



# How to *play* the **Game**

Most businesses are so focused on extinguishing the everyday “fires” that crop up that they don’t have time for “big picture” thinking.

This paper will help you develop and implement a business strategy to reach your financial goals.



STRATEGIC PLANNING &  
IMPLEMENTATION ASSOCIATES, INC.

**Strategic Planning & Implementation  
Associates, Inc.  
195 Merrimack Meadows Lane  
Tewksbury, MA 01876  
(978) 640 0803  
[www.spainc.com](http://www.spainc.com)**

## SECTION 1: How this report came about and why we thought it was necessary to share.

At SPIA, we focus exclusively on advising business owners and sales executives how to increase their company's revenue. To do this, a business must increase sales...somehow. We have found that companies accomplish this using different strategies: acquisitions, bringing on additional lines to represent, or adding more sales reps. You name it; someone has done it – all in order to drive sales and increase revenue and profits.

In order to understand why some companies were consistently growing while others were erratic in their revenues, we set out to understand if there was something that truly distinguished the businesses. Was it the industry they were in? Was it the economy? Did they have a niche that no one else had targeted? Did they have a knack of hiring sales superstars? Was it great sales management?

### What exactly was it...?

We quickly learned that sales efforts varied widely, from the aggressive recruiting of sales superstars and giving them lots of perks to sending the salespeople out to hit more doors (a.k.a. work harder!) all the way down to hoping for word of mouth referrals from their current accounts.

**When we went through everything, we found a common thread. The difference between companies that consistently grew their sales (and revenue) and the ones that were erratic was that the successful companies:**

1. Had a key person in charge focused on growing the business.
2. Had a process in place for the sales team to follow.

The key person in the business was sometimes the president and sometimes it was the sales executive – but there was someone focusing only on revenue growth.

In regards to the sales team, when we say a process we mean a series of well thought out steps that eliminated the random reactive efforts of the team. The term reactive was found to be true in just about every one of the erratic revenue producing companies we studied. Those sales teams came in each day and simply went the way that the day took them.

This often meant pushing off all-important prospecting time and other revenue producing activities in favor of extinguishing the “fires” of the day. We found that successful companies had processes that took all of the guesswork out of the selling process. They were structured so that the company could hire good, personable people, plug them into the system and be able to manage and monitor them. It seemed so easy. We wondered, “**Why wouldn't everyone do this?**” So we investigated and found an answer to that as well...

## Section 2: Why would revenue generation take a back seat – especially when it’s so important?

We dug deeper and asked the business owners and sales executives who didn’t have a process in place this question: “Why wouldn’t you take the time to do this?” We got all sorts of answers. Out of those responses, we found that, while they agreed that having a process for the sales team to follow was extremely important to their company’s success, they said the problem was that they were so focused on reacting to today’s problems –the day to day fire extinguishing – that they never took time to work on “big picture thinking” as they called it.

They said that there was always something that came up – no matter how hard or how many hours they worked to catch up. Now we were really getting somewhere. Logically, it made sense. If you see that something isn’t working and it’s hindering you, fix it and move on. But this went well beyond logic. The ongoing “tornado” so overwhelmed these professionals that the big picture thinking was nothing more than a distant memory that they had when they started or joined the company. What had happened was that the habit of reacting to everyday challenges made them into a jack-of-all-trades and master of none – not good.

Let’s look at a similar scenario. The person responsible for steering a ship, the captain, is not focusing on the destination and the best way to get there. He’s so “busy” because one of the sails has ripped and is causing a problem, plus the cook was asking what to make for dinner and the ship’s doctor has found two of the sailors sick and wanted to know what to do about it. Seriously, would you want to be on that ship? It doesn’t look bad from the outside but when you get on board and start to look around – something just isn’t right.

