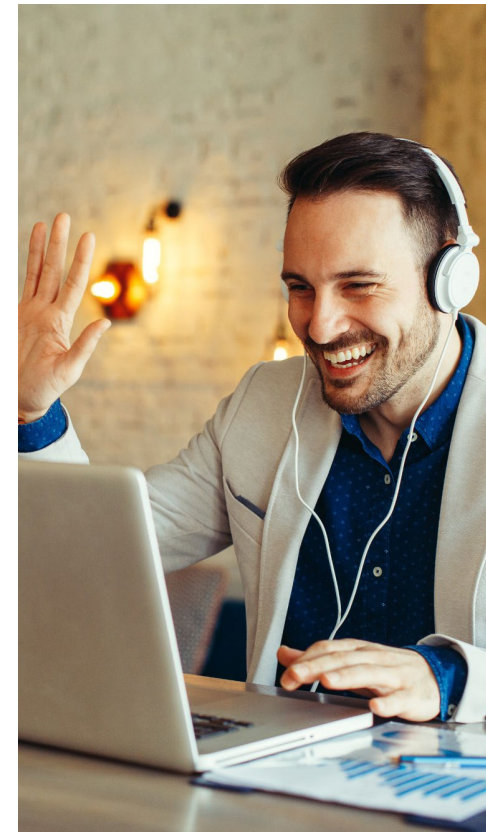


LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL SKO: Avoiding Three Common Mistakes that Lead to Unnecessary Friction

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Traditionally, a Sales Kickoff (SKO) is a milestone event, part of a company's DNA, and the place to re-ignite and recharge the field by celebrating accomplishments, driving excitement among sales reps, and building alignment around the organization's future. It provides an excellent opportunity for organizations to advance their objectives and strategic imperatives. Unfortunately, through our experience, these events often miss the mark in expectations from leadership, the field, and overall return on investment. We find that critical elements to plan and execute an SKO successfully are overlooked at some point during the process, creating friction among those responsible for planning and managing the event. These three critical elements are: (1) ensuring alignment across *relevant*, diverse stakeholder groups, (2) maintaining a focus on the target audience, and (3) recognizing the impact of changes on event design. Attending to these elements ensures a balance between executing a memorable event, making the event relevant to the target audience, and driving business outcomes for the future.



Designing, developing, and executing a sales event: Does this happen to you?

Typically, a Sales Kick-Off (SKO) starts when a sales leader sees a need to celebrate accomplishments, drive excitement among sellers, and build alignment around the organization's future. A committee is quickly assembled with representation from stakeholder groups such as marketing, sales enablement, and operations. A budget is developed, the SKO is announced, and everyone involved in planning quickly shifts into execution mode.

The committee comes up with a plan and assigns responsibilities. Committee members then go off on their own, along with their respective teams, with periodic check-ins as a full committee to gauge progress. It quickly becomes apparent that groups are working in silos with different priorities. For example, some group focuses on event program management, including venue choice or platform identification, event objectives, agenda, speakers, and communications. Other members of the SKO team are focused on content development.

Inevitably, something always happens that leads to minor and, in some cases, significant changes to the event. For example, sales leaders, who are sponsoring the event, are not always involved until a few weeks before the event, and they begin to realize that minor changes are necessary. However, there are other instances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when organizations need to make drastic changes to their SKO plans. Whether adjusting for minor or significant changes, these changes lead to re-work, stress, and late nights for the people putting the event together – all major contributors to friction between team members and others in the organization. More alarming, these challenges can ultimately impact the ability to achieve the desired outcomes from an SKO.

We have identified three common mistakes organizations and planning committees make that lead to unnecessary friction when launching an SKO. By avoiding these mistakes, you will experience better planning, coordination, and alignment between sales leaders, marketing, event planning, sales enablement, and operations, which will help you achieve the desired business outcomes for your SKO.



MISTAKE 01

Planning is not aligned across all event stakeholders

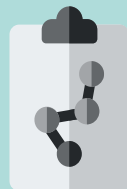
Too often, planning efforts fail to consider competing stakeholder interests and perspectives that influence members of the planning committee when they go off to work on their part of the overall event plan.

- The Event Team wants attendees to remember the experience. Therefore, their priorities are the location (if in-person), the platform (if virtual), registration, and communications.
- Sales Enablement wants attendees to walk away better equipped to engage customers. Therefore, their priorities are breakout sessions that focus on tools and skill development.
- Product Marketing wants attendees to understand product and solution features and benefits, use cases, and “what’s new.” Therefore, their priority is education.
- Sales Leaders want attendees to leave inspired and motivated to execute the strategy. Therefore, their priorities are the main stage messaging and the overall vibe of the experience.

