

Maximizing the Effectiveness of Sales Training

Five Factors for Developing Sustainable Selling Skills



Sales Readiness Group

ABSTRACT

According to the American Society of Training and Development, US-based companies spend approximately \$20 billion a year on sales training. Yet many sales organizations get low ROIs from their sales training initiatives.

A common problem with many sales training initiatives is that they are event based (i.e., intensive, multi-day training events) where participants typically forget much of what they have learned shortly after the training event. Another challenge is that sales organizations don't get the frontline sales managers actively involved in the training, reinforcement and measurement process.

This white paper explains the benefits of using a systematic approach to sales training that transforms it from a one-time event into an ongoing process that produces a more sustainable adoption of new sales skills.

WHY SALES TRAINING OFTEN PRODUCES LOW ROIS

Better selling skills produces better performance. It's intuitive. And sales training is a proven method for improving the selling skills of a sales team. But many sales organizations get low returns on investment (ROIs) on their sales training initiatives. Why is this?

One common problem is that sales organizations often have unrealistic expectations regarding the sales training initiative. Ask any sales manager what outcome he/she wants as a result of a sales training program and most will say increased sales. But sales training can't directly increase sales; it can only change certain behaviors that, if consistently applied, will lead to increased sales. And that's a key challenge: getting sales professionals to change their on-the-job behaviors and habits is difficult.

Successfully changing specific behaviors requires a process, not a one-time event.

Another contributing factor to low ROIs from training initiatives is an over-reliance on "event-based" training without sufficient post-training reinforcement. We have all gone through this type of training before:

- Fly the team in for a national sales meeting
- Include 1-2 days of training
- Overload the team with content
- Throw in a "team building" dinner, and, finally...
- Repeat next year (maybe).

Unfortunately, research has consistently demonstrated that unless training is followed by post-training reinforcement this type of event-based sales training produces limited results. That's because successfully changing specific behaviors requires a process, not a one-time event. Behaviors can't realistically be changed in one or two days, especially since sales professionals routinely forget most of what they have learned within 30 days of the training event. Sales professionals need time to learn and apply new knowledge and skills, which later need to be reinforced and coached for sustainability.

Another root cause of ineffective sales training programs is the lack of understanding of the extent of time, commitment and skills required for frontline sales managers to affect the desired change. Sales managers' support of the training goal and objectives - from design through execution - is crucial as they are uniquely positioned to ensure that new knowledge and skills are applied on the job. Setting expectations, coaching and monitoring performance metrics is the work of sales managers. Providing them with the knowledge, skills and tools to do this effectively and efficiently is required to ensure an organization's return on its training investment is maximized.

FIVE FACTORS FOR CREATING SUSTAINABLE SELLING SKILLS

So what can a sales organization do to maximize its ROI from a sales training initiative? Start by taking a more strategic view of training, one that goes beyond just the delivery of training and focus on creating sustainable changes in sales behaviors. Specifically, Sales Readiness Group recommends developing and implementing sales training programs that incorporate the following five factors:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Motivation2. Customization3. Spaced Learning4. Reinforcement5. Measurement |
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These five factors that can lead to sustainable changes in sales behaviors are outlined below:

1. MOTIVATION

Motivation is a critical element in the adoption of new skills. Without it, sales professionals won't invest the effort required to change behaviors. There are many ways an organization can help participants develop the motivation to learn new skills. For example, the organization can conduct a pre-training skills assessment for all participants and establish professional skill development plans. Another powerful motivator is to couple the training with some form of post-training certification and recognition program.

Motivation can also be developed by demonstrating the sales organization's commitment to training. Management at all levels within the organization should lend their presence and authority to inspire their organization and understand the importance of the training initiative to organizational success. Examples of this include:

- Executive sponsorship of training initiatives
- Pre-training communications from senior executives
- Executive participation in delivery and reinforcement
- Frontline sales manager's active participation in the training and the post-training reinforcement and coaching

2. CUSTOMIZATION

A common characteristic of unsuccessful sales training programs is using "off-the-shelf" curriculum that does not address the specific needs of the sales organization. As part of the sales training development process, the training must first be linked to the goals and objectives of the organization. Executive involvement and validation of the training's purpose and desired outcomes must be clearly defined for any meaningful application of skills and knowledge. For example, an organization seeking to expand sales to its existing clientele vs. a company looking to expand into new markets may both want sales training; however the positioning, exercises and role plays would be very different.

