



6 Rules for Conducting and Implementing Effective Sales Training

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Rule

1

Teach Sales People with Sales People

Sales people will test and retest the trainer, and if the trainer can't challenge back with stories, experiences, great reasoning and applicability, the sales people lose interest and jump to their Blackberries. Sales people are a tough bunch - cocky, confident, know-it-all, independent and in a rush. At least that's what they'd have you believe. Unless a trainer has sold and shows s/he has done it well, the sales people and managers find it hard to relate.

If you use an outside sales trainer, s/he should be the person that sold you the program. Why, because you'll be able to observe his or her selling process first hand and talk about it in the session. You will also get ultimate quality and customer service because s/he will want more of your business. Avoid sales training company facilitators. They lack the street sense and urgency that must exude to their selling audience. If facilitators are good at selling, they will still be selling as well as facilitating. When I have to run multiple sales training sessions, I bring in my other sales people who also teach sales training to their customers.

If you use an inside trainer, the best candidates are sales managers. Sales people listen to their managers, and like all subordinates, they try to please their managers by enacting what they say to do. Although sales managers should rally to this task, they usually try to avoid it. In that case recruit a sale person and make sales training his or her full-time job. If sales people train part-time and sell as their day-job, they focus on their territory, their income and the demands of their manager, rather than being diligent following-up and getting the training implemented.

Analyze Your Selling Problems

Obviously the main reason for sales training is more sales. However, what's the constraint, draw-back, issue, challenge, etc. as seen by a cross section of your sales people and managers. Is it the sales people's lack of skills in certain areas, i.e. prospecting, getting to the right people, team selling, interviewing/questioning, presenting, closing, cross-selling, etc. or any of the host of subcategories? Some people lack some skills and some people lack others, all have different skill levels.

However, the beauty of sales training is that no matter the skill levels all will learn different things from the same information because they understand from their own skill level perspectives. People have attended my same sessions many times (for a variety of reasons) and all tell me they learned something different or understood the concept better or differently each time. Although they heard the same words, they were at higher skill levels or in different mental states each time and understood more of the subtleties and applicability.

So what are your selling issues? Are your people having trouble getting high enough in client organizations? Are you lacking a common process that causes management to worry whether selling situations are being handled differently by each sales rep and getting different results? Did you inherit sales people from various backgrounds and you need to bring them together with a common language and methodology? Are some of the people less productive than others and you'd like to bring them all up to the same and higher success level? Are the selling cycles taking too long? Is competition stealing share? Are they price selling to beat competition? Are you not getting enough add-on business from existing accounts?

Stop, think, and most importantly ask the sales people and managers for their insights. Ask, “What’s holding you (or your sales people) back from getting more sales?” or “If you could wave a magic wand and get whatever you wanted, what would you want to learn (or want your sales people to learn) to do better?”

Try not to have *pump-them-up* type training / motivational talks. These last for the day and are forgotten by cocktails. You must have a goal, something you want to accomplish, a direction, an outcome, etc. that is tangible. Your people must leave with a repeatable process, discrete actions, exercises to change behaviors, etc. rather than hype. When people categorize me as a motivational speaker, I quickly correct them by saying, “I teach process. I give people hardened tools they can take away and use, over and over again to close sales.” “My participants become equipped with strategies, tactics, techniques, and processes that enable them to network to the leaders, engage those people in meaningful interviews, move those leaders to commitment, and on-going relationships.

So wave your magic wand, what is it about the selling processes or behaviors of your sales people you’d like to improve? Then together with the sales trainer or selling coach determine how you eliminate these issues and solve these problem to attain the results you desire.

Decide Who Will Reinforce & How Sales People and Sales Managers Will Be Held Accountable

Sales training is efficient and effective when you reinforce it and hold people accountable for implementing it. Studies show that 10% of participants will take and use the training without further encouragement and improve. 10% will never use it, even if you threaten them with their job or a gun. The other 80% are moldable but will do little until they are urged, coached further, held responsible, monitored, etc. As mention previously, the best people for this role are the sales managers. Subordinates listen to them and sales managers have the most to gain. Therefore, the role of the sales trainer, either from the outside or your internal one, must be to win the support and commitment of the direct managers and senior managers to enforce the concepts taught in the training.

It's a food chain. If the SVP Sales or CEO seeks updates from the manager on actions to improve the performance of each sales person (by name), that sales manager will pay attention to improving each sales person. If the sales manager pays close attention to each sales person by mentoring the training, coaching further, and holding that person accountable for using the learning, that person will change and improve his or her selling behaviors and performance. If the senior managers and direct managers don't, little will change. Who want the most for the training to work?

