

Place Sales Planning – What are we selling?

I originally thought explaining how to translate effective private sector sales planning into economic development terms would be easy. But, as I have been researching the subject I find there is a lot written on how to be an effective sales person, but little that I could find on what makes a good sales plan. In fact, most of what I found suggested a sales plan was equal to a business plan. That wasn't particularly helpful. Consequently, I've decided to simply reflect on my own experience in a variety of relevant roles such as a sales representation, a manager of national sales force compensation system and a national Director of Sales.

I think, a Sales plan has a few unique characteristics that can be used to differentiate it from marketing planning, although admittedly the two activities are often interdependent.

First, a Sales Plan is all about a 1:1 interaction, marketing plans focus on how to tell your story to targeted groups of people at the same time. A Sales Plan is highly personal, the target is known by name and the goal is to help the target understand how your location is the best choice for their specific capital investment needs.

Second, a Sales Plan typically has a shorter time horizon than a marketing plan. The effort is far more focused and the information customized so the expectation is that results can be delivered sooner. Typically the time horizon for a sales plan is 18 months, while a marketing plan is expected to look forward at least 24 - 36 months.

Third, in general sales people need to be effectively managed in order to deliver the desired results execute Sales Plans. Managing sales people is a very different proposition than managing creative agency personnel.

So what does an effective Place Sales Plan address? This is a subject I will explore through several posts and encourage you to weigh in on with your own experience and thoughts. But, I think it can be described in the answers to 6 power questions.

1. What are we selling?
2. Who do we think will buy it?
3. How are we going to sell it?
4. Why do we think they will buy it (value proposition)?
5. How do we build loyalty with customers that buy it?
6. How do we know if we are on track with our plan?

Let's examine the first power question - What are we selling?

When I first started exploring place branding several years ago, I spent time asking each of the economic development professionals I met, to describe their location as a product. I was amazed by the reaction that simple question created. It ranged from curiosity (because nobody had ever asked them such a question) to embarrassment because the details of their location were not sufficiently top-of-mind to be able to answer the question adequately.

Ask any automobile salesperson the same question and you will get a detailed description of what cars on their lot and what they could possibly order for you if you are willing to wait. Ask a pharmaceutical salesperson and they will tell you the pros and cons of every product they represent, ask an electronics salesperson and you will get a detailed explanation of the key differences between the offerings in their store. Ask an insurance salesperson, a financial advisor, and so on and so on, and you will find they know their products extremely well.

Deep product knowledge is at the foundation of success for effective salespeople. It is only by knowing your location well that you can create customized reasons for why a specific Company CEO should consider investing capital in your community versus alternative locations.

The first thing in the Place Sales Plan is a clear description of what your location has to offer to a capital investor. And, it is very important the information be precise and current. This would include a

listing of all available properties and their relevant detail, as well as the key assets in the community a capital investor would care about. Call this an inventory assessment if you like. But, it is the first and a very important step in creating an effective Place Sales Plan.

If you subscribe to, or are a contributor to an automated GIS program, then you need to make absolutely certain the information you provide is both current and complete. Then you need to make certain the economic development professionals in your area know what your existing inventory looks like and how to quickly get supplemental information if needed.

In addition to the description of your location, include a short discussion on the process you will use throughout the year to maintain the quality of the information. Be specific and describe who is going to do what by when. That way, you can be confident your economic development team will always know precisely what you are selling.

My next post on this subject will tackle the challenge of effective targeting. Because once you know what you are selling, you need to figure out whom you want to focus on selling it to.