



The Innovation Games

About this case study. The programme described here was designed and run by Michael Scheelhardt inside a large enterprise technology vendor, in a sales innovation role. The vendor is not named, no colleague or customer is named, and the figures come from the author's own tracking of every registered opportunity through to close, unaudited. Where the text says what the evidence does not show, that is deliberate.

The company

Picture a global enterprise software vendor with a wide portfolio: SaaS, PaaS and IaaS, industry-specific applications, on-premise software and professional services. The structure of its sales organisation gets in the way of delivering the best solution to a customer, because it was never designed for that.

Every Account Executive, presales consultant and implementation consultant is measured and paid on individual performance inside an assigned product area. The result is a competitive environment in which the focus is pushing one product, whether or not it addresses the customer's wider business problem.

The problem

Where product capabilities overlap, the incentives breed rivalry. It plays out like this. Two Account Directors are working a large telecommunications prospect that wants to overhaul its customer experience with a combination of sales and service software. Without notice, one of them books a meeting with the client, covers his peer's product area himself, disqualifies the peer's offering, and then emails to say he has "qualified out" on his colleague's behalf. The whole budget moves into his own portfolio.

Not everyone behaves like this, but the pay plan makes it common enough to shape the culture. For the customer it shows up as conflicting agendas and competing pitches from the same vendor. Customers want a partner who can think about their business; they meet a vendor that seems more interested in its own targets.

A full overhaul of the KPIs was not feasible in the time available. The proposal to the leadership team was a supplementary set of measures, funded from a leadership budget, that rewarded the one thing the existing plan ignored: solving a customer's problem with more than one team.

The game

The Innovation Games put the SaaS sales teams at the centre, because they talk to the business managers who own strategic priorities, while the infrastructure teams typically talk to IT, who hold budget but make tactical decisions. The game asked those SaaS teams to solve customer problems that ran across products, to pass qualified leads to other product teams, and to look for combinations of the company's capabilities beyond what their own application did out of the box.

The move was simple. A seller registered a customer challenge in a short project note. Two kinds of challenge qualified: the customer's need ran past the standard capabilities of the SaaS application, or a competitor with stronger references or a closer relationship was putting the engagement at risk. Registering earned a modest reward, a dinner worth around \$150, paid whether or not anything

came of the challenge. Each registered challenge was then matched with colleagues from other product teams who could contribute to the solution design, and the qualified leads handed to those teams counted as results of the game, which is where the 19 opportunities below come from.

Before the launch, the SaaS teams sat an enablement session on what the platform services could add to their own products, built on use cases from implementations that had already shipped. People cannot look for combinations they do not know exist.

Results, and what they are

Within five months, US\$3 million in new sales had closed from combined SaaS and platform solutions that no single product team could have built alone. The game also produced 19 new qualified sales opportunities, each of them pipeline that would not have existed under the siloed structure, and two new sales plays: combinations of capabilities from different teams that neither team had known the other had. Competitors with narrower portfolios or weaker internal collaboration could not copy those plays.

Every registered opportunity was tracked through to close, and the figures still carry three limits. The revenue counts as the game's because the deals were registered in it; nobody audited that attribution. There was no control group, so the programme cannot say what those teams would have closed anyway. And it ran for five months, so that is what the figures cover. What it can say is that five months and a modest reward budget produced deals and pipeline that the KPI sheet had left on the table.



"The Innovation Games is an excellent initiative. Bringing people together to collaborate and focus on synergies to solve customer problems is not just rewarding in sales, but also fun, as we learn so much from each other."

Carlos Rodriguez Iturria
Cloud Innovation Engineer

Why it worked

The reward was for a customer problem solved, something the seller and the customer both wanted. Nobody wants an activity count. Sailer and Homner's 2020 meta-analysis found that competition combined with collaboration consistently outperforms pure competition, and Deci, Koestner and Ryan's meta-analysis of 128 experiments found that rewards handed out merely for completing tasks can undermine intrinsic motivation over time. The Innovation Games paid a small amount to surface a problem and let the recognition come from solving it with colleagues. That is the difference between a scoreboard and an incentive.

The same game, smaller field

The programme scales down without losing its shape. Take one quarter. Ask every seller to register one account where the client's need runs past what your own product does, and pay a modest reward for the registration itself. Hold the enablement session first, so people know what the neighbouring teams can sell. Credit a qualified lead handed to another team as pipeline, because on the client's side it is. At the end of the quarter, count three things: projects registered, leads handed



across, and deals closed that needed two teams. That is the scoreboard a KPI sheet cannot show, and it fits on one page.

The Innovation Games is one of three gamification cases in Chapter 5 of The Sales Innovators, second edition, which also describes the version of the game that runs between companies serving the same client. To talk about running it in your organisation, visit www.salesinnovator.ai.