

# Copier Careers White Paper

## Copier sales burnout: when the “opportunity clock” stops

Most salespeople know their job means to work under pressure, increase revenue and help the company grow. Making the numbers helps a true salesman get up in the morning – motivation guru Zig Ziglar refers to his alarm clock as his “opportunity clock.”

That clock stops buzzing for some salespeople. When fiscal demands aren't met, quotas get tough and pressure is the game, it can send salespeople silently on their way and cost a company thousands of dollars yearly in turnover and retraining.

The copier industry boom of the 1990s flip-flopped as the decade waned. Customers sidled into a more elusive mode. It used to be more sales were walk-ins, but now it's difficult for salespeople to get an initial appointment with a customer, according to Ken Harouff, a Document Solutions Manager for Machabee Business Equipment, Reno, Nev. Said he: “It is the economy that has changed the sales outlook.”

Price is often the determining sales factor and customer loyalty is low, said Joe Allison, a sales manager heading for a new management slot in Pasadena, Calif. in late January. Copier sales traditionally are based on relationship selling, he says, but now cold calls figure prominently.

Even top salespeople know how it feels when sales success is tough. “They're always looking for your numbers and you're only as good as your numbers,” said John Hekker, who represented sales for a national copier company four years and now does incentive marketing for a promotional company near Detroit, Mich. “You may be a star one month and then you're treated like dirt the next,” he said.

“In sales, you have to believe in what you do,” said Harouff. And the sales chessboard has high potential for success and failure. Sometimes the interest of a “hot” potential client disappears – common when a competitor may be anywhere from two doors to 10 states away. When a sale evaporates for little apparent reason, salespeople say it's hard for a salesperson to put on the “game face” for the next sale.

“I think that's a situation that creates burnout,” Allison said. “You put a lot of effort into a sales situation and maybe something comes along that takes it away from you.”

Salespeople start wondering about their own ability if they go long periods without a sale, said Allison. Two women successful in sales five years were hired as a team for a copier company of Allison's acquaintance. They were asked to make cold calls without a customer base and attain a high revenue quota. These two women were discouraged within months, and the copier company soon lost two people who Allison assessed as having high sales potential.

Techno-stress is something that dogs managers and line salespeople alike as rural companies transit people from analog standalones to digital networks. Rob Mullen, an information technology-savvy Rochester, N.Y. copier salesman, was asked to do everything from training personnel to setting up copier/printer networks from scratch at a former company. While having the technical capability to do the work, he said he told management he was stretched too thin, but his concerns were ignored.

“I tried to voice my concerns with the company for six months before I left them,” Mullen said, “and then I went into business for myself.”

### The quiet good-bye

Time drags for the person nearing burnout. “It starts to become old when it's not fun anymore,” Hekker said. “The clashes, the pushing – you start going where you don't want to go.”

Stress symptoms appear first, according to Ruth Luban, a Santa Monica, Calif. psychologist who has an audio workshop called Burnout: Keeping the Fire, (available at [www.corporaterefugees.com](http://www.corporaterefugees.com)). There may be health issues, or extroverts may have social withdrawal or isolation. There may be excess drinking, smoking, overeating or gambling. The problems may spill into family relationships, too.

It may be external pressures that contribute, too, but often it is rooted in self-confidence and the salesperson's perceptions about his or her ability.

“Panic or fear of job loss or dejection leads to giving up,” Luban said. “I've seen both in salespeople.”

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Sales managers say there are mismatches where firing may be the only solution. When salespeople leave, Hekker says there is usually not a party or send-off for the person. Usually it’s a quiet exit and no one ever hears from them again. Harouff says a few copier salespeople go from dealer to dealer, but most do not.

“Most of them rotate right out of the industry,” Harouff said. “It’s a tough industry.”

## Recognizing near-death of a salesman

Salespeople may confide in their peers that they’re in trouble, but rarely to management, according to Hekker. Experienced salespeople get used to “playing close to the chest.” That means not revealing big prospects on the horizon until the sale is imminent, Hekker says.

“You don’t want to put out there that you have a large account coming in,” he said. “If it doesn’t come in, then it’ll look like you blew it.”

Salespeople also may stay tight-lipped with management as their own sales-figures rowboat is going down. They may not want to focus management or sales team attention on themselves.

Salespeople sometimes succeed because of a unique approach. If pushed too far away from an individual’s sales style – the proverbial round peg in a square hole – burnout is inevitable, according to Luban.

“Burnout occurs when the bottom line is not met, when their managers are intimidating and critical about their not making their numbers, and little or no positive reinforcement occurs unless they score those sales,” said Luban. “Over time, their energy inevitably erodes. They watch weeks go by without success. They compare themselves unfavorably with peers who may be scoring when they’re not. Concurrently, peers get more competitive, sometimes vicious, in coveting the smaller pool of available customers. I’ve heard stories about sales people invading their peers’ territory, stealing customers, etc. just to make those numbers.”

A salesperson burning out may give rise to some clichés about salespeople. In an article at HR.com called Death of a Salesman: How to Keep Your Revenue Engine from Burning Out, Joni Johnston, a clinical psychologist, wrote, “Negative stereotypes about salespeople abound. In reality, though, the dishonest, pushy, manipulative salesperson isn’t a typical salesperson - she/he is a burned-out salesperson.”

## Three “M’s” for managers

A good sales manager will motivate, mentor and monitor, Allison said, and in this manner, give positive strokes to the salespeople. But sales managers can be non-motivators, too. “A lot of these managers are big talkers and are ‘rah-rahers,’ but give no support,” Allison said.

Sales managers are sandwiched between the salespeople and those above them demanding unrealistic numbers, Luban said. “Some are more worker-oriented, particularly those who rose through the ranks and can stand in the shoes of salespeople. Others are numbers-oriented and have never experienced the slings and arrows sales people encounter in tough economic times. Compassionate managers approach their sales people best by acknowledging both sides out loud. In other words, allowing sales people to vent their frustrations and the realities they are bumping into, validating the sales people’s perceptions, but also describing the company’s needs for particular outcomes.”

Recognizing something is amiss with a salesperson is the sales manager’s responsibility. “They (sales managers) have got to do the responsible thing,” Harouff said. “They’ve got to sit down and have a heart-to-heart.”

Luban has outlined antidotes (see her prescriptions for recovery in the other article on CopierCareers.com, Economic Heat Can Burn Out Copier Techs) for burnout that work for salespeople, too. From a healthier lifestyle to quality time with a support group, all can help a salesperson gain better overall life balance.

Managers can get the best out of their salespeople by asking them to be part of the burnout solution, Luban says, rather than making more demands and taking a hierarchal stand.

“Again, in terms of burnout, sales people tend to over-identify with their products,” she said. “They have to in order to be successful. So managers can get more from their people by allowing them to identify with the problem and brainstorm solutions that could create win-win all around.”