Maximizing the Effectiveness of
Sales Training

Five Factors for Developing Sustainable Selling Skills

SRG

Sales Readiness Group

ABSTRACT

According to LinkedIn's third annual State of Sales Report, in the U.S alone, companies spend about $15 billion each year training sales employees. Yet many sales organizations get low ROIs from their training initiatives.

A common problem with many sales training initiatives is that they're 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 selling skills.

WHY SALES TRAINING OFTEN PRODUCES LOW ROIS

Better selling skills produce better results. It's intuitive. 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 because of a sales training program and most will say increased sales. But sales training can't

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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.

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 post-training reinforcement follows the training, 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're 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 is required to ensure an organization's return on its training investment is maximized.

FIVE FACTORS FOR CREATING SUSTAINABLE SELLING SKILLS

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 focuses on creating sustainable changes in sales behaviors. Specifically, Sales Readiness Group recommends developing and implementing sales training programs that incorporate the following five factors:

1. Motivation
2. Customization
3. Spaced Learning
4. Reinforcement
5. Measurement

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 doesn't 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 align with their job performance closely, or it'll 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 the 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. There are a variety of ways to implement spaced learning to increase skills retention. These include:

Blended Programs: Blended programs typically consist of pre-work, followed by on-site training for the primary training event, and then deploy eLearning or virtual instructor-led training (VILT) for reinforcement. The benefit of this approach is that the onsite workshop provides for a high degree of peer to peer interaction, and in-person engagement with the facilitator.

Virtual Classroom: 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, and breakout rooms). Virtual Classrooms reduce time out of the field for participants and eliminate the travel expenses associated with onsite workshops.

Flipping the Classroom: This involves using eLearning as a precursor to an onsite workshop. The eLearning is typically delivered in short segments focused on providing sales professional with knowledge on key skill areas they will learn to apply in the workshop. The benefit of this approach is that the actual workshop can focus to a much larger extent on real-world application exercises and role plays.

4. REINFORCEMENT

Research has consistently demonstrated that without systematic, ongoing learning and reinforcement, participants quickly forget what they've learned and revert 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. 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.

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. In fact, based on a study we conducted of over 400 sales organizations, one of the hallmarks of top performing sales organizations is that their sales managers invest more time in coaching their reps.

There are two types of sales coaching: strategic and tactical. **Strategic coaching** focuses on how a sales professional approaches an account to acquire a 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 sale 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 to sales management. For them, selling came naturally, and they often can't 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 systematically.

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. Also, 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 effecting method for providing on-demand skills reinforcement for busy sales professionals. Another important aspect of ensuring

that new skills are consistently applied to 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 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's ultimately the best positioned to observe members of his/her team over time to determine if change has taken place, if it's relevant to the desired outcomes and if it's sustained.

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NORMAN BEHAR – MANAGING DIRECTOR

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 white papers and blog posts are frequently featured in leading trade publications. Previously, Norman served as President and CEO of Catapult, Inc., a leading provider of personal computer training services, where he oversaw operations and managed growth before the company's acquisition by IBM. Norman received his B.A. from the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude.

DAVID JACOBY – MANAGING DIRECTOR

David Jacoby has extensive experience developing and implementing innovative sales training and sales leadership development solutions for clients. David is a thought leader in instructional design and the use of innovative technologies to deliver industry-leading online sales training programs. Previously, David has served as Vice President of Business Affairs of Xylo, Inc., where he was responsible for the Company's sales operations, legal affairs, and financing activities. Before joining Xylo, David was a corporate attorney with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, where he practiced in the firm's mergers & acquisitions group. 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.

RAY MAKELA – MANAGING DIRECTOR

Ray Makela is an author, speaker, and business executive with 25 years of management, consulting, and sales experience. At Sales Readiness Group (SRG), Ray oversees all client engagements and the delivery of sales and sales management training programs. He has delivered programs for clients such as Alcon/Novartis, AIG, Sysco, Nielsen, Timken, Follett, Pandora, Ritchie Bros, HERE, Infor, Galderma and Walmart. Before SRG, Ray was a partner and owner at Codesic Consulting. He was responsible for business development, managing customer relationships, and the development of the sales team. Ray has also held management positions at Accenture and Claremont Technology Group as a consultant in the Organizational Development practice. Earlier in his career, Ray served for seven years as an officer in the US Navy. 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. Our mission is to help improve the performance of sales teams by providing customized, skills-based training programs that produce sustainable behavior change. Our solutions include comprehensive sales training, sales coaching, and sales management programs.

Sales Readiness Group, Inc.

Toll Free: 1-800-490-0715

info@salesreadinessgroup.com

www.SalesReadinessGroup.com