



# Special Report

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# Sales Culture: It Takes a Company!

**August 2011**

*Everyone is in sales.* What does this mean? You may work in research and development, or in finance, or in technology, or perhaps in human resources. Your job title might even refer to serving the customer. The real fact of today's complex and turbulent world of products and services, solutions, and continuous change is that all must be customer-centric in approaching their jobs. Complex times call for complex solutions. As change affects your world and that of your customers, they need you to be responsive to their ever changing needs. A virtual partnership must evolve that includes your customer and everyone in your organization. It is not enough for just your sales professionals to have this relationship. This implies that everyone in your organization understands the customer and what will incent that customer to continue to buy your products and services. That means that everyone is in sales: senior management, who must invest necessary dollars in customer-centric programming; senior sales leaders, who must invest time and commitment to sales professionals; sales professionals, who must invest their energy and commitment to developing their sales skills and expertise; and all other members of your organization, who must understand the sales workflow and customer needs in that process.



**Figure 1. Levels of Commitment**

So how can you be sure that this sales culture focus is established and maintained in your company? This paper describes a set of practices that will help your organizational members create this environment for themselves and your customers. It describes a model that is urgently

needed and critical to any organization that chooses to be successful in today's turbulence and complexity. Further information defines the stakeholder in a vibrant sales culture, what that culture entails, how one builds such a culture, and, finally, what business results can be expected from your investment in that sales culture.

### ***Creating a Sales Culture Environment***

Creating this environment drives results from within the company. Everyone focuses first and foremost on the customer as driven by a vital and dynamic sales engine, which is made up of strategically motivated and compensated sales professionals, a "we" versus "them" mindset, and low sales force turnover.

Creating this customer-centric sales culture is essential in maximizing your company's success. An important aspect, we can all agree, of maximizing your success lies in sales professional measuring and meeting sales objectives. Tracking, measuring, and sharing sales results underlies this culture. Sharing tangible status and information, as well as interpreting it for all members of the organization, is very motivating. It also gives context for connecting individual activities to these objectives. It is these practices that set the tone for a sales culture. When employees in the R&D organization understand that their activity might impact those metrics, it becomes clear that they must be customer-centric in their thinking. When the accounting personnel see that being creative on payment terms might impact a sale, they, too, become customer-centric in fulfilling their daily responsibilities.

Please note that a sales culture mentality is essential no matter the industry you are considering. Every enterprise and company has customers, sales professionals, internal service providers, and a need to work cohesively to bring these factions together for successful business results. People who work together effectively tend to continuously satisfy each others' needs and produce excellent results. These people must include all stakeholders throughout the organization.

When sales professional build this culture to understand and integrate all the stakeholders, your value proposition to your customers will change. Mediocrity will prevail without it. You will perhaps survive without it; however, moving to assured heights of performance can be achieved with the proper attention to creating a collaborative and integrated sales culture.

This model creates and drives a complex and collaborative organization to deliver unique results in complex times.

Let's move on to describing the stakeholders.



**Figure 2: Sales Culture**

### ***The Customer***

Understand that the customer is probably the most important component of a business' value proposition. If the customer doesn't find value, he is not going to continue to buy. This means that the customer is critical to keeping your business afloat. Now that seems like a very obvious conclusion; however, the implications to each employee are not so obvious. As each employee actually contributes a specific and distinct role to the overarching value proposition, it makes sense that each employee be accountable to consider what will satisfy the customer that is within that employee's realm of control. The customer also provides value by educating you on their evolving needs. Input to your value proposition comes in many forms if you are listening to your customer.

Customer satisfaction, a main economic indicator today, also happens in many ways. The customer experience comes to mind. Customers may love your product and its features, but they also might love that you are always ready to solve special situations or challenges when using your product. If continuous billing problems arise, the customer might experience a level of frustration that supersedes a generally acceptable satisfaction level. So if everyone understands how each job contributes to a customer's satisfaction, there will be less risk of losing that customer. That being said, it naturally

follows that the customer and his satisfaction are critical elements of the sales culture. So how does a company ensure that it is creating a customer-centric sales culture?

Just as everyone is in sales, everyone also serves customers with a focus on their needs, as they impact ability and desire to buy. Customer service is known to be important, but actual focus on customers and their individual needs during the sales campaign is different. It is not done according to a set of customer service guidelines or department processes; it is done according to specific customer needs during the sales campaign. Everyone is accountable to serve customers so that needs are fulfilled through the close of a sale. The marketing and documentation professionals need to support products and services with useful and timely information to enable easy understanding and use. Customer-centric analysis would be critical to those endeavors.

