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'Making the numbers': How compliance can boost ethical sales behavior

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In today's ultra-competitive business environment, organizations and their frontline sales teams are seeking every advantage possible to drive profitable revenue growth. But this can create challenges and internal friction points that will lead to unethical and sometime unlawful behaviors. Since an organization's sales professionals are typically the face of the company to the outside world, what can an organization's leadership do to ensure an environment and culture are in place to produce highly ethical behaviors on the part of their sales team?

This article outlines practical guidelines and strategies for executives, compliance professionals, and sales teams to ensure that their organization maximizes its sales effectiveness while turning ethics into a sustainable competitive advantage. It is also intended to help compliance professionals better understand the challenges faced by their firm's sales teams and the pressures they are under to perform. This in turn can help close the experience gap between compliance teams and their colleagues in sales. Leveraged correctly, compliance professionals will more naturally be viewed as trusted and valued advisors to a firm's revenue-generation efforts.

Making the numbers

As a business professional with years of experience as a salesperson, sales leader, and sales executive, I've seen firsthand the incredible pressure placed on sales teams to make their numbers. Compensation plans for salespeople are constantly being set, adjusted, and manipulated in an attempt to drive top-line revenue and bottom-line profits. Through weekly sales meetings, sales teams are routinely measured, ranked, graded, compared, and sorted to classify their value and worth.

Few occupations are so easily and heavily measured than that of the sales profession. Given this constant inspection and push for measurable results, it is easy to see why so few feel comfortable pursuing a sales career. With the ongoing pressures of finding new client prospects, learning new products, keeping abreast of evolving industry trends and techniques, closing deals, delighting clients, asking for referrals, and ultimately meeting revenue and profit goals, salespeople can succumb to the use of poor judgment from an ethics and integrity perspective in an attempt to be successful.

With sales teams focused on these unrelenting pressures, the guidance offered by a firm's compliance team may not always be viewed as relevant or helpful to the sales team's mission. In fact, it may be viewed as a hinderance. The more a firm's compliance team understands the pressures faced by their sales team counterparts, the more effective they will be in working within the broader organization and having their voices heard.

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