The business owners we spoke with also shared that confusion – although not apparent on the outside – just might be something “spinning around” in the back of the sales team’s head – holding them back from selling more. Suggestions were offered by the sales team and typically put off by management because something else was more pressing. It was like one of those things in your life that you know needs to be dealt with, but nobody wants to do it – at least not now. Kind of like the 2-ton elephant in the middle of the room that nobody talks about? Exactly.

Then it dawned on us! The sales team had the very same traits as management -- they were reactionary as well. Was there a correlation? You bet there was.

The people on the sales team in the erratic companies were always putting out fires and running around – just like the business owners and sales executives. How did the continually growing companies fix this?

We’ll show you how in 10 steps...

### Step 1: They listened to the voice.

They told us that they weren’t sure what exactly it was, but it’s probably best known as a “gut” feeling. It was that voice inside them that said something is wrong and needs to be looked at. For the sales executives, it was the voice that said “*Don’t sell to this person – they’re bad news – they’re going to be a nightmare client.*” But they sold to them anyway. Saying things like “It’ll be fine.” But it never is. The client isn’t happy and the people who have to deal with them aren’t either. That’s no-win situation.

Why did this happen? They told us they didn’t listen to their gut – that’s why. The business owners and sales executives who had consistently growing revenue in their companies told us that they listened to that voice – they didn’t ignore it – and took action to start to fix it. In short, they slowed down, stepped out of the tornado and asked themselves one simple question: If I continue to follow my current pattern, where will we be in 5 years? If the answer was simply 5 years older – then they made changes.

## Step 2: They scheduled the time to simply think.

This might sound a little crazy with everyone being so “busy” all the time, but it’s true. The business owners/sales executives had to get away from the tornado and simply slow down. Their offices were always humming with activity – in some ways that’s good and in some ways it’s bad. They said that when they were in that tornado it was easy to ignore all of the big picture thinking because things were always going on. Many of the business owners and sales executives scheduled time before work, during the work day and/or after work to get in their “thinking time,” and this time never got rescheduled. They said without scheduling the time, it simply would never happen – period. This was time dedicated to big picture thinking – macro level thinking. What exactly did they do during their “thinking time”?

We found that out too...

## Section 3: The Process

While there were many different ways to look at this thing, we focused on the elementary steps that each of the consistently growing companies seemed to follow.

Some didn’t even see them as steps until we pointed them out. The point was that the business owner/sales executive and the sales team all had some semblance of an overall process that they went through – together.

### Step 3: They started reading.

Once the time was set aside, these executives got their hands on everything and anything they could find about their respective industries. They looked in trade magazines, industry newsletters and searched on the internet. They looked for any industry news and/ or analysis that was being conducted in their industry. Why? They were searching for trends – particularly any trends that could lead to a new opportunity for them to grow revenue in their companies.

For example:

1. What strategies for increasing revenue are working well for other companies in my industry?
2. What are the best ways to hire and develop salespeople for maximum growth and productivity?
3. Are there any opportunities to partner with “players” who serve the same industry?

These leaders – plain and simple – had their eyes and minds focused on looking for opportunities. They knew that those opportunities would work for their companies but, for some reason, never took the time to search out and implement – until they got serious about growing revenue.

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***“ The business owners and sales executives that had consistently growing revenue in their companies told us that they listened to that inner voice - they didn’t ignore it - and took action to start to fix it. “***

#### **Step 4: They learned about their competitors and built a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) for their company.**

The successful executives told us that many businesses could name some competitors off of the top of their heads – that’s the easy part. The difficult part was learning answers to the following questions that would truly allow them find ways to position their business to win deals against them.

1. What are these company’s true strengths and weaknesses?
2. What about their distinctive competencies?
3. What are the competitive advantages you have that you can leverage to gain more clients?

The successful executives said that until these questions were answered in detail there would be no way to position their companies to effectively win more clients and increase revenue. The term “unique selling proposition” was found to be a very big deal when it came to how they could be different (and hence sell for a higher margin) in the marketplace.

