

# Ready for a Rebound



**Overcoming a  
slow start to  
the sales year**



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## Overcoming a slow start to the sales year

BY PAUL NOLAN

It wasn't long ago that fans of the National Basketball Association could be excused for turning off a game if a team was leading by 15 to 20 points in the first half. Such leads were mostly insurmountable, even with a half to play.

No longer.

The latest regular season, which ended in mid-April, featured a record 38 comeback victories by teams that trailed by 20 points or more during a game. The previous record for victories after trailing by 20 or more was 30, set last season.

Sales managers whose teams fell well short of first-quarter revenue goals take heart. If NBA squads can reverse course and come out on top when trailing by 20 with only half the game left, it's possible, even in the world of complex B2B sales, to make adjustments and still meet this year's sales targets.

Sales slumps are a certainty. How sales managers and sales reps respond to them impacts a slump's length and severity. Sales management veterans we spoke with and others who have commented on the internet state that a prolonged drop in sales

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should be viewed as an opportunity to review a B2B company's go-to-market strategy from start to finish.

Does a marketing campaign need to be refreshed? Is lead generation falling short? Are reps failing to secure enough initial meetings? Is low motivation a problem?

If you're losing market share to a competitor, it's imperative to figure out why — fast!

"You can't solve a problem that you don't understand. To prevent a slow first quarter from dragging down the rest of the year, the first step is to diagnose what went wrong in Q1," says Julie Thomas, president and CEO of ValueSelling Associates, a sales training company. "Once you identify the challenge, you can prescribe a solution to remedy it. That solution could involve compensation/bonus/recognition, customer incentives, innovation on the product side, enablement to expand skills, lead generation activities, sales process optimization and/or efficiency."

### Analysis and Avoiding Paralysis

It's important to accurately assess what led to the downturn and not act out of panic. Brendan Connaughton, head of growth marketing at sales proposal software maker Qwilr, recommends dissecting every stage of the sales process, beginning with how your sales funnel is being loaded.

"Are your marketing and outbound campaigns reaching your ideal customer profile? Are you using techniques like lead scoring to effectively prioritize your sales team's time," he asks in a [blog post on busting sales slumps](#). Connaughton recommends focusing on fundamentals and implementing small fixes first.

"When you're in a sales rut, just like when a team is down by a lot, it's easy to panic and think you must go for the big shots. However, it's probably not what will serve you best, or what you really need to get your rhythm back," he states.

Instead, he suggests reviewing the sales pitch to see if it needs tightened up and/or doubling down on prospecting

## Regaining a Big-Hitter's Mindset

After playing three seasons of baseball for the UCLA Bruins, Jermaine Curtis bounced around the minor leagues between 2007 and 2020, and had, as they say, a cup of coffee in the Majors for the St. Louis Cardinals in 2013.

You don't play baseball for more than three decades without learning a few things about batting — and about getting yourself out of a hitting slump. Curtis' four-step process for getting out of a batting slump is applicable emerging from sales slumps as well.



### Step 1: Stop listening to people giving you advice.

"I would start messing with my swing and my mechanics, and start listening to everyone. They mean well, but [what they're pointing out] is probably not the issue," Curtis says. "The issue is your confidence is gone and you forgot what you do well." Listen to those you respect, Curtis advises, but don't listen to the

9-hole hitter who says your back elbow needs to come up.

### Step 2: Forget about your stats.

Focus on the fundamentals that lead to sales, not on how many deals you're closing. "In this game, you can control the process, but you can't control the results," Curtis says. Sounds a lot like sales.