A customer's holistic experience with your company, products, and services is critical. Even when a prospect is considering buying, it is important that confidence is built in the organization that will be providing support during the relationship.

Managing the customer is usually the responsibility of the sales professional. This is a huge responsibility. The face of your company is that of the sales professional. It is thought that sales sustain your company through the acquisition and retention of your customers. Let's be crystal clear here, this responsibility must be shared by many in the organization. Essentially, everything that everyone does touches the customer!!

So let's explore how sales professionals model, share, and distribute those responsibilities throughout your organization for best results.

## ***The Sales Professional***

Good salespeople build relationships with their customers and work to continuously satisfy their needs, perhaps even interpreting their needs before the customer actually realizes what they are. Primarily relating, interpreting, and understanding needs are essential, but even more important is being able to deliver a solution for those needs. This secondary responsibility is where the salesperson must use those external relationship-building skills to create a virtual team within your company. This team will provide the ability to design and deliver solutions to fulfill the customer's identified needs. The responsibility of satisfying and retaining your customers, then, falls to a larger group. Educating and including that larger group in the customer experience is what a sales culture is all about.

The art of sales includes weaving together constituents, people, needs, and requirements to close the sale. The artist is the sales professional, having a highly-honed and developed set of skills needed to identify the mix of all of these components in the right timeframe to get the job done. Just as a painter uses a canvas to combine paint, light, perspective, and color in a complex process to make a beautiful and pleasing painting, a sales professional does the same to find and engage the right mix of people, information, discovery, and strategy to navigate through a complex sale.

Conversely, the science of sales includes the systematic use of those specific and highly-honed skills and tools to enable this mix to work together to close the sale. These skills include personal, relational, and professional business skills. Tools are focused on researching, measuring, and communicating effectively. Processes for measuring sales should be granular, quantitative, and qualitative, ensuring sales professionals' accountability for business results. They can then share clear, concise, and measurable information and expectations with all organizational members.

Combining this art and science is the foundation of a sales culture that facilitates the close of a complex sale in complex times. Your sales professionals, being the link between customers and employees, are the most likely people for creating a sales culture that understands, embraces, and masters this environment. They are the external face of the company, products, and services to your customers. When your sales professionals are supported with a sales culture, your customers are effectively served. There is a systemic downstream effect that serves the customer and your company very well. Everyone is thinking about the customer. Customer-

centric activity is the only activity and this environment, in return, serves and supports all stakeholders with a viable and thriving enterprise.

Sales professionals are accountable to create this culture just as all organizational members are accountable to contribute from their respective areas of expertise. Training and customer service representatives must work together to ensure that training is relevant to each customer.

So how do sales professionals go about creating this sales culture? Essentially, they must build virtual teams to ensure the participation and collaboration of all experts. Hiring sales professionals with strategic understanding of the need for a strong sales culture is a good start. Then you must equip them with the skills needed to form and manage these virtual teams.

### ***Developing Your Sales Professionals***

Sales professionals are a critical component of all healthy, growing organizations. As all critical-path components, these professionals need significant nurturing. Company and sales leaders must ensure continuous investment in educational opportunities, essential skill development, and learning systems. Sales leaders, especially, have a responsibility to coach, train, and develop their sales professionals. Their investment is central to having great sales professionals, a virtual team, and a sales culture. Strategic investment in your sales professionals leads to the viability and sustainability of your company, providing a measurable return on this investment.

Exceptionally important is the sales professionals' development and strict use of quantitative and qualitative measures to track sales objectives as well as the effectiveness of a sales culture. Sales professionals prepared to extend themselves, their skills, and sales metric expectations to the organization create the virtual teams necessary to foster and manage a strong and viable sales culture. A sale, including all work towards quantitatively measured returns, becomes everyone's campaign. How could that approach not return huge dividends?

### ***The Virtual Team Model***

The virtual team is accountable for a great customer solution and experience. The team uses a top to bottom methodology that transforms attitudes and actions for success. It integrates specific beliefs and behaviors

into the fabric of the organization, revolutionizing the ability to connect with customers and maximize revenue. The team empowers everyone in the organization who might impact a specific customer and sale. It is virtual because the members are often in different locations, departments, and/or within different reporting structures. The sales professionals must influence relevant and appropriate participation, even when most members will have no direct reporting responsibilities to the sales professional.