The USP was defined as something that made them demonstrably unique in the marketplace (and not the old “we have good service and/or experienced people line.” It’s important that the USP is not just a collection of product/service features, but that the implementation of the company’s products results in measurable customer benefits.

#### **Step 5: They began to model the “top dogs” among their competitors.**

When we looked at the elementary steps that all of these successful companies took, one element seemed to be the most common: “Common sense isn’t so common,” we heard time after time from these successful executives when we asked why more businesses didn’t take this step. After all, we reasoned, why reinvent the wheel when you can benefit from the success someone in your industry has already achieved?

When you look at the competition, here are high performing and growing companies that consistently seem to be at the top of their categories. The successful executives repeatedly told us that it was essential to look at the industry’s “top dogs.” Once done – the goal was to see what they’re doing and you’re not and fix it.

For example:

- What systems did they have in place operationally, financially and marketing wise that were making them the industry leader?
- Were they using a certain type of software that was designed for the industry?
- What type of marketing campaign was in place to continually grow the business?
- What was their process to recruit, hire, train and motivate the sales team?

***Without a USP, they said, they were nothing more than a “me too” commodity, and commodities are judged only price – something they wanted no part of. We found that none – repeat none – of the successful companies were without a USP.***

We wanted to know exactly how they got that information. “Easy” one executive said. “Call the company before going to an industry trade show and see if you can set up a time to meet them there. They’re almost always there and they’re very willing to help – that’s how they got large. In fact many of them are now regarded as an information source on the entire industry.”

Once they got the info, they said that the easiest way for them to look at all of the comparisons to the “top dogs” was to put it on a spreadsheet. Once done, they could look at how their company stacked up to the “top dog.” Some told us that this was often a difficult step for them to take because they learned just how much they were behind the curve in building their businesses in their industry.

### **Step 6: They asked themselves “What’s possible with what I’ve got?”**

After learning about the competitors and the industry top dogs, all of the executives in the successful companies – one way or another – took a serious look at what they had for resources and asked themselves one very important question: “What am I capable of doing with the resources I have?” Sometimes this was just a passing thought and sometimes it was an all day meeting with their executive team. During this time, they thought about things like:

1. Can I grow by 10% per year with the current sales and business development teams?
2. If the top dog has the same number of sales reps – why isn’t my team producing more?
3. Once the sales start to come in – can the back office handle the additional volume?
4. Is there an angle that I’ve been missing with the team?
5. Do I have them following the same routine they did 5, maybe 10 years ago?
6. Am I being honest about their capabilities? If I’m not, how do I get the wrong people off the team and the right people on the team?

When they focused on (and were honest about) the capabilities of their existing teams, there were often glaring weaknesses. These typically were weaknesses that they already knew were there, but they chose to ignore with the “I’m so busy” mindset.

### **Step 7: They questioned – and rebuilt if necessary – the way they went to market.**

Before they could work on the sales team, all of the successful executives realized the need to re-examine their go-to-market strategy. After all, they told us, even the best sales team wouldn’t be any help if the market had changed and their product/service mix didn’t. Examples of some difficult questions they asked themselves in his step included:

1. Were their current lines outdated or still reflective of what the market needed and wanted?
2. Was the pricing structure still competitive in the marketplace?
3. Did they need to add additional products and services to make them competitive?
4. Did the market require a next-generation online ordering system or other new technological advancement?

Once they examined and evaluated their current offerings, they took the all-important action steps to correct any weaknesses that could be hindering revenue growth. Taking the action steps to correct problems seemed to be coming up over and over as a trait that just about all of the successful companies had.

**Take the all-important action steps to correct any weaknesses that could be hindering revenue growth**

**Step 8: They put together a process to figure out how this would actually be possible – with all of the departments working together.**

This was what the successful executives seemed to call, for lack of a better phrase, “How exactly do I pull this off?” They said they asked themselves questions like:

1. How much financing is needed?
2. What operational functions were required?
3. Would the current marketing strategy have to be changed?
4. What would I need to do with the sales team?
5. Would this fit into our culture and, if not, does the culture need to be changed?