The realities unfortunately are that both senior management and direct management are busy with many other pressing matters and may let this reinforcement and accountability slip. This ruins the sales training investment and is the reason why sales performances don't improve as rapidly as they could. That moldable 80% will default to their old habits and get the same sales results they had before unless someone follows-up and works with them. Again, the sales trainer has to keep the pressure on in a diplomatic way. Securing support from the CEO and/or SVP before the training and issuing reminders afterwards are very effective. Clients put me on special retainers to keep up the prodding, reinforcement and accountability.

Securing commitment for active support from top management unfortunately is a tough sell. I lose more sales by telling senior managers they have to participate than any other reason. Although not verbalized, those who hire me to train want sales training to stick immediately and continue indefinitely without any extra effort on their part. Well, it does stick immediately. Everyone in my sessions leaves with strategies and action to close at least two active pursuits and their success rate is at least 75%. Unfortunately, when I check back at 3 and 6 month periods, those who have not kept up the reinforcement and accountability, are not much better than before the training, but nowhere near what they were right after the session. On the other hand, those that keep it up, show tremendous gains in their sales and profit margins.

Customize Sale Training to Your Sales, Customers, Industry and Sales People

I've trained thousands of sales people and managers in various industries all over the world, and although there are many similarities in selling, there are differences among industries, services and regions. As I've written in many articles, the subtleties are what make huge difference in selling. So your sales training has to be customized, not only for your industry, customers, product or service, but for what you want to accomplish. In other words, if the sales people are having trouble getting to key decision makers and winning them over, they don't need more product information, or reasons why your product is better than the competitions'.

This brings up another area of caution for sales training. Product training is very different than sales training. Marketing usually delivers product training and marketing is very different than selling. It's true, marketing is used in the selling process, but the skills required getting someone interested (marketing) are very different than the skills to move that someone to commitment and/or the close (selling).

Many companies use the marketing department to train their sales people especially new hires. Although they mean well, they tend to indoctrinate the sales person with all the hype and competitive advantages of their products or services. This has the tendency to send sales people out as walking commercials. As a sales person moves from generating interest to closing the prospect, the focus has to

change from features and benefits to investigation, gaining support, getting to the top decision-makers, and finally securing commitment. Most of these elements are usually not in the knowledge realm of training from a marketing department.

Although product/service expertise is very useful, selling skills (which are not the same as people skills) are far more powerful. A skilled sales person can always bring in an expert to address technical and other complex product issues without losing credibility with prospects. On the other hand, most technical experts have trouble networking to ultimate decision makers, relating to them, interviewing them effectively and closing them.

Knowing your products and services, your industry, and types of customers are good reasons why internal people, i.e. sales managers should be the sales trainers. Unfortunately sales managers (usually former top-rate sales people) were never trained to train their salespeople. If they had been, they would be doing it successfully already. Besides, the style with which the manager sells probably doesn't fit all the personalities of his or her sales people. So, although they're the best to know the subtleties and the selling requirements of your products / services, they need to learn both an effective selling process that fits all sales people, how to train it and how to enforce it.

Outside trainers bring fresh ideas, selling processes never taught, and a credibility that is sometimes more easily accepted. They are usually seen as sales experts without the baggage of internal people. However, they will lose their credibility quickly unless they take the time to understand the industry, types of customers, products and services, and the subtleties of your selling environment. Sales people will constantly retort, "You don't know our business." The best way for an outside trainer to learn is to interview senior managers, sales managers, and a cross-section of the salespeople. This will give the trainer a good idea what's going on, as it relates to the selling effort. It also shows everyone that the trainer has taken the time to understand their business. Additionally, as the trainer interviews your people, s/he will establish credibility that will come in handy later in the training. After this due diligence, the trainer should consult with senior management and the training department to customize the training and reinforcement, based on his or her findings, to produce the desired outcomes.

Rule

5

Set - Up Training for Maximum Peer Interactions

Adults are a tough bunch to educate, especially in areas they feel they have competency. Unlike children who absorb what teachers say, adults who are experienced in selling will not accept doing something differently that a trainer says to do without rejecting it first, breaking it apart and rebuilding it to fit within their comfort levels. This is called resistance to change and is nothing new, and is ever present.

