

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The Front-Line Sales Manager – Field General

**A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR
SALESFORCE MANAGEMENT**



Noel Capon Gary Tubridy Florin Mihoc

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The Front-Line Sales Manager — Field General

In *The Front-Line Sales Manager – Field General*, our perspective is very straightforward. We believe *the firm succeeds or fails based on the performance of its sellers*. The material in *The Front-Line Sales Manager – Field General* draws heavily from a clinical research study conducted by the authors.

To inform the book's structure and content, we have sourced a variety of related strategic material and frameworks from our own research. To bring the book to life, we have provided extensive commentary from successful sales leaders and FLSMs from many well-known corporations, drawn from our new clinical research study. We believe that knowing what sales leaders and successful FLSMs actually say about specific topics provides valuable *color* to the book. Further, these real-life reports make the messages more applicable for today's sales management challenges.

The Front-Line Sales Manager – Field General focuses on one critical element of firm functioning—the field salesforce. We zero in on one role in particular—the front-line sales manager (FLSM). That person is directly responsible for leading, directing, and managing a group of sellers. If FLSMs are successful, the firm achieves its sales-revenue goals; assuming costs are under control, it earns profits. Profits allow the firm to survive, grow, and enhance shareholder value. Conversely, if FLSMs fail, nobody gets a paycheck!

The Front-Line Sales Manager – Field General celebrates the importance of FLSMs to the firm's current and future health. More importantly, the book offers a roadmap for firms and their sales leaders to provide FLSMs with *the will and the skill* to get behind a customer-centric strategy, and embrace the multitude of organizational changes to make that happen. Furthermore, this book plows new ground in demonstrating and exploring one of the most under-researched, yet overly important, roles in business—not only in the salesforce but in the entire firm. We believe our work offers value to many constituencies.

In Part I, we present a sixfold *acumen* framework—*strategic, organizational, business, team building, resource, personal*—that identifies the core requirements for FLSMs (and their sales teams) to perform at a high level.

In Part II, we take the strong position that the job of sales leaders and senior sales managers is to set the conditions for FLSMs and their sales teams to be successful. In the three chapters in Part II, we highlight these requirements for higher managerial levels.

Chapter 2

Strategic Acumen

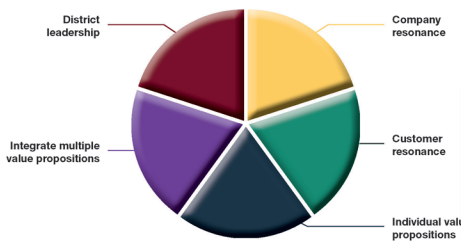
The essence of **strategic acumen** is the ability to think and act strategically. Front-line sales managers (FLSMs) must understand the various competitive and environmental pressures that business organizations—firm, customers, competitors—face. FLSMs must develop and exercise *strategic acumen* so they can enhance relationships with customers, and address the five customer-related tectonic shifts we identified in the Prologue—*greater access to information, increased competitive intensity, cloud technology, new buyers, greater procurement professionalism*.

In many cases, the firm approaches these challenges by evolving the nature of customer relationships from simply being a *vendor* (although that may be quite appropriate in many cases) to becoming a *valued supplier*, or even a *partner*—by forming a strategic relationship. As one sales leader told us:

"We are really trying to work on having a strategic relationship with our customers, and be seen more as consultants than opportunists. Our clients range from very large and complex, to smaller and straightforward, so engaging with them strategically really depends on the type of customer they are."

There are two broad arenas where FLSMs should exercise strategic acumen—*internal* at the firm, *external* at customers. Specifically, strategic acumen comprises five dimensions—*company resonance, customer resonance, individual value propositions, integrate multiple value propositions, district leadership*—Figure 2.1. All these strategic acumen dimensions come together as FLSMs and their sellers strive to deliver the value customers desire, and set the stage for earning revenues.

Figure 2.1 Strategic Acumen Dimensions



sample commentary

case study example

CASE STUDY LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a *disruptive innovator*, a game-changer in human resource management. Essentially, LinkedIn offers firms the ability to search for talent (like executive search firms do), rather than simply post job opportunities and wait for potential candidates to find them. LinkedIn's challenge was to monetize its free-for-members platform, now comprising more than 500 million members. In its search for revenues, LinkedIn developed increasingly complex value propositions, initially based on selling advertising space on its platform. LinkedIn earns revenues in three ways—hire, market, sell:

- **Hire—Talent Solutions.** LinkedIn helps with recruiting by offering corporations tools to access its platform to advertise job openings.
- **Market—Marketing Solutions.** LinkedIn provides brand-building opportunities for firms. LinkedIn earns revenues via advertising.
- **Sell—Sales Solutions.** LinkedIn helps customers better interact with their customers. LinkedIn earns revenues via subscriptions.