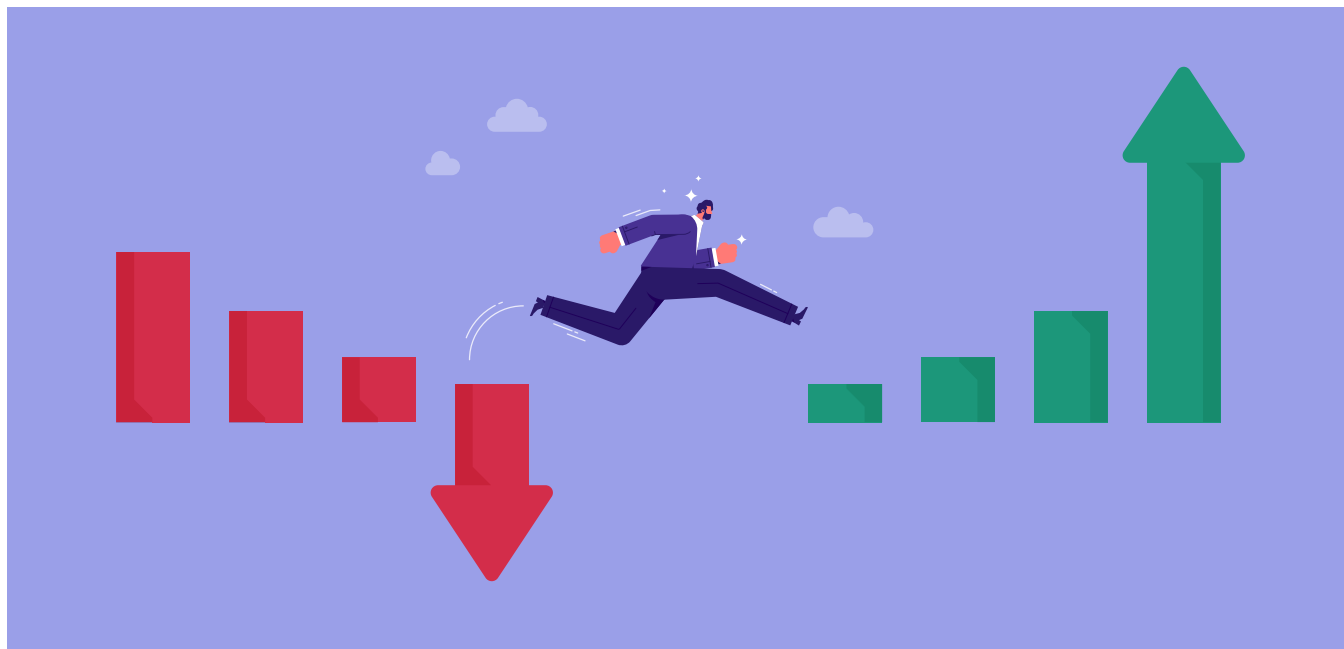
### Step 3: Retrain your brain to think about the process.

Find the positives of each prospect interaction. If Curtis battled through a double-digit pitch count at-bat and ultimately got out, he told himself it was a quality at-bat and if he kept doing that, he was about to be on fire. Learn from each pitch, whether or not it has a successful outcome.

### Step 4: Brag about your successes out loud.

"When you get that hit that breaks you out of a slump, you need to tell yourself, 'This is the player I am.'" (Note to managers: You need to celebrate your reps' slump-busting sales deals loudly too.)

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emails and networking efforts. “They may seem like elementary steps, but that’s part of their power. Even small steps in the right direction eventually lead to where you want to go,” Connaughton states.

Sales at [Thinksia](#), a provider of fractional chief marketing officer services as well as marketing and branding consulting, were off to a slow start in the first quarter of 2021. Timothy J. Williams, the company’s marketing and brand strategy executive, says a meticulous assessment of the marketing and sales process resulted in changes on several fronts. The sales team at Thinksia is composed of around 20 members, focusing on both inside sales and field sales activities.

“We revitalized our sales training by incorporating new methodologies and external expertise, emphasizing consultative selling and customer success. This approach not only improved our team’s skills but also strengthened our client relationships,” Williams said. Thinksia partnered with Sales Performance International (now Richardson Sales Performance) to create a three-month intensive program focusing on solution selling techniques.

