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BSC's Guide to Success

Top 10 Tips to Ensure a Successful Sales Compensation
Assessment and Design Project

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Better Sales Comp: Guide to Success

Creating the most appropriate sales compensation program often requires a significant effort, following a methodical process with involvement from a wide range of key stakeholders. While the best designs require careful study of your particular strategies, company culture, and compensation objectives, our experience with hundreds of clients leads us to conclude that there are a range of factors that help ensure a successful design project outcome and process. This “Guide to Success” provides BSC’s Top Ten Tips when an organization takes on the task of improving its sales compensation program.

1. Substantiate and Confirm the Business Case for Change

The inception point for a new design effort starts with answering a simple question – *why are we doing this?* While this may appear somewhat obvious, we find that projects that end unsatisfactorily or crawl along at a snail’s pace often end up in that situation because the reason for considering and making changes was never precisely or clearly identified. There should be at least one compelling driver and a real need for change to the sales compensation program. Some prime examples include:

- The company has a new strategy – products, markets, growth objectives.
- New sales roles are emerging or being considered to achieve that strategy.
- Quantitative analysis identifies that the plans are paying unexpectedly, out-of-alignment with performance, or simply with a poor return on compensation spend – often measured through Compensation Cost of Selling (see more on this in our online BSC blog).
- The Compensation Board expresses concerns and wants to ensure sales compensation plans manage and minimize risk accordingly.
- Leaders or managers feel plans are out-of-alignment compared to best practices or current business environment.
- Turnover is suddenly or unexpectedly higher for the sales team.
- Merger and acquisition activity occurs – requiring incorporating sales teams and/or compensation programs.

This sampling gives a good sense of some key drivers of plan change; the key point is that there needs to be a compelling purpose or any efforts have a much-reduced chance of success.

Related to the notion of “why”, the various drivers often lead to different implications for the assessment and design process. Some require less rigor and fall under the notion of a plan audit or assessment, possibly followed by minor sales compensation plan tweaks. Others, particularly those representing significant strategic shifts, typically indicate the need for a more intense effort to identify and manage the organization through the change.

The potential degree of change helps companies understand both, **what they are up against** and **what it will take to address it**. Time requirements often adjust as well, with a low-intensity audit requiring as little as four weeks while a major redesign effort requires four to six months. Typically, if the current plans have been in place for three or more years, one can expect exponential levels of intensity will be needed to overcome inertia and the potential emotional ties to the current plan. In such environments, even when fixing a truly bad plan, the long-term team members may suddenly hold on dearly to the old plan – “it’s the best plan we’ve ever had!!” The key takeaway is to factor in the appropriate amount of time, intensity, and rigor in alignment with the degree of change your design effort requires.

In addition, plan changes with a genesis in a strategic business change (M&A, new products, competitive action or opportunity) often occur at inconvenient times within the fiscal year. These usually indicate the need for a reset of sales roles and sales assignments that can require more timing than is available in the remainder of a fiscal year. In these cases, it might make sense to consider an interim plan design that moves the organization in the right direction, deferring the organizational change to the next fiscal year when it can be planned effectively. The integration of two sales teams represents an example. Sales roles and assignments might remain in effect, but sellers may share objectives or have cross-sell crediting built into an interim plan until the teams can be integrated.

2. Schedule the Long-term and Interim Deadlines



Compensation assessment and design efforts should follow a methodical and efficient course. There are project steps that clearly help create **better** outcomes, and project managers will do well to try to align around these tried-and-true milestones or gates. Best-in-class design efforts often include the following components, and we’ve included optimal timing based on attempting a significant change effort:

- **Strategy Lock (Month 8 of Current Year).** While business and sales strategies can evolve and finalize as the year moves on, major strategic shifts are ideally identified early enough to allow proper address of the dependent milestones to come.
- **Role Lock (Month 9).** The sales and service roles (existing, changed or new) should be clearly defined in terms of role and responsibilities. They must support the new strategic objectives, and one must define role expectations and how they impact organizational success.
- **Role Assignment (Month 10).** With roles defined, the next step is slotting the bulk of the sales force into any new roles. This “reality meets road” step helps organizations understand when role expectations need to realign or adjust – at times yielding to the dreaded, yet sometimes needed, “hybrid” type role. Hybrid examples can include having a single seller cover: 1) new and existing accounts, 2) large and small accounts, or 3) direct and channel-based accounts. Ultimately, the sooner the new role structure is tested at the assignment level, the sooner compensation plans can be formulated for all new or existing roles.



