

The Reluctant Award Winner

Sales awards make me uncomfortable because they recognize all but the most important people to any business: the customers.



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It was a long time coming, but Walter had finally achieved his goal. Years of hard work, travel, sales calls, presentations, quotes, follow-ups and so on, and he had made it. He stood on the stage at his company's annual recognition dinner with a million-dollar smile on his face. Make that a \$7 million smile. Annual sales of \$7 million was enough to do it, exceeding those of any other salesperson in the entire company. A beautiful crystal trophy, sparkling in the beam of the spotlight, was handed to him by the company president to recognize his achievement as the year's top salesperson. Soon, he would proudly perch the trophy on a shelf in his office. Everyone who entered would know he was No. 1.

A lot of good can come from the hard work and results that are recognized with a sales award. Walter, for instance, had earned some really fat commission checks thanks to his dedication. The extra cash even enabled him to install an in-ground swimming pool behind his house for the benefit of his kids and neighbors.

The fact that Walter had a record sales year was good for his employer, too. Big sales years mean lots of margins for employers, margins that can be reinvested in business growth or put away for a rainy day. Maybe Walter was so good at selling that his customers paid top dollar, more than he and his employer would have been willing to settle

for, further boosting margins. And sales awards breed even bigger sales numbers in the future, because sales awards spur competition among salespeople. Good salespeople tend to

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be competitive people, and competitive people like to win. Sales awards motivate competitive people. Likewise, competitive people hate to lose. When a competitive salesperson sees a colleague win a sales award, the competitive fire may be stoked in such a way that both achieve more in the following year.

Walter's amazing year was great for his co-workers, too. As the adage goes, nothing happens in business until someone sells something. And plenty happened as a result of Walter's success. Customer service staff had customers to serve; production staff had product to produce; the accounting team had invoices to complete, receivables to collect and profits to count; materials were received; and orders were shipped, all by people who otherwise would have had little to do. The suppliers to Walter's company

also prospered, as they were able to sell more products to Walter's employer. Thanks to Walter's success, his teammates had more secure jobs, and his company's suppliers more secure futures.

Yes, the success that a sales award represents extends far beyond the salesperson, benefitting family members, employers, co-workers, suppliers and more. Why, then, do they make me so uncomfortable?

I won a sales award once; I appreciated the gesture on the part of the organization that gave it to me. The intention of recognizing my success was genuine, and I accepted the award gracefully. But it's still in its box somewhere. I brought it home from the event at which it was given to me, and that was it. Never once did I display it in my office.

Sales awards make me uncomfortable because they recognize what is good for me, my family, my employer and my colleagues, leaving out perhaps the most important people to any business: its customers and those who benefit from using its products.

We can win a sales award for work that does not necessarily benefit our customers. Selling customers products they don't need, at prices higher than we otherwise would, and investing 100 percent of our time making one more sales rather than investing part of it making sure our current customers are 100 percent satisfied can all lead to higher sales and bigger trophies, but that doesn't justify these actions. Not to say that everyone who wins a sales award engages in these practices; many do not. But I wonder about the motivations produced by focusing solely or extensively on dollars.

Awards for adding the most value for customers, caring about them more than anyone else, innovation, business integrity, generosity, vision, mentoring and creating opportunities for others? Sign me up. Sales awards for closing more deals than anyone else? Leave those for Walter. ■

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