However, sales people and managers listen to their peers. And as mentioned earlier, people in a training session relate to what's being said differently depending on their skill levels. Therefore, the trainer must first get individuals to apply each concept to their own style, personality and particular selling situation. Then, in small groups each individual needs to share his/her use of the concept with the group. This has two profound effects. First, the person gets to hear out loud what s/he is thinking, which is usually very revealing. Hearing words coming from you own mouth provides tremendous feedback that doesn't come from thinking about it. Secondly, the peers listen, question further and give creditable feedback, which is more readily accepted. Remember, they can't say to a peer, "Oh, you just don't understand." In these small group workshops peers work with each other using actual accounts as examples and make suggestions to generate an understanding and hopefully an acceptance of the concept and how to use it by each individual. They discuss its merit, tear it apart and rebuild it to fit how each will use it. Each group should be assigned a leader to prod, monitor, encourage these discussions, and yet prevent one or two from dominating the discussions. Everyone must participate

These workshops will generate further questions, issues, and concerns that will be dealt with by the larger group -- again more peer interactions. Therefore, the trainer must encourage these large group interactions. A good technique, if the group goes silent, is to bring up struggles and insights s/he heard while circulating around the small groups. These peer discussions make the participants amenable to using the training concepts and that's powerful.

The trainer has to be very careful not to impose his or her opinions too strenuously. Rather, s/he must encourage other participants to address these concerns and encourage the applicability of the concept in question. To be safe the trainer must prepare some of the senior people in the audience and small group leaders to jump in to these discussions and relate their experiences to the concept. These inputs will basically validate the concept and/or resolve the issues.

Although peer interaction is very powerful, there is nothing more powerful than manager interaction. The more support management shows during the training session, the more readily acceptable, it becomes. That's why it's so important to get managers to attend training sessions. However, getting managers to attend and stay involved may be a significant challenge, but it is definitely worth your efforts, and their time, if you want the learning to stick.

Peer interaction can also be set-up for ongoing reinforcement. Encourage newsletters or memos with success stories, coaching tips, ideas of how to use a training concept, how others have used the concepts, and gentle reminders of accountability. Managers can also reinforce the use of the training by offering small awards, or recognitions to people that had success using the training. There is nothing like competing for attention and the drive for awards and recognitions. Anything that keeps the people talking about the learning goes a long way to making the training pay off. It's like learning a foreign language. The more you speak the new words to your peers, the more you remember them and use them. Coming from the other angle, the more the managers reinforce and enforce, the more the sales people will realize the boss is serious.

Participants Must Prepare Written Strategies and Actions to Take with Them

All sales training produces aha moments for all participants. These are extremely valuable occurrences and these revelations need to be captured before they are lost. There should be constant suggestions to write these insights down somewhere so they have a chance of being seen again and again. Manuals and handouts are not a good place because people typically don't keep them on their desks and rarely review them. Also, many will nod in agreement to points made, but fail to note them and consequently forget them. This is like losing a money machine. These acknowledgements and agreement can keep churning successes if remembered and used. I'm constantly peppered by participants of how great a refresher my session is. Refresher means those people forgot the concepts learned previously and never used, and they are about to forget them again unless there is visual and verbal reinforcement. Therefore, the facilitator must have some methods to make sure moments of understanding or concurrence are not lost -- writing them on a flip chart paper and hanging them where all can see or emailing them on a weekly basis; create glossy posters for hanging in the office; encouraging people to attend roundtable reviews at lunches, etc. -- anything to keep it in the forefront of their minds.

Additionally, formal written strategies and actions must be prepared and committed to before the session is over. In all my workshops, all participants prepare at least two game plans for their real accounts/opportunities they brought with them no matter the topic, -- networking, prospecting, sales calls, sales pursuits, account management, or self-improvement -- no matter who the

participant is – CEO to tech rep. These give the people a solid road map in their own words how to use what s/he learned. I call this 'Take'n It to the Streets. But, as mentioned earlier, this works great initially, but tapers off at an exponential rate unless management follows-up, reinforces, and holds people accountable to continue preparing these written action plans.

Another tactic; get people to commit out loud to the group what their take away actions and strategies are. Another is to pair up people so that each reinforces and hold the other person accountable. This works but is not in lieu of management pressure and reinforcement.

People must walk out with written marching orders which they have built themselves and are committed to. The more the facilitator and others help them prepare those marching orders, the clearer they'll be to the individual and the more willing s/he will implement them. One success goes a long way to internalize concepts and continue to use them. However, if there's no written exit game plan, the chances of participants using the concepts are slim to none. Then, there are no successes, and the training will become a fuzzy memory. I usually require copies of each person's exit strategies. I then send emails at 2 weeks, 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months reminding and requesting feedback. That's how I know those that use the training close 75% of the time the sales opportunities they brought to the training. Request those exit actions. Share them with the direct managers and send reminder follow-ups. This will get the ball rolling, and once it starts it will be hard to stop.

Summary

Use these six rules:

1. Teach sales people with sales people.
2. Analyze your selling problems as seen by the managers and sales people.
3. Decide who will reinforce and how sales people will be held accountable.
4. Customize the training to fit your people, your customers, and your industry.
5. Set up the training for maximum peer interactions.
6. Require all to prepare and commit to written take-away strategies and actions.

And your sales training will pay for itself many times over.

And that's what I call successful sales training.