- **Plan Lock (Month 11).** Concurrent to the role assignment step, and after the majority of roles have been locked, the organization needs to finalize the new plans. Ideally, the new designs include TTC, mix, upside, measures, mechanics, crediting, and payout timing elements. The plans must also endure the financial cost analysis. While one-off plans in large organizations often require refinements after this lock point, the majority of plans, particularly for roles with critical mass, should be completed with at least one month to go in the current fiscal year.
- **Plan Documentation (Month 12).** With plans locked, the final month should be spent creating manager and field rollout presentations, plan documents, plan calculators, and any other communication tools necessary to support the degree of change embodied in the new designs.
- **Communication (Go Live – First Two Weeks of New Year).** While some companies believe new plans should be in a salesperson’s hands before the start of the new plan year, **better** practices, supported by numerous studies, actually point to a rollout during the first two weeks of the new plan year as most ideal. This ensures sales representatives are not distracted while closing out the current year, yet this is early enough to ensure any behavior shifts or motivational impacts are experienced very early in the new plan year. Revealing plans too early could also cause reps to game the system, particularly if a new plan rewards more for a result tomorrow than the current plan would offer today. Communicating new plans too early is a major “watch out”.
- **System Update (By Start of Month 2).** This timeline may feel late to some parties who would like to have everything in order on day one of the new fiscal year (often the same folks who communicate new plans prior to the start of the new year when reps should be pushing hard to finalize results!). While IT and comp admin teams need to have extremely high confidence that a new plan can be supported, the programming and testing needs to be completed prior to the first payment period, whether that’s the start of month two (monthly plan) or month four (quarterly plan). The “high confidence” mentioned should actually come during the design process, as we recommend including IT/systems in those discussions. But artificially trying to have systems updated by day one may put too great a burden on the strategy, role, and compensation design phases, potentially leading to poor or rushed decisions. These are often later “questioned” and then require rework before or after the start of the new plan year (with systems needing to be reprogrammed anyway). A rush to finish the plan actually causes a delay in the roll-out. Talk about a negative feedback loop! Avoid it.

One final point pertains to the degree of change. In some situations, the optimal plan designs are simply too significant to take on in one plan year cycle. In such cases, it is wise to create an interim plan with a step in the right direction and then more adequately plan for the wholesale changes in the next cycle, be it at the half-year mark or the next annual period. Change management matters; you must leave enough time to do it right.

3. Build the Right Teams

The sales compensation assessment and design process embodies the ultimate cross-functional team effort. It requires multiple participants, involves essential stakeholders, and can become unwieldy if participation, roles and commitments are not clear. Ideal processes include a design team responsible for reviewing all inputs and crafting design recommendations, as well as an approval team responsible for testing those recommendations and ultimately signing-off on final designs. Successful outcomes typically heed the following advice:



- **Involve the right people on the design team.** An effective design process ensures the design team represents the organization’s needs and its various stakeholders well. They need to be informed, should demonstrate good judgment, and must be highly engaged. They also need to be respected; recommendations from a design team with respected members are much more likely to be subsequently respected by executives, not to mention salespeople. Salespeople, in particular, will look at the design team membership and the sellers need to trust the participants. Design teams normally include representatives from sales, human resources, sales operations, finance, and IT/systems.
- **Involve decision makers early and clearly.** Senior executives normally end up approving the plans, and if you want to avoid late-in-the-game surprises, their perspectives must be factored in early. Bottom-line, the design team needs to understand what they want the plans to support or what principles matter to them. Of equal importance, the approving parties need to give credence and authority to the representatives on the design team. That is not to say the approvers need to follow every recommendation from the design team – indeed, that would make the design team *the* approving team – yet the design team members and process must be considered important and their recommendations supported more than vetoed. The decision makers need to give them their charter and mandate. We cover this key topic again later.
- **Separate design efforts where it makes sense.** In today’s complex multi-divisional organizations, a perception often exists that all groups need to receive equal attention or have similar needs. In many cases, that is simply not true. If one division is undergoing more strategic changes while others are remaining more status quo, the design process and approach can certainly vary in focus. Indeed, exerting limited resources on the groups or sales team with the greatest needs and opportunities just makes good sense. We often separate groups into high, medium, and low touch in terms of need and focus. While some low touch groups may bristle, particularly if they feel like the red-headed step child (no offense to step children or Gingers), most will be thankful to not exert unnecessary time and energy if a need doesn’t exist. They’ll thank you, and you’ll thank us for this reality check.