At the same time, Thinksia restructured its incentive program to reward not just closed deals but the behaviors that lead to them such as client engagement levels, lead nurturing and effective follow-ups. Williams said this adjustment fostered a more engaged and creative sales process, aligning team efforts with strategic goals and significantly boosting performance.

Lastly, the Thinksia team switched to Salesforce CRM, which Williams says allowed the team to streamline the sales process, manage leads more effectively and gain deeper insights into customer behavior. “The decision was driven by the need for a more robust system that could integrate with our other tools and provide deeper insights into customer interactions. This

technology-driven approach optimized our sales efforts and led to a more personalized customer engagement strategy,” he said.

The combined efforts enabled Thinksia to overcome the slow start and achieve a year of robust sales growth and enhanced team morale. “Our flexibility and holistic approach to sales performance improvement were key to our success,” Williams says.

### Mindset Over Market Conditions

Slow sales periods can be caused by market downturns, but a fatalistic mindset will drag out a soft market far longer than is necessary, says Michael Hinkle, founder of [JBI \(Just Buy In\)](#), a Los Angeles-based sales consulting and coaching business. Hinkle worked in commercial real estate sales for two decades before starting JBI last year. He shares his insights on selling in good times and bad in his book, “Treasure Hunt: A Common-Sense Approach to Building a Successful Sales Career.”

“No market is ever dead. I don’t care how slow things get, somebody’s doing business in any market,” he said. “You will always find some activity in your market. Are you presenting a quality enough product with a solid enough service level to capture what business is there? You have to ask yourself that tough question when it’s going hard?”

Hinkle said companies frequently reach out for his services when they hit a rough stretch. He works with senior management and individual sales reps on a one-to-one basis. Tough sales climates can trigger some sales reps to revert to ineffective techniques, such as product information dumps, Hinkle said. Managers must reinforce the tactics that have proven effective.

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# 4 Steps to Reigniting Unmotivated Workers

Sales slumps can result from an industry decline, shifts in customer preferences, marketing missteps or the emergence of a strong competitor. They can also be a sign of an unmotivated sales team.

Disengagement happens. It's telling that the low numbers from Gallup's annual measurement of workplace engagement seemingly no longer alarm the business community. "In 2023, employees in the U.S. continued to feel more detached from their employers, with less clear expectations, lower levels of satisfaction with their organization, and less connection to its mission or purpose, than they did four years ago. They are also less likely to feel someone at work cares about them as a person," the latest [report on workplace engagement from Gallup](#) states.

For the full year of 2023, 33% of full- and part-time employees were engaged in their work and workplace. That's down from a peak of 40% of U.S. workers reporting they were engaged in June 2020. (Gallup began reporting U.S. employee engagement in 2000.)

*Harvard Business Review* asked its readers and Harvard Business School executive education program participants what leads to disengagement and how can managers help themselves and their teams get reenergized. Its analysis of responses resulted in a [four-step process for reigniting enthusiasm](#) for work it tags with the acronym DEAR for detachment, empathy, action and reframing.

## Detachment

Renewing interest in work, whether for yourself or your team members, can only occur after one understands the reasons disengagement is occurring in the first place. At the end of the workday, reflect on what went well and felt meaningful and then make a deliberate effort to disconnect from work.

Authors Robin Abrahams and Boris Groysberg recommend everything from meditation, to exercise, to thinking of yourself in the third person for workers who are disengaged. Surprisingly, doing less may be the first step to doing more. One respondent reported that establishing clear boundaries between his work and his personal life helped him regain energy for work.

## Empathy

It may go without saying that the threatening ["third prize is you're fired" approach](#) used by Alec Baldwin's character in "Glengarry Glen Ross" isn't effective. Empathetic connections was a common theme from those who shared tales of regaining enthusiasm for work. Abrahams



and Groysberg stress the importance of treating people like people and practicing self-care. Studies have shown a connection between strong performance and having a best friend at work.

