

# Ito1 MIAMI HEAT SCHOOLS ITS STAFF ON SALES AND SERVICE

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## HOT TOPIC: SALES

The Miami Heat basketball team's sales and service representatives went into a full-court press this past summer. The goal? To expand their expertise through cross-training.

For the NBA team's customer service reps, it means learning basic sales techniques they can employ during calls with customers. For the sales team, it means a deeper understanding of the value of service and how that ties into the customer relationship.

"Our company's focus changes depending on demand," says Debbie Knowlan, director of season ticket services and retention for the Miami Heat. "If we're sold out then we're service-driven. Since we're not sold out, our entire organization is focused on driving sales."

Knowlan, who cut her customer service teeth in a previous position with Ritz-Carlton, says that sales coaching has helped the service staff deliver for the organization, which just finished a very challenging season. "Last year we started providing our service people with the same training that our salespeople receive. It's given them the tools they need to close sales more effectively and it's increased their confidence."

Knowlan and Mark Brown, director of sales, maintain a close and collaborative relationship that extends to their training approach. Consequently, they both conduct sales and service training using methodologies from the same companies: **LRA Worldwide** and the 800-Pound Gorilla. And they follow the practice of providing cross-functional training based on two concepts. "The first concept is that sales and service are, at their core, the same," says Zach Conen, vice president of **LRA Worldwide**. "The ultimate goal of both functions is to create value for the customer that leads to a long-term relationship."

While salespeople are selling, they also should think about how they can meet customer needs. While service reps are meeting customer needs, they should think about other products and services that they can offer to customers. This now occurs within the Heat organization. Its sales team's training has been massaged to emphasize the value of service. And sales and service representatives team up more frequently to upsell existing customers, Knowlan says.

"When one of our service reps followed up with a season ticketholder, the rep learned that he wanted better seats," she says. "So, the service person contacted his premium accounts partner and they worked together to successfully upsell the account to premium-level seats."

The second concept **LRA's** Conen emphasizes is the relationship. "It's not about 'sales' or 'service,' it's really about the interpersonal relationship that your company develops with your customers, regardless of whether that person wears the title of 'sales,' 'service,' or even 'janitor,'" he says. "Developing this emotional connection is key, whether it's forged over two minutes with a customer service representative, two years with a sales rep, or two decades with a CEO."

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This concept works well for the Heat. "I've received a surprisingly high number of calls and notes from season ticket holders that essentially say, 'If it wasn't for [service representative] Kenny or Cathy, I probably would not have renewed based on the season alone,'" Knowlan says. That connection is crucial following this past season, in which the team lost its star player Dwyane Wade to injury, traded away fan-favorite Shaquille O'Neal, and won only 15 of 82 games.

The service reps establish an emotional link by investing time and effort to get to know season ticket holders personally—they know when they celebrate anniversaries, their children's birthdays, and how they feel about roster changes and the team's performance. All of this information is fed into the ticketing system, a tool that Knowlan describes as crucial to the company's sales and service performance. Both the sales and service teams access the system to learn about customers.

According to Knowlan, the sales coaching has paid off for her service staff. After last season many season ticket holders expressed displeasure at the team's performance. Service reps now listen and point out that the team is two years removed from an NBA championship, expects injured All-Star Wade to return, added a three-point sharp-shooter, and drafted an all-star rookie who was one of last year's top college players.

"Season ticketholders really want someone to listen to them," Knowlan says, adding that now both the sales and service staff are trained to listen and make the most appropriate offer. "Having that knowledge of how to properly sell...has given [service reps] the tools they need to close the deal."