The idea is to support these team members in their understanding of the art and science of sales so that they are able to support the sales campaign. The sales professional helps employees connect their roles and responsibilities with the customer, the customer's needs during a sale, and their continuing needs for service. The virtual team is led by the sales professional and made up of a group of employees whose roles support the closing of a specific sales campaign, delivery of a promised solution, and the support of that solution throughout the life of the customer relationship. An example of a virtual team might include a technology expert, a contracts professional, a customer service representative, and a documentation specialist. This team might be charged with creating a package of services to accompany a piece of software that is being integrated into a larger technical solution.

Candidates for a virtual team are those within the organization who understand the importance of the sale, the customer, and how their roles can positively impact the sales campaign. Finding the right people who want to do the right thing, serve the customer, stay in business, and do well for the company is the task of the sales professional in creating the virtual team. This involves coalescing a team to combine efforts for the customer from a big picture perspective and for longer term value. The sales professional will create this team based on needed expertise, stakeholder ship, and a member's ability to work in goal-oriented and trusting relationships with others. It should be an honor to be invited onto a virtual team!!



**Figure 3. A Virtual Team**

When employees understand these connections, they are able to create a sales culture within their organization. Forming and leading virtual teams to facilitate successful sale closings, then, requires that the sales professional prepare and educate the supporting employees to be good contributors to their virtual teams. This includes creating transparency around the sales workflow, a solid understanding of the art and science of sales, and an expectation of accountability for contributing one's expertise to customer, as well as team, needs.

Creating transparency around the sales workflow lays the foundation for building the understanding of the art and science of sales. These efforts are meant to truly empower everyone to impact a customer and a sale.

### **Sales Transparency**

Everyone on a virtual team must know the details of the sales campaign. Each customer has a different set of needs. A successful sales campaign is going to have an enormous amount of communication going on, such as pipeline status, metrics of the customer's objectives and goals, the context of your own metrics, and general needs that the discovery process has lifted. As all of this information is compiled by the sales professional, technology and CRM solutions can be used to make it available to all members of the virtual team. The technology experts are charged with enabling this communication to effectively support the sales culture. When the technologists understand their role as being customer-centric as opposed to being technology savvy, there is a greater coordination of efforts towards results that serve the customer, both internal and external. CRM and technical "know-how" are essential, but only as they enable the right activities. This is a huge step towards creating a sales culture.

It is also wise for the sales professional to make sure that the team members fully understand the information provided, as well as what that information means to their specific campaign. This is where the sales professional is responsible for continuous and obsessive communication. Every person on the team should understand the campaign activity, requirements, and next steps. People want to be in the “know,” so the sales professional should never miss an opportunity to communicate.

In addition to sharing information regarding the specifics of the campaign, the sales professional has an opportunity to build relationships with virtual team members, recognizing their importance to the culture of sales. Acknowledgement of an extra insight, a job well done, or a customer-focused perspective goes a long way to reinforcing team members’ contributions and integration into the sales culture.

*Are your sales campaigns transparent?*

### **The Art and Science of Sales**

In a sales culture, the art and science of sales is integrated into the fabric of the organization. The art of sales presumes an understanding of how each role creates value and contributes to the process of selling, satisfying, and serving the customer, encompassing the full range and depth of all stakeholders’ views. With a vested interest in the sale, each team member must be considered a stakeholder in a sales campaign and, consequently, part of the sales culture as well. The interdependent and collaborative thinking of these stakeholders is essential to maximizing sales results. Examples of these stakeholders include the CIO, marketing experts, and R&D resources.

Understanding how the pipeline works and where each potential customer is in that pipeline is essential to making that contribution as meaningful as it can be. Virtual team members will be able to integrate their thinking and collaborate with other team members, including the sales professional who is linked most closely to the customer, to expedite the close of a sale.

The science of sales includes the development of personal, relational, and professional business skills as they relate to the company’s objectives and goals in serving its customers. The sales organization can look to the human resource (HR) professionals to integrate these skills into the roles of virtual team members. These HR professionals have the capability to build these customer-centric dimensions of performance into the fabric of the

organization by including them in job descriptions and training and development programs.

Understanding, having confidence in, and using one's expertise as it contributes to the sales process is foundational to creating a sales culture. HR can set this expectation as well as enable it with tangible programs that support this way of thinking.