Empathy requires curiosity about others. Seeking new perspectives builds workplace relationships and increases everyone's engagement. Helping others at work — particularly by taking on tasks outside of one's job description — is one of the best ways to make work more meaningful.

## Action

Small achievements can have big impacts. Rather than having poor-performing workers address the most important (and possibly imposing) tasks, managers may opt to have them focus on some to-do list items that are easier to complete. It may even make sense to reward accomplishments that are not directly related to work — volunteer work and side hustles — to instill a sense of accomplishment.

Gamifying work tasks is a proven means of reigniting workplace engagement. And learning new skills through online learning lead to new responsibilities that make work more interesting.

## Reframing

Assess what roles one plays at work outside of their job title. Are you a teacher? A strategist? A logistics person? Helping employees recognize the more meaningful and rewarding elements of their jobs increases engagement. This includes mundane tasks. Instead of the how and what of a task, shifting the focus to the reason for doing it — the larger goal — helps workers power through.

— Paul Nolan

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“A lot of salespeople focus on product knowledge and what their product is going to do to make the client’s life easier. When that’s all you’re focused on, you’re busy telling them all about why they should use the product, yet you don’t even know what their buy reasons are. They may not be looking for your product to be the solution to a particular problem that you’re focused on thinking you’re going to solve. They may have a completely different issue.”

The most effective tool a salesperson has is their business card, not product brochures, Hinkle emphasizes. “I can’t begin to tell you what I’ve got to offer to fix your life until I find out what problems you’re having.” Assure them that you’re ready, willing and able to tailor a solution to their unique needs and you are more likely to close a sale and establish long-term accountability.

### Revamp Your Incentive Program

A slow start often requires a fresh look at what motivates our teams. Transitioning from one-size-fits-all incentive programs to more personalized, flexible rewards can make a significant difference, says Marc Bishop, director at [Wytlabs](#), a digital marketing agency.



“We focus on understanding individual motivators and aligning them with broader company goals. This personalized approach not only boosts morale, but also encourages a more cohesive and motivated sales force that’s ready to tackle challenges head-on,” Bishop told SMM via email.

Gabriel Lukov, head of inbound growth at [Businessmap](#), a provider of enterprise agility software that helps clients align companywide goals, says his company implemented a non-cash incentive program after sales dragged. The company previously relied almost solely on a commission structure to motivate its sales reps.

“Giving monetary rewards wasn’t enough, so we introduced a point-based reward system where sales reps could exchange points for unique experiences like team dinners or workshops. This increased enthusiasm and competitiveness within the team,” Lukov said in an email.

[Research by McKinsey](#) revealed that up to 55% of employee engagement is driven by nonfinancial recognition. This aligns with research by McKinsey and others that shows employees frequently leave a job because they do not feel appreciated by their company, particularly their immediate manager.

When Jake Butler was director of sales at food delivery company DoorDash, his team of 60 reps who called on restaurants to sign deals with fell well short of its goal in the first quarter of 2022. A three-pronged approach of increased accountability on manager coaching, new partner discounts, and the introduction of additional non-cash incentives fueled a rebound that helped them hit an aggressive end-of-year revenue target.

“We didn’t feel like we got that much out of cash bonuses, and when I talked with reps, they told me the cash incentives lacked instant gratification because they got piled into their paychecks and were taxed,” Butler said in an email. (He has since left DoorDash.)

“We unlocked budget to do fun offsites and raffles when teams hit their goals. The incremental revenue would be far greater than what we’d spend for the incentives, so it was a relatively easy sale to finance.”

### Patience, Persistence and Confidence

Sales managers must quickly determine the root causes of a sales decline while making sure to maintain their reps’ motivation and confidence. Implementing extra training signifies a company’s commitment to righting the ship. A focus on fundamentals and a cool demeanor can be contagious.

