

A Frightening Development: Are Your Salespeople Ghosting You?

Dear Stephen:

I am a regional sales manager at a medium-sized furniture and textile manufacturer. I am in charge of an outside sales force which is comprised of one textile rep, two A & D reps, one sales rep focusing on end users and strategic accounts and another sales person who works exclusively with dealers. There is also a showroom manager and a project manager. Including myself, we are eight people in total who mostly get along quite well. I think I have built a good team.

Over the past year I have noticed some odd scheduling quirks among my employees: Two of my salespeople make calls in the mornings and don't arrive at the office until noon. Another person

makes a large number their calls after 3 p.m. and then does not return to the office afterward. One of my people seems to even be ditching work entirely. On the rare occasion that I do see him around the office, it's as if I am running into a ghost. It is difficult for me to complain as business has been good, and everyone is at their sales goals, yet some small and specific things keep bugging me as a manager.

For instance, the woman who is always gone in the afternoon coincidentally matches her time out of the office to when she would pick up her kids from school. The guy who never shows

up has a summer home far from the office and just disappears without any accountability. He is missing most Thursdays and Fridays and almost never checks in with the office when "working from home." Our showroom and offices are in a major city. There is very little reason for someone to work from home.

We use an elaborate CRM program to keep track of sales calls and numbers, and there is one detail that keeps bothering me: Sales are up and steady but the sheer number of sales calls are down. I feel like I am losing control of my team.



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook, and follow him on LinkedIn.

I hate to be that parochial boss, but I really want everyone more accountable and checking in at the office, even if they are at a sales call. I am on the verge of making some institutional changes which would require this type of accountability. I know it will ruffle some feathers but I think it may be necessary step for the business. What do you think?

Signed,

Lonely Larry

Dear Larry:

It is no coincidence the closer outside sales reps get their sales goal, the more independent they become. I don't blame you for feeling haunted by your absent employees. That's exactly what they are! I call them "ghosters."

Ghosters are a growing problem in sales and specifically in this strong economic climate. Let's face it, everyone is doing well, and it is often difficult to attribute to the salesperson. So the profiles you describe are a problem for several reasons.

Conventional wisdom used to say if you were meeting or exceeding your sales goals, the boss didn't

care where you were. I remember when I was coming up in sales there was an old adage "work smart, not hard." Today, however, these are considered dated scapegoat terms. We have proven it is important for field salespeople to be in the office and collaborating with their colleagues in a professional environment. This sort of collaboration increases worker motivation and allows them to share stories, ideas, tips and leads on projects that will help grow future sales. I know it goes against the popular opinion but you are right, salespeople really should in some way, be in the office as part of their routine.

Frankly, your salespeople should be concerned, too. The cliché "out of sight out of mind" comes to mind. It is to every salesperson's advantage to be visible to the boss. Of course, I do not know your company's specific compensation/incentive structure but your salespeople should always be incentivized to work harder and make sure that you know it. This is exactly why I always make sure to advocate for a capless income. In other words, a reason to sell way beyond their sales goal to make unlimited income.

My advice to you would be to send an email to everyone explaining you appreciate their

productivity, yet you still want to see and feel their presence in the office. Then follow that up by explaining it "in person" at a meeting. There are easier and less abrasive ways to achieve this than what looks like a mandatory curfew as well maybe arrange office meetings or institute social time over a provided breakfast or lunch in which your sales people are incentivized to spend time together outside the monotony of work. As long as the time spent isn't actively keeping your salespeople away from your customers.

I don't necessarily envy your position. Outside salespeople are fiercely independent and hate to be treated like children. Yet if it is important to you and common in your corporate culture for salespeople to check into the office, be sure your team members understand this and do it. When you feel like you're starting to see a ghost, write them up. If you still feel haunted after this, then you have the wrong salespeople for your style and what you expect — replace them. No boss needs salespeople this unaccountable, so they will always find another home. It is as simple as that.

Best,

Stephen