Fundamental personal, relational, and professional business skills that are critical to being a successful sales professional are the same skills that are critical to being a good customer-centric virtual team member. There are two sets of customers to be served: the internal customer (virtual team members) and the external customer. It is so important to recognize that serving internal customers well will enable the virtual team to ultimately serve the external customer well, too.

Additionally, everyone knows the value proposition. Each can articulate it clearly, using action words and quantitative language. It is a succinct statement that undisputedly clarifies what the product does for the customer.

*Can all stakeholders in your organization articulate your value proposition and how each person contributes to the art and science of the sales campaign?*

### **Accountability for Contributing Expertise**

Virtual team participants, potential or current, should expect **and be expected to** understand customer-specific sales campaigns and how they can help move that campaign towards close. This expectation sets-up the notion of **everyone's accountability for understanding and serving customer needs within the sales campaign**, as opposed to thinking more generally of the traditional customer service role.

This is probably the most important aspect of a sales culture because it is the thought process that ensures its effectiveness.

Accountability for contributing is multi-directional. All individuals must consider their responsibility to everyone whom their actions touch. This accountability requires and ensures that all have an understanding of their impact on delivering business results.

*Do your stakeholders feel accountable for contributing to a sales campaign?*

## ***Building the Sales Culture***

Now that we have defined the concept of a sales culture, it makes sense to discuss how one might actually build this environment within an organization.

There are two initiatives that happen simultaneously when building a sales culture. Both build customer-centricity into the fabric of the company, but in slightly different ways. The first initiative occurs within the sales organization, whose members must create and lead virtual teams effectively to close sales, build and solidify relationships with customers, and retain those customers by ensuring their satisfaction into the future.

The second initiative duplicates the sales organization's culture for the rest of the company. This initiative helps virtual team members use sales skills to satisfy each other so that all can contribute effectively to each sales campaign.

This may seem daunting, so let's clarify.

### **Within the Sales Organization**

A first step in developing a sales culture within a sales organization is to complete an assessment of the sales organization. Measuring and investing in sales professionals' personal, relational, and professional business skills while creating a plan for mastering these skills is essential. As noted above, partnering with HR will be helpful.

Another aspect of building a sales culture in the sales organization is to check on the elements of the sales infrastructure, such as relevant and appropriate metrics and measures, compensation plans, and appropriately targeted hiring. Strategic hiring will never diminish in its importance to creating a sales culture. Another aspect of building a sales culture in the sales organization is to check on the elements of the sales infrastructure, such as relevant and

- 1. Assess the sales organization.***
- 2. Build sales skills as needed.***
- 3. Hire strategically to enhance skills.***
- 4. Assess and build sales workflow to be inclusive.***
- 5. Measure sales results.***

appropriate metrics and measures, compensation plans, and appropriately targeted hiring. Strategic hiring will never diminish in its importance to creating a sales culture.



Are all of these elements reinforcing and rewarding your sales culture activity, your virtual teams, and virtual team members' contributions to closing sales?

The next step is to assess the sales organization's workflow. How are potential customers being managed through the pipeline? How are company experts being consulted and used in this process? A virtual team for each campaign should be the norm. If it is not, then you should consider creating it.

Next, what are the touch points within the company that the sales professionals have identified and developed? Assessing and rating the relationships that support each of these touch points will provide a view into the value that these professionals are able to contribute to the sales culture.

Finally, how are you measuring your virtual teams' effectiveness? Is the full gamut of expertise within the company being utilized? Is the matrix of stakeholders complete?

It is also important to look at the sales organization's effectiveness in sales success and customer retention rates. Does the natural consequence of today's sales process indicate success and sustainability for the company? This question and answer are so important that they may change a company's perspective on how it expects its sales organization to function. What expected outcomes are reasonable, feasible, and perceived to meet the longer term goals of the company?

*Is your sales organization operating with maximum effectiveness?*

## Within the Company and/or Virtual Team

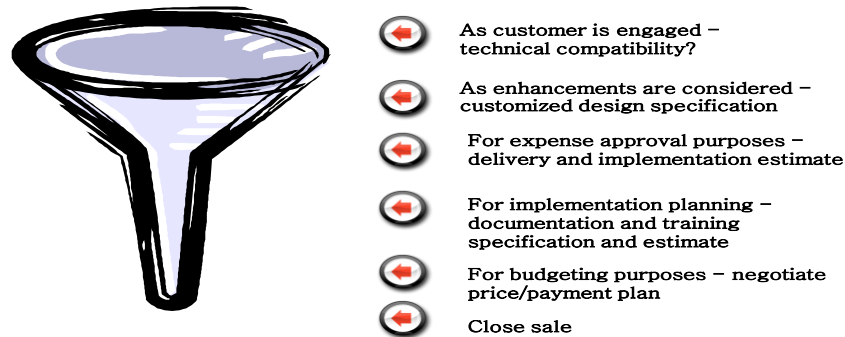
- 1. Assess perceptions of the sales organization.***
- 2. Educate all on a sales campaign and on business results and drivers that direct individual contributions.***
- 3. Assess matrix of complementary relationships for efficiency and alignment.***
- 4. Measure sales results.***