LinkedIn earns Talent Solutions revenues on a per-use basis. The more strategic Marketing Solutions and Sales Solutions revenues derive from annual contracts. Although LinkedIn also secures revenues from individual members who upgrade to premium status, its FLSMs and sellers mostly drive company revenues from customer firms. LinkedIn also offers various tools for specific hiring challenges, like securing 500 nurses for a medical facility in Texas.

In the initial stages of LinkedIn's search for revenues, sellers focused on *Talent Solutions*, essentially helping solve short-term tactical recruiting-and-hiring problems. After a couple of years, LinkedIn shifted to a broader strategic focus—*Marketing Solutions, Sales Solutions*. This evolution placed significant stress on its FLSMs' strategic acumen to absorb the evolutionary thinking developed at LinkedIn corporate, and to implement the new customer value propositions with their sellers. Said one LinkedIn FLSM:

"Our conversation used to be about selling advertising space—tactical buys to solve hiring issues. We morphed into strategic conversation, where we are not merely solving narrow human resource [HR] challenges, but a business issue where decision makers are in marketing and branding organizations."

More recently, LinkedIn's selling effort has become more consultative, as FLSMs work with their sellers to act more as customer partners. The conversation has changed, from posting *help-wanted* advertisements, to offering advice to HR departments on how to identify and persuade top people to join their organizations. Essentially, LinkedIn has taken the executive search model and massively increased the scale of operations. Simultaneously, LinkedIn sellers face diverse competition from firms like CareerBuilder, Glassdoor, Dice. Dealing with several transitions in the corporate value proposition, while simultaneously fending off competitors, requires FLSMs to possess significant strategic acumen. One LinkedIn sales leader provided an example of the sort of problem FLSMs and their sellers now solve for customers:

"Suppose a grocery chain wanted to hire a top high-tech person to develop and implement an online grocery operation. Why would a top-tech person choose to work for a grocery? Because it would be interesting to work for that grocery, and building that online platform. But they wouldn't think to work for a grocer in the first place, without LinkedIn. Moreover, how do you, as a grocer, attract that top talent? Talent acquisition and HR is a brand recognition thing, moving the whole discussion to marketing as well. How do they know you as a brand of a great company to work for? So, it is really helping bridge those two gaps: Get all recruiters on the platform, and get all the jobs on the platform, and change that discussion, and helping those customers with their business challenges versus just recruiting. It is not only a hiring discussion, but a strategic-level discussion."

LinkedIn's corporate evolution from recruiting/hiring to strategic discussions with customers has placed a heavy burden on FLSMs/sellers—they do things today they were not doing just a few years previously. The way LinkedIn works with customers is changing because of this mind-shift. LinkedIn helped define how industries can recruit. This immense shift in value propositions required significant strategic acumen by FLSMs.

“Front-line sales managers are THE main driver for sales performance. That is where this book helps reflecting and improving. Great read!”

—Hajo Rapp, Head of Global SAM and Sales Excellence, TÜV SÜD Group
Member of SAMA Board of Directors

A senior executive of a shipping giant captured the focus of this book when he told us:

“The DSM (FLSM) is the highest leveraged position we have in the organization—and the very one we give the little attention to—it’s an oxymoron. Highest leverage than any job”



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who should read this book

FLSM success or failure is critical for the firm. We identify three separate audiences:

- **The salesforce.** This book has value for the entire salesforce, from sales leaders to individual sellers. In particular, three groups should read the book:
 - Front-line sales managers (FLSMs).
 - Sales leaders/senior sales managers.
 - Sellers.
- **Senior firm managers.** This book reinforces the important salesforce role in achieving firm objectives. The book emphasizes the critical FLSM job; it identifies the powerful support that you—senior firm managers up to and including the CEO—can provide the salesforce to optimize FLSM and firm success.
- **Functional leaders and firm employees at large.** The salesforce in general, and FLSMs in particular, are critical in achieving firm success. Functional leaders—customer service, finance, human resources, marketing, operations, R&D—must work with FLSMs to optimize firm performance. By more fully understanding the FLSM job, readers from firm functions will be better able to provide support for salesforce efforts to enhance customer relationships and secure sales revenues.
- Probably, **sales and marketing consultants/advisors** as it provides both the strategic framework and tactical how-to’s when approaching real-life situations.
- **Entrepreneurs.** Professionals who aim at building sales organizations/teams who can tap into the vast knowledge of market-leading firms, and in the many years of experience and exposure to the markets, provided by the sales leaders featured in this book.

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Noel Capon, R.C. Kopf Professor of International Marketing, Columbia Business School, founded Wessex Press, Inc. in 2007. Wessex is a small publisher with global reach focusing predominantly on marketing, management, and other higher-education textbooks. Wessex’s goal is to provide top-quality learning materials at affordable prices. Publishing under the Wessex Press and AxxessCapon brands, Wessex Press, Inc. offers titles in multiple print and digital formats. Wessex also offers video books.

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