After looking at these questions from a macro view, the successful executives could envision how it would happen internally. They told us that they had to see how each department could pull off their part so it would all come together and actually start to work. In order to have “buy in” from the whole company, they had to figure out if it was actually feasible. Once again, the successful executives built, or had their departments build, the all-important action steps that would make everything a reality.

**Step 9: They actually did what they said they were going to do!**

This is – once again – a blinding grasp of the obvious, but the successful executives then implemented the action steps that they had agreed on and the held everyone accountable for following through. This sounds so elementary, but we found that many of the erratic companies fell down on this part that, so it had to be much more than coincidence. The erratic revenue producing companies had the tendency to let the action steps wait until (pick one) the spring, the summer, the fall, the winter or until after the holidays were over etc. There always seemed to reason to delay deliberate action. This one step alone -- taking action on what they knew was good for them -- seemed to keep coming up as the main difference between successful and the not-so-successful companies.

**Step 10: They put all of the steps that were necessary to succeed company wide(especially in sales and business development) into a system and trained on that system.**

The successful executives all told us that their businesses could only be as successful as their systems allowed them to be. There was simply no other way to do it.

Once implemented, these systems became a work in progress and were constantly being tweaked. They shared that when a new project/challenge came up that they always had a system to fall back on; a way that would not require the “re-inventing of the wheel” as they put it.

What those systems also allowed them to do was train their current and future employees on the way things function in their companies. Every department, from every member of the sales team to the person answering the phone, could be trained on what works.

It came as no surprise to us that the companies that were successful in building revenue had a well trained sales team on how to do it. When new sales reps came on board, they:

1. Felt comfortable because they were well prepared and hence sold more.
2. Had something to fall back on when they faced a challenge.
3. Could easily explain to their manager exactly where they went wrong and it didn't turn into a guessing game for either one.

Even the experienced reps told us that:

1. Armed with a real USP they felt confident that they could win deals where they were not the cheapest price.
2. They knew what worked and when they were in a “slump” they simply went back to the process that kept them on top of their game.
3. Once they had a system to work with, they became even more comfortable because now they could save so much time by not re-inventing the wheel for every sale.

## Final Thoughts On Our Report

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Business owners and sales executives often lament that they are at a disadvantage because they don't have the capital and/or resources to train the sales staff the "right" way. To that we disagree. We have seen many small businesses grow because the people responsible for building revenue made a decision to make it happen and held themselves accountable to do it – period. Successful executives always found a way to make things happen. The unsuccessful ones always found a reason why it couldn't be done.

It could be reading about a competitor, finding out what recruiting methods work or simply listening to your inner voice. More than likely, it's a combination of many of the things already covered in this report. Whether you leave these things to happen by chance or actually make plans to implement them is – as always - up to you.

## About SPIA

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SPIA is a sales and business development solutions company dedicated to giving you the tools to grow your business. While other consultants focus their training on "closing the deal," SPIA's philosophy targets filling your sales funnel. We work with companies of all sizes to help them capitalize on sales and business development opportunities in order to grow revenue and build a healthy company positioned for long-term, sustainable growth.

**To discuss how we can help your company, please contact:**

**SPIA at: 978.640.0803 or [cstimmel@spiainc.com](mailto:cstimmel@spiainc.com)**

## About the Author

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Craig Stimmel, CMC – Executive Vice President and Founder of SPIA. Since 1971, Craig knows and understands the world of large corporations as well as the challenges facing entrepreneurs. He has helped hundreds of companies increase sales revenue by managing various business processes more effectively.

A dynamic speaker, Craig spoken before associations, conventions, trade shows and conferences worldwide, helping audiences understand market trends, recognize new market strategies and position themselves to take advantage of new business opportunities. Craig's articles have appeared in numerous business & trade publications in the US, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany, UK, Czech Republic, Russia, Turkey, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

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