

Sales Training

It should be a process, not an event

by: Steven Power, Sales & Marketing Solutions International

In my 15 years of sales and marketing consulting, one thing I've learned is that selling sales training is the most difficult sell ever! After hearing all the objections and listening to much discussion on the topic, I will begin by acknowledging some common perceptions regarding sales training and then offer solutions that will enable those responsible for training to take the training experience to the next level.

Common Perceptions

"Sales training events don't work!" — Many dealer principals have experienced the two- or three-day training event that serves to charge up the sales force for two to three weeks, but does little to change selling behavior in the field. As the fabled sales training icon Zig Zigler said: "Sales training is like taking a shower; it wears off after a couple of days." I agree that many training events lead to a few new areas of awareness and some minor adjustments in behavior but much of it never makes it out of the training room into the customer's office.

"Sending people away to training is expensive!" — When salespeople need to travel to training, the travel and lodging costs combined with the training fees can become a major expense. Another cost that compounds this is having salespeople out of the field for two or three days plus travel time. If a principal is considering sending four salespeople to a training event for three days this represents 12 selling days out of the field. Ouch!

"With a 50 percent turnover rate, it is difficult to get a return on investment from training!" — If a dealer sends four people to training and two of them turn over within 90 days, the dealer principal has just paid to train them for their next job.

Now that we have taken a look at some of the common perceptions and challenges related to sales training, let's look at some solutions.



Successful Sales

Begin with an assessment and end with an assessment. — The typical sales force is comprised of people with diverse sales experience, tenure and selling skills making it difficult to determine just what kind of training salespeople need. Successful training programs begin with an assessment of each salesperson's knowledge and skill level in the elements of the sales process the training will emphasize. A simple rating system (a scale of 1-10) is usually sufficient. It will reveal which steps in the sales process and, therefore, the training students, will need extra attention.

I suggest the assessment be conducted by the sales manager after investing the time to ride in the field with the salesperson with the specific outcome of observing their knowledge and skill level in the real world.

A certification exam at the end of the training process brings enormous intensity to the training process. A post training assessment enables the manager to assess the student's ability to comprehend the training curriculum as well as help identify gaps that need to be closed with reinforcement or retraining. A certification exam also sends a strong message to students that they are being held accountable for the training experience and investment.

Training should be a process, not an event. — Attitudes, skills and knowledge are developed over time. Whether teaching golf, piano, surgery or sales, one massive lesson with limited practice is not enough to equip students for success.

Successful training programs break down the training curriculum into digestible dosages and present the concepts in modules spaced over a defined time frame. In the "space repetition" training model, each module builds on the next enabling students to gain momentum as they progress through the curriculum connecting the dots along the way.

Successful training programs have role plays, case study exer-

cises and exams in each module to assure the student progresses to the next stage only after he or she has mastered the knowledge and skills required in the proceeding module.

If sales managers or trainers are certified to train the training, they can self pace the training by breaking down the modules and delivering them as a process over time, not a one-time event.

Sales management must internalize and personalize the training curriculum. — Sales managers are the key to getting training out of the classroom and into the field. Managers must go beyond having firsthand knowledge of the training curriculum to personally preaching it daily. It is my opinion that sales managers must be certified to train the training or at least be certified reinforcers of the training. By conducting the training, managers put their personal signature on the curriculum and present the concepts more passionately. Once managers have personal ownership of the training, they will reinforce it in the office on a daily basis and model the desired behavior in the field on ride-outs with salespeople.

Certifying the sales manager as the chief trainer offers a solution to the high cost of sending people away for training. If managers deliver the training in house, travel and lodging expenses are relieved and the training can be paced to prevent salespeople from being out of the field all day for three days straight. Since the turnover rate for sales managers is substantially lower than salespeople, the likelihood of getting a return on investment on training grows exponentially.

Skills trump knowledge! Skills take time! — Successful training programs integrate skill-building elements including student authorship of scripts and talk tracks, role play exercises, case studies, and infield inspection and coaching on the manager's part.