4. Demand Strategic Selling Inputs

This piece of advice derives from the milestone gates identified in [Tip Two](#). Offered directly to the capable and helpful human resources or sales operations professional (or whomever “owns” sales compensation plan creation), our advice is to noisily and emphatically push back on strategic leaders and/or sales management if and when they are slow to identify strategy or provide clarity in the selling roles. Say it with us, “effective sales compensation plans derive from clear sales role definition”. Now, say it again, and if needed, say it to those individuals.

Encourage them to follow the milestone timeline we portrayed earlier. While ambitious in some environments, moving directionally toward such a timeline is essential for providing enough time to successfully assess needs, construct plans, and test impacts. You may not completely win the fight for a completely enlightened and methodical process, but the goal should be to take steps in that direction each and every year. The quality of the sales compensation plans, your performance, and the organization’s acceptance of new plans all depend on it!

Do you know what we find to be the number one reason design efforts fail or struggle? Answer: incomplete, late, or poorly delineated sales role definition. Organizations are **better** served by breaking out the phases of changing the job versus changing the plan. Involving the right strategic selling inputs is the essential predecessor to one’s design work.

5. Identify Leaders with Veto Power – and Engage Them Early and Often

We recommend carefully identifying potential individuals or leaders who may be able to exercise veto power at any point in a design engagement. This varies by organization. If one’s CEO is particularly hands on, either in managing the sales model or in extreme cases, chiming in on sales compensation measures or formulas, you need to determine how to best involve them at appropriate points and avoid the eleventh hour veto. In our work, we call it, “pulling a Pete”. Pete, as we’ll call him, was a highly engaged and likeable CEO from one of our clients. Pete became part of our vernacular when he basically hijacked the design process late in a project, indicating that he had no faith in the design team and we should just continue our work directly with him. Unfortunately, he lacked everyday touch with the field organization, and the resulting few weeks were burdened with massive inefficiency. With little time left in our design window, we ended up having to step back, quickly collect his directives and views, and then work backward with a sub-portion of the design team and those with knowledge of the day-to-day realities. It was an entire redesign, retracing our steps to form an almost perfect circle. By “perfect”, we mean frustrating and suboptimal. To avoid a “Pete-like” experience, we recommend the following:

- **Understand executive viewpoints and involve them early.** Know what you are up against. If a leader is very hands on, ensure his or her voice is heard early, his objectives and goals are clear, and he is given a chance to co-author the process by which you will create the new plans. We now tend to assume leaders want more of a say than less of a say, so attempting to have an early project discussion with veto-eligible parties is a wise expected step in any project.



- **Have the executive charter the design team.** While this may not fully satisfy a CEO with OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), letting them identify at least some of the design team body will give you a leg to stand on when design recommendations cross his or her veto desk.
- **Agree on the approach for executive check-in sessions.** A hands-on leader may need to have check-in conversations after each major design team meeting, while others may be fine with a single review when initial design constructs are taking shape. We recommend assuming they will want more involvement versus less, and let the leader push back and hopefully provide the truthful and realistic mandate for the design team to do its work.
- **Hold the executives accountable.** With a leader's feedback incorporated, his or her co-authorship of the design team members and process, and frequent check-ins, you will have gone a long way toward avoiding an eleventh hour shift. Most leaders are in those roles for a reason; they are strong business people, prone toward logical and rational behavior (that's our story and we're sticking to it!). If things do start to teeter at the project's end, you have a defensible and emotion-free list of reasons why the current design approach should continue. That hopefully will go a long way.

