

# Board Converting News

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## Measuring Sales To Script Success

*by Jim Curley*

Every sales manager must know the routine. A pile of “pitch” letters arrives on your desk each week promising a quick and easy solution to your sales growth woes. Most get at most a cursory look, then a pitch themselves – into the recycling bin.

About three years ago, Larry Hudson, VP of Sales & Marketing at Jamestown Container, received such a letter, but a quick glance at its contents gave him pause. It was a case study by Athena SWC of a company in his geographic area, and that company, like Jamestown Container, was in the packaging business. “Direct mail pieces are usually so generic I just throw them out.

“Also, the Athena case study contained terminology that we were definitely comfortable with – lean manufacturing, Deming principles and a focus on measuring our efforts,” he said.

Hudson initiated contact with Todd Zielinski, the Managing Director and CEO of Athena. “Todd came over and made a presentation to our sales and marketing group on the strategy for this effort, including how the division of labor would work if we were to join forces.

“We had looked at a lot of programs over the years and considered a number of ways to get further faster — help with cold calling, prospecting and measuring sales efforts. At first, we tried to do this internally, but that never succeeded to the point that it was worthwhile to continue the attempt. We also considered other third-party solutions, as well as reorganizing our entire staff. None of these seemed to click.

“Athena’s approach was on the front-end only, and

that was where we needed help,” Hudson added. “Cold-calling and prospecting are key elements to growing sales, and we weren’t particularly good at that.”

“Both Jamestown Container and Athena are proponents of the Theory of Constraints, which holds that a

***‘Athena’s capabilities meshed with our needs. We’re not comfortable turning over the aspects of the sales process that include relationship building and design work, so in our case Athena’s primary objective was to generate a steady stream of qualified sales opportunities for our team.’***

— **Larry Hudson**



company should focus on the ‘weak links in the chain’ that are holding it back,” explained Zielinski. “In sales, Jamestown felt that its weak links were in front-end selling.”

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### Out Of The Gate

In early 2014, a formal agreement was signed. “Working with Athena, we then developed a list of potential customers as well as appropriate sales

scripts,” Hudson said. Chris Mays, Athena’s Operations Supervisor and Account Manager in charge of the Jamestown account, remembered, “We had a joint half-day session understanding their target customers based on industry, size and geography. We looked at the customers they were working with and looked to emulate Jamestown’s success through our efforts. Then we took that search criteria, went back to our offices and found potential customers that matched those criteria.



**Most of Athena’s work for Jamestown (prospecting and new business development – dark green and blue slices) takes about 20 percent of a salesperson’s time. Jamestown’s Hudson adds, “For the leads we’ve worked on together, they’ve also helped with the opportunity management role, by keeping track of our progress and when required, helping us ‘re-connect’ with a prospect that might not progress quickly.”**

“A certain amount of refinement took place as we learned about Jamestown’s business,” Mays continued. “Initially, we had targeted machine shops as a segment, but we found out that machine shops didn’t provide the level of business that Jamestown was looking for. We switched gears as we learned. We then focused on consumer goods.”

“For example, early on, Larry Hudson wanted to find out what kind of response we would get from the New York State wineries,” May recalled. “We found that though this particular segment wouldn’t generate a great amount of business, it was one that Jamestown might explore.”

Sales scripts were Athena’s “sweet spot.” May explained, “We developed a rough draft of a call script, walked through it with Larry and his team, and revised it with their input. The qualification questions that Jamestown wanted to ask included: Who are you currently using for corrugated? Are there particular challenges in working with the other corrugated supplier? What are your current delivery requirements? What’s your best estimate on your spend on corrugated?”

“We’re really good at getting the prospect to open up,” Mays said. “Our best calls are those where the

prospect is doing the majority of the talking. We just sit back and listen, gathering up all that intelligence. We’re even better in converting that process into an appointment with Jamestown.

“It’s important to get to the right contact, decision-makers, be they purchasing managers, operations managers, or vice presidents,” Mays said. “We send a carefully scripted direct-mail piece, followed by an email blast, followed by a phone call setting up an appointment for Jamestown.”

### Steady Wins The Race

“From the beginning, we wanted to roll out the program in a very controlled way, so we did not open it up to our entire geographic range, or clients who were in our total geographic market, or to all of our account managers,” James-town’s Hudson remembered. “We carefully selected areas and prospects within the area so that when Athena did their part, we were confident that our account managers could successfully follow up.”

“The rollout was targeted to get our feet wet,” said Bill Benedict, Lake Ontario Regional Manager for Jamestown Container. “For the first year, we concentrated on the corrugated and supplies business from Erie to Syracuse – a geographic area very familiar with our company.”