Furthermore, sales professionals have limited time so the training program needs to closely align with their job performance or it will not be retained. That means the sales training curriculum must address the specific knowledge and performance skill gaps for the training participants.

Another crucial aspect of increasing relevancy is customizing the training curriculum for company and industry specific needs. Using company and industry specific terminology and examples can help build instant credibility in the mind of participants. Retention may be significantly enhanced when the training materials, exercises and role plays reflect the

learner's perceptions and experiences. This means leveraging subject matter experts to create accurate role plays and exercises.

3. SPACED LEARNING

The most effective sales training occurs when the delivery is spaced over a period of time rather than within a concentrated training event. The idea of spaced learning is based on the simple yet powerful insight that training participants learn, apply and retain new skills more effectively when training is divided into manageable chunks of content that are delivered over time.

Many sales organizations use a blended training delivery approach to leverage the benefits of spaced learning. This will typically consist of on-site training for the primary training event and then using eLearning or virtual instructor-led training (VILT) for reinforcement. The challenge with this approach is that the bulk of the training still occurs over a relatively compressed period of time, such as the typical 1-2 day training event.

However, recent advances in VILT technology are now allowing companies to use VILT for the primary training itself, and, thus, more fully maximize the benefits of spaced learning. Sophisticated VILT platforms allow sales organizations to deliver highly engaging sales training with expert facilitators that rivals the effectiveness of in-person training. During such training, participants interact with the facilitators and their peers both telephonically and using online interactions that are available in the virtual classroom (e.g., chat, polling, whiteboarding). In addition, participants can work on case studies and exercises and participate in role plays in virtual breakout rooms.

A well-designed sales training program using VILT can be structured as a series of short, weekly virtual workshops with integrated fieldwork and review. In-between workshops, participants apply the skills they have learned in the field. Over the course of several weeks, participants learn, practice and apply the new sales skills, get coaching and reinforcement from the facilitator and share best practices with their peers.

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In addition to eliminating the travel costs associated with training events, this VILT approach better integrates with sales professionals busy schedules.

Following the training, participants should take some form of online knowledge check or certification. This will help identify any learning gaps and better target subsequent reinforcement sessions.

4. REINFORCEMENT

Research has consistently demonstrated that without systematic, ongoing learning and reinforcement, participants quickly forget what they have learned and revert back to their original behaviors. According to one study, approximately 50% of learning content is not retained within five weeks, and within 90 days, 84% of what was initially learned is lost.

Ongoing application and practice make a new skill a habit. So in order to maximize the investment in sales training, companies should consider a fully integrated approach to reinforcement that consists of (1) facilitated reinforcement, (2) sales coaching of the participants by the frontline managers, (3) on-demand reinforcement using eLearning and (4) tools and job aids.

At a minimum, facilitated reinforcement sessions should occur at 30/60/90 day intervals following the initial training. The sessions should allow participants to review, share best practices and fill knowledge gaps, as well as provide participants

with positive reinforcement for successfully using new skills in the field. In between reinforcement sessions, participants should have exercises, field work and on-going skills practice.

Perhaps one of the most effective methods to ensure that sales professionals are applying new sales skills on the job is to have their frontline sales managers provide them with ongoing sales coaching. According to the Corporate Executive Board, effective sales coaching can potentially increase top-line revenue by up to 20%. With such potential benefits it is no wonder that many sales organizations recommend that their frontline sales managers spend 25% - 45% of their time sales coaching.

There are two types of sales coaching: strategic and tactical. Strategic coaching focuses on how a sales professional approaches an account in order to acquire new business or sell deeper into existing accounts. Strategic coaching focuses on helping sales professionals work through challenges such as account penetration, inability to access decision makers, competitive issues, and formulating overall account strategies. Tactical coaching, on the other hand, focuses on selling skills and knowledge. Here the sales manager observes and analyzes a sales professional's selling skills or sales knowledge in an actual sales call, discusses what went well and areas for improvement and then provides constructive feedback.

