



## How to Motivate a Sales Team with Contests (That Actually Work)

### Description

Motivating a sales team is one of the hardest parts of being a sales leader. You can have the right people, a solid strategy and clear goals, but getting your team to consistently go above and beyond can be a challenge.

That's where well-designed sales contests can make a real difference.

At BDU, we've seen that thoughtfully planned and executed contests don't just drive short-term activity. They create energy, build camaraderie and push performance in a way that feels natural and even fun. And motivation tends to be much more sustainable when it's driven by [the "carrot" rather than the "stick,"](#) especially in a sales environment.

However, not all contests are created equally, and poorly designed ones can certainly backfire. Here's how to effectively use contests to motivate your sales team and achieve real results.

#### Why Sales Contests Work

At their core, sales contests tap into something simple: human nature. Most salespeople are competitive, and even the most team-oriented individuals still want to win.

For example, BDU's CEO Lisa Peskin can recall a simple sales contest she participated in early in her career: whoever booked the most appointments during a two-hour prospecting session would win tickets to a 76ers game. Lisa's results were a record number of appointments booked, and she surpassed expectations not because she wanted the prize itself but because of her drive to outperform her peers.

That's the power of a well-structured contest. It creates urgency, focus and a surge of energy. When layered with team dynamics, contests can also strengthen morale and engagement.

#### Start with the Outcome, Not the Prize

One of the most common mistakes sales leaders make is focusing on the reward first. Instead, start with a simple question: What specific behavior or result should the contest drive?

This might include:

- Booking more appointments
- Increased revenue
- Selling a specific product
- Pipeline growth

The contest must be aligned with the activity that directly impacts business results. Without that clarity, a contest may be fun but it won't be effective.

There are five other key factors to consider when determining whether a contest will motivate or fall flat.

#### 1. Number of Winners Matters

If only one person can win, most of the team will disengage as soon as they feel they are no longer in the running.

There's a simple way to think about this. Lisa once observed two small children running against one another in a race. They were neck and neck until one pulled ahead. The other immediately slowed down and fell on purpose; the race was over for him the moment he believed he could no longer win.

The same dynamic plays out in sales contests. To maintain engagement, consider:

- Multiple winners
- Tiered rewards
- Contests where everyone can win by achieving a goal

#### 2. Individual vs. Team Contests

Different formats drive different behaviors.

- **Individual contests** fuel personal competition
- **Team contests** build collaboration and shared accountability

Back when Lisa was a sales leader, she challenged her team to reach 105% of their monthly number. The team determined they wanted a huge, indulgent team lunch as their reward. Progress was tracked using a large visual thermometer updated regularly as the team moved closer to the goal. The team celebrated milestones along the way and built momentum together.

What made this contest effective was not just the reward; it was the shared experience and collective focus.

#### 3. The Right Prize Isn't Always Money

While cash may seem like the strongest motivator, it is not always the most impactful, especially for high-performing sales professionals.

In practice, non-monetary rewards often create stronger, longer-lasting motivation. Back in the 90s, Lisa saw success with incentives such as international trips, high-end luggage and Montblanc pens. Today's top prizes might include the latest tech gadgets, special travel experiences or even personalized rewards that feel meaningful to the individual.

As opposed to money, these rewards become memorable symbols of achievement.

#### 4. Set the Right Timeline

The length of a contest also plays a significant role in its effectiveness.

- **Short contests** (hours or days) drive immediate activity
- **Mid-length contests** (weeks) influence behavior and pipeline
- **Longer contests** (quarter or year) support major performance goals

Matching the timeline to the objective is critical.

#### 5. Keep the Contest Visible

A contest only works if participants are consistently aware of it. To keep engagement high, try:

- Sharing standings at least weekly
- Using leaderboards or visual trackers
- Reinforcing the contest in team meetings

Visibility keeps momentum going and ensures the contest stays top of mind.

#### What Doesn't Work

Not all contests motivate, and some can actually discourage effort. Common pitfalls to watch out for and avoid include:

- Contests that are unrealistic
- Contests that participants don't want to participate in
- Poorly defined or unclear goals
- Over-reliance on cash incentives
- Lack of consistent communication

When participants feel they cannot win, they will disengage.

#### Pro Tips to Maximize Motivation

To get the most out of a sales contest:

- Make it fun and creative

- Reinforce it consistently
- Celebrate progress, not just outcomes
- Rotate formats between team and individual contests
- Ask the team what motivates them

Motivation is not just about incentives. It's also about a [strong sales mindset](#) and a supportive environment. Leaders who create a culture of energy and engagement will see stronger results.

#### Final Thoughts

Well-designed incentives can be powerful motivators when used correctly, and the most effective sales contests do more than just drive numbers. They create energy, strengthen culture and give teams something to rally around.

For sales leaders looking to increase performance, contests are not just a tactic but a strategic tool. And when executed purposefully, the impact can be seen not only in the results but how a team shows up every day!

Want More Ways to Motivate Your Team? Let BDU Help!

Just submit your information below to schedule a free, no-obligation consultation to explore the most effective incentive strategies for your team.

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