The reason most training does not make it out of the classroom is because the integration of skill-building exercises takes time. It is easier and more efficient to present training events to students, hand out scripts, explain theoretically how to apply the concepts, and turn students loose in the field to "gain real world experience." This "on the job training" can be the most costly training of all as most salespeople cannot build new skills in the actual sales environment. Without practice and confidence the unskilled salesperson will most likely blow the sale.

Role play exercises are critical to creating a simulated environment in which salespeople can apply the training concepts and techniques. Role play allows students to experience the early failures that are a natural part of building new skills. Without this simulated experience, students will most likely not build the confidence to attempt newly acquired skills in the field. When students attempt new skills in the field and fail at implementation they often associate that failure with the skill

and never attempt it again.

No one would invest in a golf lesson and then go straight to the course without stopping at the driving range to practice and develop confidence before attempting it in the real world. It is also extremely helpful when the instructor plays a round with students, inspecting their application of the new skills and providing coaching for improvement.

Curriculum is critical! — Well designed and well written training curriculum provides sales forces and management with common vocabulary and a defined sales process to follow. Generic sales training does not work! Sales training curriculum must be specifically designed for your market sector and proven to deliver measurable results in similar sales cultures. As well, sales training must be flexible enough to be customized to your organization.

Curriculum development and writing should be left to professional developers and writers. Let's face it, most sales managers were promoted to management as a result of being top salespeople. While many sales managers are competent presenters, as top salespeople, they tend to be intuitive in their implementation of the sales process and, therefore, often present training with an intuitive delivery.

Without well written curriculum, it is very difficult for an intuitive person to teach process or pass on skills. Many salespeople who make up the training audience are not intuitive, but are process oriented; thus, they do not learn intuitively. Process oriented people learn best when the process is broken down into steps, which are broken down into sub steps and presented in a logical order.

Intuitive trainers also often assume the audience understands the obvious nuances of implementing each step in the process and tend to skip over or microwave what should be obvious. However, process oriented learners want and need all the details and, without the nuances, will have problems connecting the dots in the field.

Above all, sales training curriculum must be supported with field sales tools that prompt and support salespeople in the implementation of the training concepts. Based on the training curriculum, field tools may include marketing letters, a scripted value proposition statement, a field survey tool, an account profile and a proposal template.

Conclusion

Even the best sales training will not equip salespeople to walk on water or pull down 100 percent of the deals in which they engage. If average salespeople engage in 10-15 deals per month and are successful in writing three to five orders, that means they

lose seven to ten deals per month.

In my sales management experience I observed that average salespeople were very close to winning two to three deals per month that simply fell off the table. This was often a result of the salespeople skipping or sloppily handling a step or two in the sales process. Perhaps they had low rapport with prospects or conducted a poor discovery process; thus, they did not customize the presentation to the prospects' motivations. Perhaps the proposal was off the mark and led to massive objections that salespeople could not handle. Or, everything was going great until they just did not close effectively and the prospects decided to put off the buying decision and then the competition caught wind of the deal.

I suggest that herein lies the promised return on investment in sales training. If management can equip salespeople to capture just one to two deals per month that they are engaged in anyway, it would go a long way toward reducing turnover. Do the math. One to two deals per month, 12-24 orders per year, \$6,000-\$12,000 dollars in additional earnings go a long way in con-

vincing salespeople that they are in the right business with the right company and the future is promising.

For sales managers, an additional 12-24 orders per year, per salesperson goes a long way in meeting annual sales quotas and achieving yearly bonuses. For dealer principals, just one to two orders per month, per person more than offsets the expense of training sales managers to train and equipping salespeople to capture the deals that are "falling through the cracks" today. ■

Steven Power is founder and president of Sales & Marketing Solutions International. He has trained more than 15,000 business-to-business sales professionals in 19 countries and 12 industries. "Power Selling — The Book" is Power's full consultative and collaborative approach that combines his highly successful sales philosophy with his real-world consulting experience. His clients include Hewlett-Packard, Ricoh, Canon, AOL's Digital City and Staples Office Expo. "PowerSelling" is available at www.powerselling.com or by telephone at (805) 650-1248.



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