Solution

Ensuring alignment on the business objectives early in the process and understanding the critical decision points the team needs to make will reduce unnecessary friction throughout event planning and execution. Our experience tells us that organizations with the most successful SKOs do the following:

- Align all vital stakeholders on goals or desired outcomes for the event.
- Solicit input from all stakeholders to identify themes.
- Maintain clarity on the red thread throughout the event.
- Coordinate planning and execution efforts by working as one unit rather than silos.



MISTAKE 02

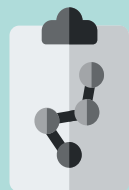
Losing sight of what the target audience needs from the event

When balancing multiple perspectives and priorities, it is not hard to lose sight of the target audience's needs from the event. While everything that an organization does is in service to customers, it needs to be kept in mind that SKOs are in service of the sales force and how they can best do their work in service to their customers. Traditionally, organizations have over-rotated to celebration, inspiration, and information sharing during SKOs, whether the event is in-person or virtual. However, this does not address the comprehensive needs of sales reps, particularly in our environment today.

The reality for sales reps today is that they struggle to achieve work-life balance because they are working longer days, jumping from meeting to meeting, experiencing less separation between work and home, and struggling to disconnect from work outside work hours. Sales reps have demonstrated a prevailing feeling of being disconnected or isolated from their colleagues and their organizations. They are spending more time with their immediate families and re-evaluating what is important to them. We need to recognize that some sales reps will decide whether or not to continue working for our organizations after an SKO. With voluntary turnover at an all-time high (29% of all turnover according to Bureau of Labor Statistics and the US Department of Labor) and low switch costs associated with pursuing other career opportunities, it is vital to make your SKO in service of your team.

Solution

A concept called "everboarding" describes the notion that onboarding or activating customers never stop because products and services are ever-evolving. "Everboarding" is also applicable to your existing sales force. Everboarding is informed by learning science – the realization that one-shot approaches like having a single day to onboard a new employee or share something new with employees in a single session do not endure. An everboarding strategy is a shift from sharing information during a single event to ongoing reinforcement. The organization, marketplace, and sellers constantly evolve, but we leave it to our teams to make sense of these changes. Successful organizations, particularly now, are taking the "everboarding" approach with their teams to engage continually and activate their team in the go-to-market strategy. SKO represents an opportunity to engage participants in meaningful dialogue, workshop ideas, problem-solving, reflect, and plan intentional experiments in the field.



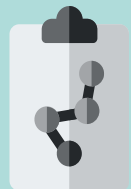
MISTAKE 03

Failing to recognize the impact of significant changes on the design of the event

There are external and internal events that can lead the team to reassess an SKO. For example, disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation of in-person events through the bulk of 2020. As infections seemed to go down and become more manageable in the first half of 2021, many organizations believed it would be possible to hold in-person SKOs once again. However, with a mid-year rise of infections due to the Delta strain of COVID-19, many organizations must now reassess those decisions. As we saw in 2020, many leaders hoping to avoid significant changes found themselves waiting until the 11th hour to make planning decisions for 2021. With limited time to pull off an SKO event after any significant change, the team, including vendors, is thrust into action. Unfortunately, sometimes the group takes action without having a clear line of sight on the overall impact of their decision or based on incorrect assumptions. In these situations, stress builds, and missteps or errors become widespread.

Solution

Significant changes may require redesigning the event rather than simply adjusting or modifying sessions. There is a subtle difference between the two, but one that will determine the impact and effectiveness of the event. Given any significant changes, redesigning the event entails taking a step back and considering how you can best accomplish the event's objectives. We know what you are thinking, "we don't have time for that because the event is only weeks away." We understand your urgency in these situations. However, taking the necessary actions early on will save you time, re-work, and overall frustration. Here are a few steps you can take to make the redesign work to your advantage:



- Quickly convene stakeholders to align the event's objectives given a need to redesign and explore what needs adjusting given proposed changes.
- Evaluate the limitations of the platforms (registration, learning delivery, virtual event, etc.) that can materially impact achieving the objectives of the event.
- Redesign the event by considering the impact of the changes on the scope of the event (national, regional, or global), length of sessions, the balance between mainstage and breakout sessions, strategies for participant engagement, speaker selection, and impact of the red thread throughout the event.



Conclusion

An SKO represents an excellent opportunity for organizations to acknowledge their sales force's contributions and advance organizational objectives and strategic imperatives. However, it is also essential to balance executing a memorable event, making the event relevant to the intended audience, and driving business outcomes. To successfully plan and execute an SKO, event planners must not overlook the three most essential aspects to execute an SKO successfully: (1) ensuring alignment across relevant stakeholder groups, (2) maintaining a focus on the target audience, and (3) recognizing the impact of changes on event design. Ensuring that these elements are top-of-mind considerations throughout the SKO development journey will allow for a memorable event relevant to the target audience and drives business outcomes for the future.

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