### Key Prospecting Questions

- 1) Are you responsible for making decisions related to the purchasing of packaging materials? If not, who is?
- 2) What is your annual spend on corrugated packaging materials? Is your current annual spend on corrugated materials at least \$xx,xxx annually?
- 3) Can you share what types of boxes you use (regular shipping boxes, diecuts, displays, etc.)? Do you know if it’s single wall, double wall, triple wall or micro flute board combinations? (try to identify [the type of] spend better). Does this include pallets or folding cartons?
- 4) Supplies: Is your current annual spend on shipping materials at least \$xx,xxx annually?
- 5) How often do you require delivery? Who are your current suppliers? Is there anything you’d like your current suppliers to do that they’re not?

Not surprisingly, said Hudson, Jamestown’s sales staff was initially skeptical “They didn’t know Athena and were not sure of the relationship between them and us. But once we began with the cautious rollout of the program, they could see how the program worked and saw how effective Athena was in getting us “in the door” for sales calls. It wasn’t too long before

the account executives left out of the initial rollout were asking, 'When can I participate in the program?'"

Benedict agreed with Hudson's assessment. "One of the things that pulled our salespeople into the arrangement with Athena was the quality and the depth of the responses Athena was able to provide through their interviews. They made it easier for us to go to prospects and sell our solutions. It's fair to say that with Athena's help, our salespeople became excited to be selling and confident that their efforts will bear fruit."

The companies worked hard to avoid duplication of efforts. "We were careful in developing our prospects' list, so that we weren't selling behind each other," Hudson recalled. "Only twice in the past two years has an existing customer of ours been approached by Athena as a prospect. We and Athena have spent a lot of time 'scrubbing' the lists to make sure that there is no duplication. We're also constantly refining the prospect list to determine early on whether the prospect has enough business for us to pursue."

Athena's service to Jamestown does not end when it hands over the contact information and script to the box maker. "We provide pipeline reports and meet with Jamestown to discuss the prospects they have contacted," Athena's Mays said. "We discuss subjects such as 'Where do we sit with the prospect and is there more that we can do to help Jamestown convert a prospect into a customer?'"

#### **Future Focused**

The relationship between Athena and Jamestown Container is ongoing with a focus on developing a steady stream or pipeline of future business. After the initial rollout in 2014, Jamestown had closed on two accounts resulting from Athena's efforts and produced a RFQ pipeline in excess of \$300,000. By mid-2016, the expanded efforts have resulted in 17 actual new customers with annual sales of more than \$650,000.

"Our joint efforts with Athena have definitely grown our sales, and it's also made our company a more effective marketer," Hudson noted. "Initially, we ran separate marketing campaigns, but we are doing more and more collaborating with them on marketing pieces. They've added that service to their offerings to us. I see this as an ongoing relationship, though it may also run its course at some time. From time to time, we still raise the possibility of doing the entire sales process ourselves, but so far we've concluded that we can't do it as well as we can jointly with Athena."

"The cost is not inexpensive, but it's fair considering what they do for us," he noted. Athena's Mays added

that Jamestown pays a fixed monthly fee for Athena's services.

"It's a perfect marriage," he said. "Jamestown Container has significant resources to offer its clients, and its sales staff is extremely professional and highly ethical. We look forward to many more years of working together."

Joseph R. Palmeri, Jamestown Container's Chief Operating Officer, has decades of experience in the industry, and his company has seen great success as a result of taking part of collaborative enterprises - from its participation in the PAN selling network to his own participation in AICC's CEO group. "Both companies are family owned, ingrained in upstate New York, and accessible to their customers," Palmeri noted. "Today's buyers of corrugated are more sophisticated and aware of their options. We must marshal our resources, present our best case before buyers, measure our results and continually refine our sales efforts."

### **About Athena SWC**

At its web site, [www.theleadgencompany.com](http://www.theleadgencompany.com), Athena SWC describes its mission as providing "an outsourced infrastructure model that focuses on demand generation, lead management, marketing and sales support process services." Its goal is to generate "solutions that enable businesses to achieve marketing operational excellence that can be leveraged and exploited to increase market share and bottom line profits."

The company, based in the Buffalo, New York, suburb of Amherst, was founded in 2007. Its co-founder, Todd Zielinski, was promoted to CEO and Managing Director earlier this summer. In June, Zielinski conducted a two-session webinar on "Manufacturing the Sale: Creating a Sustainable, Measurable Process Model for New Business Development, Marketing and Sales Support."

In its first decade, Athena SWC has focused mainly on the manufacturing sector, though it has also aided clients in healthcare, retail, finance, insurance and other sectors. Athena SWC has aided clients as geographically far away as Colorado and Georgia. "We would certainly consider engaging clients in corrugated, but it would have to be a company that does not compete directly with Jamestown Container," said Chris Mays, Athena's Operations Supervisor and Account Manager.