



Five Critical Sales Skills for Capturing the Corporate Travel Market

Roy Magee is Regional Vice-President, Asia, for AchieveGlobal, one of the world's largest providers of corporate soft-skills training.

Corporate customers have long been the mainstay of business class travel, generating the most attractive margins for airlines. However, due to the faltering global economy, many airlines are seeing this formerly lucrative revenue stream slowly dwindle due to increasing pressures on corporate organisations to cut back on their corporate travel expenses. Business travel now does not necessarily mean business class and some companies are also encouraging employees to travel with low cost carriers, something that was unheard of in the past. Rising fuel costs are also presenting challenges for airlines, along with the competitive in-roads realised by low-cost carriers.

To combat this, airlines are now re-assessing their route to corporate customers. Traditionally, they have reached this audience through travel agents who derive commissions or incentives based on sales generated for each airline. In some markets these agents still remain the only avenue for marketing airfares. Increasingly, however, they are now initiating direct business relationships with corporate customers to save on these commission fees and to bolster their own profit margins. The reduction of incentives has led to travel agents boycotting airlines in some markets. This change in sales approach is also in response to the concern that travel agents were influencing corporate buying decisions to favour airlines that paid the most attractive commissions.

This direct approach also has the benefit of enabling airlines to position their strengths relative to the competition in order to secure continued patronage from corporate customers and to also better influence their corporate travel policies. While large corporate organisations remain the focus, smaller enterprises are also a target, with some airlines offering the capability to manage flight bookings through dedicated e-platforms.



This new sales approach presents several challenges for sales staff in airlines. The biggest of which is shifting the focus away from long-standing relationships with travel agents, towards initiating business relationships with corporate clients – and helping these clients to justify continued business class travel as the economy shows positive signs of recovery. Overcoming these challenges requires airline sales teams to develop the following **five** critical sales skills and capabilities:

1. Selling to business challenges and objectives

More often than not, airline sales teams have relied on personality or common interests to sell to travel agents, often meeting the personal needs of their customer, but failing to form long-term strategic business alliances. While it is true that people often buy from people they particularly like, this approach rarely maximises the potential of business relationships.

The "new" corporate salesperson needs to understand their corporate customer's business priorities, the environment they operate in and the needs of different constituencies (travel managers, business travellers, finance and other decision-makers or influencers). By doing so, they ensure that their sales conversations do not become merely centred on personality, or price.

2. Developing a strategy for each account

Securing long-term corporate relationships not only requires salespeople to become adept at understanding their customer's business objectives and relationships, they must also be able to anticipate how these business objectives will unfold over time and impact their customer's continued business performance. If airlines fail to develop a plan for each account, they leave themselves vulnerable to any sudden changes in policies, business priorities and budget re-allocations, opening the door to the competition.

3. Managing a territory and pipeline of business

Pursuing direct relationships with corporate customers is more complex than establishing rapport with travel agencies – who have a shared interest. It also requires airline sales teams to cover a larger number of accounts rather than relying just on a few key contacts. This means balancing the need to



develop new accounts while managing existing clients. The ability to qualify which accounts are worth pursuing and managing a pipeline of interests is a key success factor for airline sales teams.

4. *Owning the customer experience*

The distinction between sales and service, especially in the eyes of the customer, is rapidly disappearing. No longer can sales organisations view selling and servicing customers as two separate activities. To deliver value to today's demanding, savvy and frankly, more fickle customers, sales teams must ensure that all employees who touch the customer – directly or indirectly – have a clear line of sight to key customer expectations and needs. This can only happen when there is a shared focus on the customer. To paraphrase a top performing sales professional, “you either need to be selling, or you need to be supporting someone who is!”

5. *Re-calibrating sales management skills*

Not surprisingly, the above changes are forcing many sales managers out of their comfort zone. In order to be successful, sales managers must actively reassess their own selling approach and sales experience, as it may no longer be relevant to the challenges faced by their sales teams.

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