While both forms of sales coaching are important, we find that many sales managers have the most difficulty with tactical sales coaching. With this type of coaching the sales manager must act as a teacher and help his/her sales professional learn or improve specific selling skills. That, however, can be exceedingly challenging for sales managers. Remember, many sales managers were formerly successful sales professionals before being promoted into sales management. For them selling came naturally and they often cannot understand why one of their team members isn't "getting it." Moreover, tactical sales coaching is an on-going process in which the sales manager must coach his/her entire team in a systematic manner.

Effective sales coaching can potentially increase top-line revenue by up to 20%.

Fortunately, tactical sales coaching is a skill that can be learned, practiced and perfected. Sales organizations should couple a sales training with training their sales managers on how to coach their sales teams. In addition, the sales organization should set clear expectations as to the amount of time it expects sales managers to spend coaching their sales professionals.

In addition to facilitated reinforcement and ongoing sales coaching, sales organizations should also consider using self-paced eLearning for "on-demand" reinforcement. eLearning is a highly cost effective method for providing on-demand skills reinforcement for busy sales professionals. Another important aspect of ensuring that new skills are consistently applied on the job is to provide sales professionals with sufficient tools and job aids following the training.

5. MEASUREMENT

While measuring actual increases in sales results from the training would be ideal, for many sales organizations this may be too complex and/or expensive for many sales organizations to achieve. One of the biggest challenges is trying to isolate the impact of training from the myriad of other factors that can affect sales results.

A more realistic form of measurement is the extent new knowledge and skills are implemented on the job. This ultimately means holding participants accountable for changing their behaviors and adopting new skills. Such measurement can be done through a combination of assessments, skill simulations and field observations. Just as with sales coaching, it is the frontline sales manager who is ultimately the best positioned to observe members of his/her team over time to determine if change has taken place, if it is relevant to the desired outcomes and if it is sustained.

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Norman Behar is a proven sales leader with over 25 years of CEO and senior sales management experience. He is recognized as a thought leader in the sales training industry, and has worked with clients in a wide range of industries including financial services, healthcare, technology, manufacturing, and distribution. Norman's whitepapers and blog posts are frequently featured in leading sales enablement publications. Previously, Norman served as President and CEO of Catapult, Inc., a leading provider of personal computer training services, where he oversaw the Company's operations and managed its growth and expansion into more than 20 major markets across the United States. Under Norman's leadership, revenues increased significantly and the company was sold to IBM. Norman received his B.A. from the University of Washington, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude.

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David Jacoby has extensive experience developing and implementing innovative sales training and sales leadership development solutions for clients. Previously, David was a Principal at Linear Partners, a sales consulting firm focused on providing sales effectiveness and development solutions to emerging growth companies. In the past, David has served as Vice President of Business Affairs of Xylo, Inc., where he was responsible for the Company's business development, sales operations, legal affairs and financing activities. David received his J.D. from the Columbia University School of Law, where he was a Harlan Fiske Stone Scholar, and received his B.A. from the University of Washington, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude.

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Ray Makela has over 20 years of management, consulting, and sales experience. Ray is an industry thought-leader who writes frequently on best practices for coaching and developing sales teams. Ray currently oversees all client engagements for Sales Readiness Group (SRG) as well as serves as a senior facilitator on sales management, coaching, negotiation and sales training workshops. Prior to Sales Readiness Group, Ray served as Chief Customer Officer (CCO) at Codesic Consulting where he was responsible for business development, managing customer relationships, and the development and implementation of Codesic's sales training initiatives. Ray has also held management positions at Accenture and Claremont Technology Group where he was a management consultant and trainer in the Change Management practice. He earned his B.A. in Speech Communications from the University of Washington and an M.P.A. in Public Administration and Information Systems Management from the University of Southern California.

About Sales Readiness Group

Sales Readiness Group (SRG) is an industry leading sales training company that helps companies develop highly effective sales organizations. Our solutions include comprehensive sales training, sales coaching, and sales management programs that deliver sustainable skills improvement.

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