“The best thing you can do is control what you can and try not to worry about what you can’t. If you can do that and stay motivated, you’ll be able to overcome any bad season,” states Connaughton. “If you take the right approach, it can become your most significant catalyst to success. Instead of letting your sales slump bury you in an ocean of worries and anxieties, let the lessons you’re learning skyrocket you to the best version of your sales self.” **SMM**



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# Ruminating on Rebounding

We asked B2B sales management professionals what strategies they deploy to turn around a slow sales period. Here's what they told us.

## Reassess Your Tech Tools

*Technology is a force multiplier that shouldn't be overlooked. If your sales software is outdated or you're not fully leveraging the capabilities of your existing tools, you might be operating with one hand tied behind your back. A slow period is the perfect time to evaluate where you can introduce new solutions, whether it's strengthening your sales intelligence, streamlining your quote to cash process, or simply upgrading your CRM. Small optimizations can pack a big punch.*

– Eric Charles, founder and CEO of [Closer College](#)

## Pinpoint Your Training

*Setting up mentor programs within your team can serve as an excellent way of advancing the knowledge and skills of junior salespeople. Additionally, this creates a better culture than one that is strictly focused on reaching targets and surpassing colleagues.*

*Any training should be a niche in the skills that salespeople need. No seasoned professional needs to be taking the Sales 101 course. Rather, from the gaps identified, they should be homing in on skills such as perfecting how they send follow-up communication, and even working on understanding emotional intelligence and how to better read people.*

– Tom Snyder, founder and managing partner of [Funnel Clarity](#), a sales consulting and training company.

## Focus On Keeping Current Customers

*In the face of a slow start to a sales year, it's essential to focus on customer retention. This can be achieved by enhancing customer engagement, providing exceptional customer service, and offering value-added services. For instance, a business could implement a 'Customer Success' program that proactively addresses customer needs and fosters a sense of partnership. This not only helps in retaining existing customers but also turns them into advocates, leading to organic growth.*

– Laia Quintana, head of marketing and sales at [TeamUp](#), which provides schedule management solutions to fitness businesses.

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# Where to Begin Sales Training? Ask Those Being Trained



## Also, it's a good idea to have team members create training content

BY PAUL NOLAN

Falling short of sales goals can be a painful signal that your team needs additional training. But how do you, as a sales manager, assess specific training needs? Not by yourself, experts caution.

By beginning a training needs assessment at the boots-on-the-ground level – that is, asking your reps what they want to learn to improve their performance – you engage your entire team and foster a collaborative approach to getting better collectively. Such an approach will not only bolster your learning program, it will transform your entire company culture, says Frederique Campbell in a [blog post for 360Learning](#).

Campbell adds, not only is it a good idea to have your team members help identify the key skills to train on, it's also wise to have them create a good deal of the training content. According to the Panopto Workplace Knowledge and Productivity Report, employees spend an average of 5.3 hours per week looking for information a peer could readily supply.

“Turning your employees into subject matter experts also keeps their skills sharp and promotes higher employee engagement, which, in turn, boosts employee retention,” she states. She recommends these strategies for determining what skills to train on:

- **Surveys and questionnaires** – Ask what skills they want to learn, how they like to learn, and in what areas they want more support following training.

- **Interviews** – Managers can dig deeper in one-on-one meetings and catch nuances that surveys miss.
- **Job task analysis** – Breaking jobs down into separate skills required to accomplish them helps ensure that training is aligned with job requirements.
- **Focus groups** – As the saying goes, there are no bad ideas in a brainstorm. Bringing small groups together gives team members a chance to hear what others think and possibly spot their own blind spots. Also, it reinforces camaraderie.
- **Performance metrics** – Numbers don't lie. Analyze every statistic that's important to you. Examples include conversion rate of leads to meetings, sales cycle length and customer satisfaction scores.

“Empowering team members to contribute to their own needs analysis is an important part of building a culture of learning and innovation,” Campbell says.

The bottom-up approach to sales training needs analysis supports this sentiment from computer scientist and educator Seymour Papert, a pioneer in artificial intelligence: “You can't teach people everything they need to know. The best you can do is position them where they can find what they need to know when they need to know it.” **SMM**