6. Target Analytics to Supplement Your Process and Strategic Alternatives

Conducting analysis represents a critical element to a **better** sales compensation assessment and redesign project. Targeting the right analyses to supplement your process helps you to manage the amount of work to be conducted and the impact and usefulness of the data. A complete list of typical analyses can be found in [BSC's 6 Areas of Sales Compensation Assessment](#) (contact us if interested). As an example, you might think of analyses as they relate to three stages of the design teams work:

- I. **Project Introduction.** In this phase, your analyses should focus on setting a foundation of plan understanding for the design team. Key to this understanding are data such as: participation rates (*how many sellers in each role receive payment from various components*), earnings composition (*how much of each pay component individuals earn and how does that vary as you move from lower earners to top earners*), and actual risk and upside (*degree to which top performers actually over-achieve on each component*). To complete the foundational analyses, provide the team with a distribution of both performance results and payout results for each role. Together, these give an accurate idea of how people are currently getting paid.
- II. **Issue Examination.** After confirming the key drivers of change, and hearing input on issues to address in the design effort, targeted analyses can be used to evaluate whether plan perceptions are accurate. An example would be to test if larger quotas actually lead to lower achievement levels by role or if top performers actually discount heavier than lower achievers. The results can be used to prioritize factors to be addressed in the design effort and to identify potential solutions.
- III. **Alternative Testing.** As the design team considers various plan design alternatives, modeling and other forms of data analysis can help to evaluate the desired impact of specific changes and to modulate the degree of impact a change might have. For instance, a company may seek to

introduce a “bookings” component in addition to a “revenue” component in its plan. Analytic examination could look at the impact of shifting dollars to the new component or of blending the achievement of the two results into a combined “weighted-average sales volume” on payouts. Such testing helps you avoid unexpected outcomes or impacts.

Analysis should be an ongoing effort throughout the project and by defining the intended objective of each analysis, work effort can be focused and timely, thus meeting the design team’s needs as the process progresses.

7. Garner Qualitative Input

Motivating behavior and rewarding for actual results represent typical goals of a sales compensation plan. While data can test for the correlation to results, it becomes more of an art than a science to discern if your plan actually creates incremental or targeted activities in pursuit of those results. BSC strongly recommends that qualitative input be gathered and presented to sales leadership and the design team. In addition to providing perspective on how sellers perceive and react to the plans, the effort to collect field and manager input provides the opportunity to address real issues the sales team encounters. It also provides a basis for achieving field buy-in to any recommended changes.

There are four methods for collecting field input:

- **Monitor and catalog activity with a web-based or call-in process related to questions, issues or challenges with the current plans.** This represents a passive approach to defining input and limits “field buy-in” impact, unless some confirmation of the issues is communicated back to those responding. This effort can identify current issues but may not provide an exhaustive or go-forward assessment of the selling environment or any recent field changes. It’s a lower energy and lower impact approach.
- **Conduct an online survey.** This provides a broad touch and valuable data for report back to the field as new plans are communicated. Survey results are best used to create conversations about the implications of the data, rather than to be used as raw facts. While open-ended questions and requests for comment can add understanding, they don’t provide give and take on the “context” of the commentary.
- **Conduct focus groups of similar sales roles.** Staging focus groups with individuals who perform the same sales role can provide in-depth understanding of how salespeople actually perform their job and how the sales compensation plan impacts their activities or targeted results. Combining dissimilar sales roles (e.g., major account lead with territory manager, or direct sales rep with channel sales manager) causes more time to be spent on surface discussions of unique job situations, rather than a deep dive into core issues shared by the participants. The sessions should be well structured and should include: reaction to survey data if available, analyses of issues and concerns, brainstorming of possible solutions, and testing of alternative options.

Focus groups can be cost prohibitive as they require sellers to come to a common location, yet they can add a great deal to the understanding of your current situation. This cost must be weighed against the strong participative and high quality interaction benefit they provide.

- **Interview top performers.** Conducting interviews of individuals in the top half to top quartile of your sales performers can allow for detailed information gathering as well as highly targeted participation messaging to valued contributors. These are best for providing job specific and sales deal specific information. Have the individual talk through the sales process with specific customers and detail the impact the compensation plan has on how they sell or attempt to influence the customer's purchase decision. Enough interviews are needed to provide critical mass of information for each role so as to avoid over-generalization of the individual situation to the total sales team.