Developing a sales culture within a company or virtual team is similar to but not exactly the same as creating that culture within the sales organization. The first step of evaluating the current state is foundational to that difference.

Step one analysis entails understanding the perceptions of the sales organization as held by the other

employees of the company. If the perception is anything other than a recognition that sales professionals have tremendous responsibility for representing the company to its buyers and stakeholders, with a fundamental need for expert support services, and having actual “make or break” power over company viability, it needs to be changed. This involves an education campaign to help these employees understand the sales workflow (pipeline understanding), need for their contributions, and urgency of creating a sales culture within the company. This campaign should include the idea that sales skills are essential for all employees to foster trusting relationships within the organization to work together as virtual team members when asked to participate.

A second step to building a sales culture across the company includes an initiative to help all employees understand how each contributes to a sales campaign, required business results, and what business drivers are impacted by each individual’s expertise. “How does my service and expertise contribute to the close of a sale?” is a question that any team member might ask. Testing for understanding of the sales organization’s workflow would be essential. If this workflow is not thoroughly understood, how could employees know when, where, or in what way to contribute?



**Figure 4. Pipeline/Funnel with Differentiated Expertise**

What does each expert contribute in helping substantiate the request for the order? What is the connection between one's expertise and the ability to close a sale? Can billing be deferred in a way that enables the customer to buy sooner rather than later? Can some customized code make the integration of the solution easier and less costly to the customer? These are just a few of the potential considerations that an expert might ponder as part of the virtual team discussion.

The third step involves the relationships among virtual team members. Does their matrix of relationships (differentiated expertise) complement each other? Is there awareness of the touch points among these stakeholders and how they can help or align their activities for greater efficiency and value for the customer? This question suggests the ultimate value creation for the customer-centric company.

Finally, an evaluation of the natural consequences of current activity is important. It sets up a discussion on the current workflow and alignment of company resources and how they might impact success in the future.

The sales organization's leaders and members are the most logical and experienced individuals to manage the work needed to create a sales culture within their organization. They will be dependent upon others, for sure, but their connection to both internal and external customers makes them the perfect catalyst to create a sales culture – a thought decidedly worth investment.

*Does your sales culture engage and maximize the contributions of all stakeholders?*

### ***The Resulting Culture***

***"How can I help?" is the predominate mindset.***

Once a company has explored and developed a sales culture, there is tremendous synergy among its employees. It is amazing how customer-centric thinking can establish a common direction and thought process that automatically underlies all activity. It also becomes apparent that all employees are aware of what it takes to close a sale, as well as the attributes needed to do so. All start to demonstrate sales skills and techniques in their internal and external interactions. A "How can I help?" mindset seems to proliferate the organization. It is similar to the networking process. Aggressive and robust networking creates solid relationships.

Customers are understood. Their value to the company is also understood. Once a potential customer starts down the pipeline, why would any organizational member not want to see the sale close? The efforts of all are maximized when this happens and everyone understands that impact to company success.

Retaining the customer with excellent service and accommodation of needs also becomes important to all employees who can help this happen, since everyone now understands the effort necessary to replace that customer with another, from pipeline start to close.

The right people are thinking and working collaboratively, consistently doing the right activities. Working within the matrix is closing sales. It is a continuous and consistent process. Everyone thinks "customer needs" in an all encompassing way, everyday, in every activity.

Job titles take a back seat to what you can contribute to the customer. The tone for this environment is set by a good sales leader, who manages people, not individual customers or portfolios. These leaders are empathetic and great teachers.

Everyone is operating within the same context and with the same end in mind - an invaluable and unstoppable scenario.

***The Most Critical Element of the Sales Culture:  
Educating the Client and the Client Educating You***

One most important element of a sales culture has not yet been discussed, but I save the best for last. Everyone in your sales culture should be open to and will most likely have the opportunity to add this value to your company.

