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## Lesson from Red Baron: Work to be an ACE

By Brian Butler

Though there is debate among experts as to the exact origins of the term “ace,” its connotation is unmistakable. The designation conferred instant hero status on the most accomplished aerial combat pilots in World War I, so-called “knights of the air.”

Governments, eager to build support for the war at home, eagerly promoted the “kills” of the aces. Citizens in each country looked up to them for portraying persistence, talent and courage. Competitive soldiers, driven by the desire for medals, fame and fortune, accepted and embraced the attention and accolades.

While hopefully none of us are at war with the competition, top salespeople – competitive, eager for acknowledgement – today strive to be aces of the sales arena.

Here are three ways to be a modern day A.C.E.:

- **Accelerate.** Just as in aerial combat where the faster plane had an advantage, speed is a major weapon in modern sales “warfare.” There are two ways to improve it.

To move faster, sometimes you have to carry fewer things. If you have too many prospects or customers it can actually slow you down. Constantly evaluate both prospects and customers and decide if they are ideal for you and your organization. Engaging in more opportunities than you or your organization can handle will ultimately result in fewer sales. Say no to questionable opportunities, fire troublesome customers. You will be surprised how less will really equal more speed – and results.

Sales may not be as much of a numbers game as it once was, but it still is an activity game. Just as the aces were judged by the number of downed enemy planes, sales people always will be judged by the number of new accounts opened or total dollar value of their account assignment. Though we want only higher-qualified opportunities, it will still take more calls, appointments, etc. to judge when you have the very best of what you want. More opportunities always will give you more chances to win exactly the battles you want to win.

- **Calculate.** The World War I aces often engaged the enemy only when the odds were substantially in their favor. As we already have discussed, sales success often comes to those who do the best job of determining which opportunities to pursue and which to pass by. In the movie “The American President,” Michael Douglas’ character President Shepherd says, “We fight the fights that are worth fighting, and we fight the fights we can win.” Here are two ways to be more calculating and thus generate more sales success.

Sales people often have been criticized (justifiably) for thinking every first meeting is going to turn into “the big one.” They run back to the office and get everyone scrambling around to satisfy the latest hot prospect. Only later, after much effort, does everyone really find out that they were not so hot after all. Instead of leaping first, take the time to define your ideal customer. What do they look like? Are they in a particular industry? Are they a certain-size company? Calculate the cost of the investment to landing the account versus the long-term value. Too much business taken for the short-term benefits will create bottlenecks in service, flexibility and value in the long run.

Be sure to review your own performance with a critical eye. What trends stand out? You may notice that there were common things you did, in a common sequence in both the sales you made, and in the sales you lost.

- **Elevate.** In aerial combat, the aircraft at the higher altitude had the advantage. In sales, elevation is also critical to success.

Start at the summit. In the book "Summiting," by Jim Hoverman, he states "Your ability to consistently have 'value conversations' with top management influencers is a skill that is no longer a 'nice-to-have' but, in reality, a 'got-to-have.'" While these conversations are not likely to happen if you are providing a commodity product or service, if your proposition has measurable return on investment, C-level people will take notice and be involved in decision-making.

To complement your conversations with those at the top of your customer's hierarchy, you need to raise your own game. There is no room for standing still today.

For example, in the Information Age, the person who communicates most effectively usually wins. Improve your handling of e-mail, voice mail and other messaging technology. Learn to be a persuasive speaker and passionate advocate for your priorities. In meetings, try being brief, brilliant and gone. Remember, very often the most important part of communication is not talking, but listening.

Commit to learning all you can about your customers' goals, concerns and priorities, as well as the trends that affect their industry. Develop empathy, sincerity and trustworthiness in all your interactions. Become an indispensable resource for your customers.

And make time for healthy living. All things being equal, the healthier you are, the better you can contribute and produce. More highly conditioned athletes are more competitive and win more of their events. So do sales people who are in better shape.

The ace pilots of long ago were totally committed to acceleration, calculation and elevation to win the dogfights they engaged in. Sales ACEs win their current-day battles with the competition in just the same way.

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