We would be remiss to not point out that the sensitive nature of these data gathering efforts require assurance that individual input will be held in confidence. Outside third parties can be very helpful in providing a safe process and ensure information is shared in a non-biased manner to the design team.

8. Include Outside/Market Perspectives

The old adage starts as follows: "If your brother jumped off a cliff would you do it too?" It makes sense to conclude from that adage that just because you notice something in a benchmark or trend study, doesn't mean you need to follow as well. In fact, significant trends that require a competitive reaction or consideration are usually slower to evolve or are the action of a specific market competitor that won't show up in a formal study. Chances are you'll hear about it from a recruiter or one of your stronger employees. Still, keeping an ear to the ground and an eye on the market is important to not be caught by surprise by one of your colleagues in another department. Some recommendations:

- **Encourage your company to participate in studies.** Most require only a reasonable amount of energy and they are a sign someone thinks the topic matters. The data can be helpful and the individuals conducting the study will be helpful to you when you are looking for input on your special topic (yes, you should participate in the survey invites we send you!). The most common studies, of course, comprise pay data studies performed by a number of targeted survey companies. This data is certainly helpful, particularly for target and actual total compensation. We typically caution companies to treat these data points as only directionally correct. The market sources cannot tell you "the perfect number" to offer your specific roles, but they do offer additional points of reference for consideration.
- **Attend topical conferences.** Whether it is a Sales Management Association event, the WorldatWork's Spotlight on Sales Compensation conference, or an SPM (Sales Performance Management) vendor's annual users and prospects meeting (like Varicent's Insight Conference), it's valuable to take the time to attend and to meet fellow practitioners. The sessions and

networking can be informative, confirm your practices, or give you new ones to consider. And if you ever need a new job, well, networking can work for that purpose as well!

- **Sponsor an industry forum or network session.** Work with a third party to organize and facilitate a hot-topics session with members of your industry. Such sessions will often lead to the most pertinent information on things you care about most. Hot-topic surveys in advance of the sessions can help to organize key discussion sessions. Participants should come prepared for in depth conversations not just about what companies do but what works and why it works for them.
- **Ask new hires from competitive firms or other leading companies.** When you hire a new sales person, it can be helpful to leverage what they know about the organization from which they came. Indeed, this type of competitive intelligence can often provide the freshest and most accurate approach to understanding market practices, leading to the consideration of new ideas and alternatives.

Outside perspectives should be carefully considered but certainly not followed without special consideration on your specific needs. In some cases, prevalent *market practices* are far from *best* or what we like to call “**better**” practices. And neither may be an exact fit for your environment, but failing to consider other viewpoints or ideas will certainly hamper the chances for an optimal outcome.

9. Secure “Can-Do” Systems Participation

Companies are less likely today to accept systems limitations or unresponsiveness of IT staff as a reason to prevent enabling the optimal sales compensation plans. In fact, more companies have invested or are evaluating the acquisition of a Sales Performance Management solution, so they can have **better** tools for enabling new plan designs. That doesn’t mean there aren’t other systems priorities or competition for limited budget dollars, but at least you can get your calls returned. Our advice follows:

- **Include budgeting needs in last year’s budget.** What, too late? Okay, well let’s not make that mistake for next year! Whether you need a new SPM solution, an upgrade to an existing solution, or programming changes to existing administration software, build the dollars you might require into the budgeting process to protect your team from a non-funded project.
- **Consider the functionality of supporting systems, not just plan administration tools, which impact your project.** Sales reporting processes represent a critical element to driving salesperson engagement and to activating the motivation you hope your plan is driving. Make sure sellers know where they stand and what they need to do to achieve that next level of payout or accelerator. Other data/systems like territory account assignment, along with quota allocation and management, are intricately involved in the success of plan administration; they require focus and updating as the company shifts selling strategies or reacts to new or lost headcount. These tools need your love too!

