



Some Kind of Sales Motivation [Are Better than Others](#)

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The late comedian Chris Farley had a Saturday Night Live routine in which he declaimed, “I’m a motivational speaker—I live in a trailer down by the river.” For the SNL audience—which sees itself as hip, skeptical, and not totally pro-Big Business—it was a shared conceit, condescension about a certain approach to sales.

I once had a client who asked if I was a motivational speaker. I’d never heard that one before, and said, “well, I hope what I have to say is motivating to people, but that’s not what I’m setting out to do.” That client heard nothing after my first clause; I lost the job on the spot. Probably an SNL fan.

At the same time, there are hundreds of motivational speakers out there who are proud of that term, and plenty of clients who are proud to hire them. And many of those clients are sales organizations.

So—as comedian Jerry Seinfeld might say, ‘What is it with motivation and sales meetings?’

I think there are three answers: and one is better than the other two.



Charles H. Green, 2009

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THREE KINDS OF MOTIVATION

One type of motivation people seek is defensive. A pep talk fits in this category. Someone who speaks about overcoming tremendous odds. The amputee who learned to throw a football with the other hand. The war prisoner who endured, even learned.

Relationship motivation is about reminding ourselves that we can improve our clients' lives and their businesses; that we are in fact uniquely suited to do so.

This kind of motivation is an antidote to salespeople who are tired—tired of rejection, tired of not making quota, of being turned away. It gives them hope that their turn is just around the corner, and the energy to keep on keepin' on. Don't give up hope. Your dream will come true, just hold onto it. I did. You can too. If I can do it, so can you.

Another type of motivation is aggressive. Get out there and win one for the team. Yay for us, we're gonna win this battle, then the rest of the war. The underdog team plays big in this type of motivation. Only the lead dog has a change of scenery. No one remembers who got second place.

You are part of a winning team. We're number one.

Those kinds of motivation have their place, but they have their limits. Both of them set up “us against them” mentalities. Defensive motivation is us against our customers—I'm not gonna let them wear me down! I'll just keep banging on the door until they have to let me in.

Aggressive motivation is about competitors, not customers. Customers are simply the chips in a competitive poker game, the means by which we score the contest.

But there is a third kind of motivation: call it relationship motivation. It is about reminding us that we can accomplish great things for our clients. And it is inherently positive.

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The mantra of defensive motivation is “the clients can't hurt me.” The mantra of aggressive motivation is “I can beat the competition.” But the mantra of relationship motivation is, “I can help my clients—and I can't wait to start doing so.”



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Both defensive and aggressive are primarily zero-sum games. Winning a job just means you finally won, and someone else lost. Beating a competitor doesn't add value, it just picks a winner.

But relationship motivation is open-ended. By focusing on how to improve the client's lot,

we are open to value-adding ideas which are uniquely the province of joint, collaborative thinking. Relationship thinking is inherently better economics than is me-vs.-you economics.

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GENERATING RELATIONSHIP MOTIVATION

There are, of course, motivational speakers, and they cover all three types of motivation. All have their place, but if your business and your sale are complex; if you think of your business as relationship-driven in large part; and if your sales process is high ticket and takes time, then you should over-emphasize relationship motivation in the speakers you invite.

Of course, motivation is hardly limited to inviting speakers to events. A major area you can influence is in your choice of motivational rewards.

Over the past few decades, we have seen a movement towards thinking of "motivation and rewards" as largely a function of monetary incentives. Sales people will always pay great attention to sales numbers—as they should. But there are important cautions.

First, monetary incentives are entirely about extrinsic rewards. If your entire motivational system is based on extrinsic rewards, you will reduce the importance of intrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards include pride, professionalism, peer respect, and client focus.

Alfie Kohn has written extensively about the negative consequences of overly focusing on extrinsic rewards. It has precisely the same corrosive effect as does focusing on aggressive or defensive motivation in speeches. It separates us from our clients, making client service only a means to a monetary end, rather than ends in themselves.

Secondly, the factor of time is important in extrinsic motivations. If your business



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development efforts are all aimed at this quarter's numbers; if your metrics are primarily short-term, and tracking inputs rather than results, then you are suborning a non-relationship kind of motivation. Longer-term metrics and rewards more genuinely link client and professional, and better align the greater rewards that can come with collaboration.

*Relationship
motivation
produces the best
economics.*

Relationship motivation produces the best economics. Intrinsic rewards do the best job of encouraging relationship motivation. When extrinsic rewards are used as well, it is best to make them long term.

There's nothing wrong with measuring short-term results—the problem comes from managing short-term. The best short-term results come about from executing a long-term strategy, driven by a relationship motivation.

To answer Seinfeld's question about motivation: it depends on which motives you're talking about. And some are better than others.

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