When anyone or everyone in your organization interacts with a customer, there is the potential to educate the customer, as well as to be educated by the customer.

Educating customers on industry trends, interesting facts, innovative ways to use your products, or how they can benefit from your products and services fosters a continuation and strengthening of the relationship with that customer. It is also an opportunity to help the customer understand some additional value of your products or services that might have gone unnoticed or been left out of previous conversations. This could lead to a new sale.

Additionally, being educated by your customers is of great value to your company. Insights into how they think, company direction, new issues arising, an acquisition, or any change in company initiatives or activities provide great leverage for your sales professional. Information of this sort also helps your company define its next strategy, based on customer challenges, insights, or new direction.

Being open to customer education allows you to help them change their “no” response to a sales proposal to “yes.” Their information gives you the ability to interpret and understand their obstacle in a way that directs your virtual team to remove it and consequently close the sale. This process happens often through the trusting relationship that virtual team members can build with customers.

Seeking customer information should be an active pursuit; it should be thought of as a unique opportunity to better understand your customers and their needs. Knowledge of these needs enhances your ability to meet them. Seeking this information creates a solid and assured return on time invested in building the mentality of a sales culture throughout your organization. There is no greater value than that found when listening to the customer.

***As the customer  
educates you,  
educate the  
customer.***

### ***Knowing that You Have a Strong Sales Culture***

So how do you know that you have a strong and vibrant sales culture? Indications of your strengths include many tangibles, such as stakeholder retention, super-engaged employees, new sales referrals, better qualified sales professionals, and increasing revenue.

Employees and customers remain where they feel satisfied and a part of the culture. They will work together to solve problems and appreciate each others' contributions and value. They will innovate together, providing input to your company's next strategy. They will collaborate and impact company successes.

As customers tend not to leave you, they contribute to your efficiencies since you do not incur the cost of replacing them. They also sell for you through referrals as they provide your best testimonials.

Employees also stay since they are satisfied as recognized contributors to the creation of value. Everyone has a pipeline of customers, some internal and some external, but the customer-centric mindset is prevalent in all activity and initiatives. This pipeline of customers actually defines the critical path of one's contribution to the objectives and goals of the organization. Employees are all able to tell you what their critical path is for impacting a customer and a sale. They also understand each others' pipelines and role of others and how they contribute to organizational objectives and goals. The matrix of cross-functional activity is understood by all. All members have energy and passion for the value of their individual roles and contributions to the pattern and fabric of the organization. Each can clearly and simply articulate the value proposition of your company. Customers don't hear a different message from different people with whom they interact.

You will also attract better, more qualified and accomplished sales professionals. These people value winning situations. They recognize that the joint, collaborative work of all stakeholders cannot fail.

Revenue will increase because you have introduced a level of stability into your workflow, which maximizes synergies and overcomes obstacles with a flexibility to accommodate changes, and, therefore, contribute to closing sales.

And finally, the customer is perceived to be king and everyone knows it!

*Are your customers considered royal?*

**Good selling!**

## About Todd Cohen



Todd Cohen works with sales leaders who want to create a sales culture so that more sales happen. Since 1984, Todd has coached and led sales teams to deliver more than \$500 million in revenue for leading companies including Xerox, Gartner Group, Pensare, Thomson-Reuters, and LexisNexis.

Todd, who has developed a natural presence in the field of building sales culture, inspires, advises, and builds high-performance sales teams that produce outstanding results. He provides strategic oversight for teams and serves as executive sales coach and advisor to clients ranging from small, rapidly growing start-ups to well-established, large corporations.

Todd is a passionate networker and connector of sales professionals, entrepreneurs, and executives in transition. He is a professional member of the National Speakers Association, and a board member of the NSA Philadelphia chapter, and he serves as chair of the Sales and Marketing group of the Greater Philadelphia Senior Executives Group. Todd, an occasional contributor to the Philadelphia Business Journal, is the founder of The Innovators Club, a networking organization dedicated to advancing technology and entrepreneurship. He is co-founder of LinkedIn Live Philly, a networking group for members of LinkedIn to advance their professional networking skills, and also helps professionals in career transition. Todd has been active in the American Cancer Society as well as several other charitable organizations. Todd holds a Bachelors Degree in Business Administration from Temple University. He is a frequent speaker at sales conferences and national association meetings and hosts his own radio show "Let's Talk Sales Culture." His book on sales culture "Never Sell Alone" was released in 2010.