritating or confusing or discouraging. We often ask, "Well, tell me about it." Or, "I don't understand. Explain it to me." Or, "Just talk to me about your accounts; tell me how you feel about them." In each case, this is to ask for *explanatory* knowledge, which is extensive "talk," which is difficult to process and make available in computer systems in typical CRM/SFA software.

Given the importance of explanatory knowledge in any sales organization, sales managers want answers to these questions such as these: (1) what is explanatory knowledge, and (2) what can a sales manager do to receive a steady flow and volume of this kind of knowledge into his/her computer system for continuous monitoring and actionability?

**1. What is explanatory knowledge?**

Constantly our minds are observing, perceiving, wondering, judging, evaluating, and otherwise taking in information but not formally or consciously processing it. It is just there, sitting in the mental system but not articulated, made clear, or connected to anything necessarily.

We call this kind of unformed or "felt" knowledge "tacit," "unstructured," "qualitative," or "implicit." Some researchers estimate that 90% of the knowledge available to us from sales reps in the field is this kind of knowledge. This knowledge has been observed, but it has not yet been spoken and heard. This is the information that is talked out in meetings, on the golf course, at the restaurant or hotel bar in the evening, at conferences, at an "off-site retreat," and so on. *Talk, talk, talk. Listen. Discuss. Talk, talk, talk.*

Explanatory information is language -- words, sentences, paragraphs. Explanatory information is start/stop, repeat, repeat again, go back to, jump ahead to, change the direction, change it again. Rambling, chaotic, disjointed, confusing, unresolved, and difficult, explanatory knowledge is not the kind of information processed easily or well by computers. This knowledge is very difficult, typically, to capture, process, and enter into databases for computer processing.

The other 10% of the available knowledge is "numerical," "statistical," "structured," "quantitative," and "explicit. This information is natural to computer processing. This explicit information is captured by any digital form that asks the rep to type in, "How many calls did you make this week?" [Enter the number into the box]. Or, "What is your revenue projection for the next month?" [Enter the number into the box]. Or, "Which promotion did you feel most successful?" [enter a word into the box]. For a sales manager, the processing might be [pull down a dialog box] "What percentage of the sales calls were made on new customers?" Or, [pull down a dialog box] "Show me the percentage of competitive situations we have entered and won this past quarter." Or, [pull down a dialog box] "compared to the past five quarters, what is the ratio of sales revenue to sales costs?"

***Therefore, critical to managing a sales force (and contrary to software solutions) is a continuous and vigorous stream of explanatory knowledge flowing toward the sales manager and converted to a form that can be analyzed easily via computer. This streaming of explanatory knowledge is not just "nice-to-have"; this capability is "core" business practice.***

## **2. So, what can a sales manager do to receive a steady flow and volume of explanatory knowledge into his/her computer system for continuous monitoring and actionability?**

Clearly, since explanatory knowledge is language not numbers, having the sales reps talk -- certainly a natural communication medium for them -- is imperative. Also and as clearly, capturing that talk into a dictation system of some kind, for processing, coding, and placing in digital databases, is essential.

Some possible ways of accomplishing this are as follows:

One solution is to have all sales reps use the telephone to call the sales manager after each sales call. This is obviously overwhelming and impractical, unless, of course, the sales manager is willing to be the scribe and record everything the sales reps say (which, we suspect, is not going to happen more than once).

Another solution might be the traditional secretary, with the sales reps calling into a voice mail system or speaking into hand-held dictation machines and forwarding the tapes or .wav files. The secretary then transcribes, formats, and files digitally the information. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's experience, that was a solution of years ago, when Ellie of 35 years with the firm knew everything and every format and liked to transcribe for her boss, the CEO. Most of today's sales people have never experienced such a world; few secretaries would stay long with a firm if all they did was transcription.

Another solution might be keyboarding the information at night in the hotel room (sales reps love to type, right? Just can't wait to get to the hotel at 11:00 pm to get connected somehow through the motel phone system to the Internet, and then, joy of all joys, spend the night typing up a report of two or three pages! Are we talking fun here, or what? Or, maybe they can use "graffiti" language and write the report into their PDA and then email it on. Sure! Should we build a sales system on such constraints?). Now, at least, it is digital and can be emailed to others and into databases. However, other than a 100% free word search capability in some software, digital pattern seeking and other analysis is difficult if not impossible with big and chaotic "chunks" of text like this. Most SFA and CRM software are built on an unspoken rule for language input: "No more than 18 keystrokes for any answer." Anyway, even if we type it up, what is anyone going to do with all of that talk? How can it be used for any practical and pressing need?

Other than making sure the system allows sales reps to talk and demands that the input be processed and made digital, what are some other requirements if we are to make strong use of explanatory data?

For one, the transcription of the dictation must be near-100% accurate, placed into specified formats, and coded for digital processing. How is that going to happen? Who is going to do it? One solution that comes to everyone's mind (from mind-boggling – and very controlled – demos at COMDEX) is Voice-to-text software. However interesting and Star Wars-like it might seem such "hopium" is years away (if at all) from meeting even the minimum accuracy requirements stated above. Let's do a reality check: try voice-to-text software on the road while using a cell phone, with cells coming in and out, while walking or in a car with a breeze blowing, with a cold in your nose, looking up and down at notes, moving your mouth close to and far away from the receiver, eating a Krispy Kreme donut and drinking a Diet Coke, using all kinds of new words learned at the customer meeting, and struggling with papers and notes as you try to talk. Real life doesn't occur under aseptic laboratory conditions.

For another, the language must finally be made available for search/query and actionability in simple, inexpensive, readily available, and easily customized software (such as MS Access) that is dedicated specifically to handling ONLY this kind of information. Software that runs the planets and stars and moon (and costs as much as the Space Shuttle), with enterprise-wide bells and whistles is too much, too powerful, too expensive, too complicated for practical, daily human use with sales call data. All we need is a customizable database that allows us to code our incoming explanatory data (the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) to meet our specific sales management needs. We want only the fields that can be searched regularly each day and are updated daily or weekly, on an intranet, a secure Internet site, via continuously updated CD-ROMs or a laptop hard drive. This simple, easily changeable software must do WHAT THE SALES MANAGER WANTS, not what some IT person or software package programmer decided months and years ago that all sales managers want – the Procrustean Bed fallacy (stretch or shrink sales manager needs to fit our bed; don't adjust our bed to fit them).

*So, **explanatory knowledge** has to come via voice, be processed with near-100% accuracy, analyzed, coded, and placed (both as code and as verbatim) into a simple database for maximum customizing and personal adjusting by the sales management. Hard to do? Any solutions come to mind?*

Good questions. We might ask as we search for an answer, why do sales managers leave themselves so vulnerable to the negative consequences of not knowing 90% of the available information from sales reps and others in the field? Does that any make sense? Being in control; knowing what is happening; listening (having the exact verbatim of the call details available in the database); being able to respond immediately for coaching or corrective action; being able to show a customer, on the laptop on the spot, what exactly "We did for you this month," by rep, by date, by product, and with the actual verbatim from the sale rep immediately following the meeting -- **these conditions are essential for successful, WINNING, sales management practice.**

Why do sales managers turn over every 18 months in many companies? Maybe it is because they do not know how to get control over, are being defeated by the most significant force available to them and operating in their system -- **explanatory knowledge**.