- **Get your IT folks involved in planning early.** Start by understanding their timeframes and availability and ask them to help you with your design and implementation scheduling. Seek their participation to help the team understand what the company “can do” to enable certain plan objectives, and have them help you with problem solving to find the optimal way to evaluate and administer any plan changes.
- **Learn from the market.** Specifically, use your contacts developed under [Tip Eight](#) to identify leading and new practices to address similar problems or challenges you are tackling. They may also have references for vendors that can support you in the evaluation of new tools and solutions. Learn from their experiences and share that with your IT stakeholders.

10. Design Plans with Attention to Communication Messages

Creating new plans and securing official executive approval leaves one crucial step left if you want to be successful – communicating and implementing the new plans! In too many cases, companies either do not leave enough time or enough resources to complete this essential step. After working hard to assess the plans, create news plans to drive results, and build consensus and support at all levels of management, seeing all that effort crumble under the weight of a shoddy rollout can be heart breaking. To ensure great performance in this final step, we offer the following insights:

- **Use the communication opportunity to its fullest value.** If you’ve ever thrown a tennis ball to an eager Golden Retriever, you know one thing for certain – you have her complete attention. Those eyes never leave the bright yellow ball ready to spring from your hand. When salespeople prepare to hear about their compensation, guess what? You have their complete attention. We strongly encourage companies to use this session to provide the messages you most want them to hear, particularly about this year’s sales strategy and how the members of the sales organization are essential to the company’s success
- **Focus on more than the “what” behind the new plans.** We’ve seen too many rollout presentations jump right into plan measures and how they calculate pay, often in gory mechanical detail. That’s great and certainly important, but there should be some build up. Think what else they may need to know to understand this story’s punch line, such as...
- **Focus on the “why” of the plans.** Talk about the purpose behind the plan changes. What happened last year? What’s new this year? Why are the changes being made? What drove the outcome of your plan design effort? Salespeople may not always agree with all of the information shared, but people (yes, even salespeople) learn and embrace new things when they have a greater sense of understanding. Attempt to offer it and anticipate one key question – “why?”
- **Focus on the “how”.** In this case, help them understand the (hopefully) rigorous process you followed. Salespeople most despise when decisions are made from the nebulous “black box”. Hopefully, you have followed a process that garnered field feedback, collected market

perspectives, and carefully weighed options. If you follow [Tip Three](#), you included respected design team members. The plan communication effort is a great time to champion your process and build confidence in its outcome.

- **Create the right materials.** The best plan communication strategies include a range of crucial documents, namely the Plan Document itself (describes the plan for a specific role), the Terms and Conditions (contains all the rules and specifics that support the plan), and Plan Calculators (helpful Excel-based worksheets with the new plan programming so salespeople can test and **better** understand pay results from potential results achieved). In addition, rollout presentations should be carefully communicated, first to the frontline sales managers and then on to the salespeople themselves (in the process identified below).
- **Cascade the plan communication and repeat as necessary.** Recent psychology studies indicate that humans retain 30% (we actually think it's even less than that) of what they hear on a good day. Repetition is often a great way to increase odds of retention. In the case of a comp plan rollout, the messaging approach and messenger both matter. We normally recommend that the head of sales communicates the plan details to frontline management. Next, the head of sales should reveal the "what", "how", and "why" to the salespeople, and the frontline managers, having already been well-trained on the content, should follow-up with one-on-one sessions and/or question-and-answer events. Cascade the communication; repeat as necessary. One final point – we highly recommend a sales summit or get together within the first two weeks of the new plan year. Particularly in periods of significant strategic changes, role adjustments, and new plan deployment, the face-to-face time greatly contributes to a successful rollout and a kick start to your sales results.

BSC's Guide to Success: In Conclusion

We hope our Top Ten Tips help you ensure a successful plan assessment and design outcome. These pieces of advice were identified while working with clients to solve their most daunting and important sales effectiveness and sales compensation issues. There are certainly other topics worth considering, particularly around best practices in sales compensation design, which we will tackle in upcoming white papers, books, and publications. But we are confident that the tips provided here can help you achieve a **better** design process and a **better** overall outcome.

If you would like to examine any issue in greater detail, or request other BSC information cited in this article, please do not hesitate to reach out to one of us directly or use our general email address at info@bettersalescomp.com. The **Better** Sales Comp Consultants team is happy to share insights collected from over sixty years of consulting experience.

Here's to a future of **better** design processes and **better** sales compensation plan designs!