SellingPower.com
Solutions for Sales Management

Change Your Training Mind-Set

The nine (secret) strategies for putting training to work where it will count most

By Geoffrey James

Sales managers expect a lot from sales training. They want to keep the team current with the newest skills, to change sales behavior to meet new market needs, and to ensure that the sales process causes revenue and profit to grow apace. Accomplishing all these multiple goals at the same time requires strategic thinking, so we asked five top sales trainers how sales managers should allocate their training resources to create maximum results – regardless of what sales training firm they actually employ. Here's what the experts had to say.

Secret #1

Think of training as a long-term investment.

The best investments of sales training dollars are tied to enterprise approaches to improving the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the sales force. The key is to create a consistent customer management process that all salespeople can use on a day-to-day basis. This approach to sales training touches the organization in multiple ways. Top performers have their best practices reinforced and enhanced, while low performers quickly realize whether or not they can do the job. At the same time, average performers gain clarity on what it takes to become a top performer. That's great motivation for the "fair to middle" achievers, which fuels the performance of the entire organization. Similarly, you should avoid short-term sales training programs that simply focus on motivation, building confidence, and scripted approaches to dealing with customers. Some individuals may indeed need these things, but they should be dealt with on an individual basis as part of their personal development plans. *Source: Sam Reese, CEO, Miller Heiman*

Secret #2

Research, then prioritize, your needs.

Every sales group has a unique set of needs. For some it may be selling a broader solution, calling on a different market or decision maker, dealing with more senior-level clients, negotiating with procurement professionals, repositioning how they are perceived, or providing a fundamental block-and-tackle sales program. If a sales manager is not sure what the priorities are, then they can use a combination of methods to help make the determination:
• Review the business objectives to ensure the training that is in place – or that is being chosen or developed fully – supports the current business objectives.
• Look at results to identify where performance is off. "Hey, you bought an expensive CRM system…so go ahead and use it!"
• Observe salespeople in action. There's nothing like seeing for yourself how the team is performing.
• Get feedback from clients. You may get an earful, but what you learn will be enormously useful.
• Ask and listen to salespeople. They're the ones who really know what's working and what's not.
• Find and use a behavioral skill diagnostic tool to create awareness of strengths and weaknesses. *Source: Linda Richardson, chairman, Richardson*

Secret #3

Choose "narrow and holistic" over "broad and shallow."

Once you've prioritized your training needs, focus on one area (for example, negotiations, opportunity management, or new business development) and proactively manage the coaching, reinforcement, and application of that area, rather than just rolling out a series of programs and training events. If you pick an area that will have the most positive impact on your customer relationship process, you should design a strategic implementation to include up-front planning, strategic execution, and ongoing evaluation across the holistic sales organization. Whichever area of sales training you are currently focusing on, be sure to include a multitude of delivery mechanisms that allow you to blend high- and low-cost efforts to address the various elements of the implementation. Because different people learn differently, give your sales professionals choices about how to learn: Web meetings, newsletters, books, e-learning, classroom, podcasts, blogs, portals, and so forth. While this sounds a bit daunting, you can lessen the complexity of multiple delivery methods by matching the delivery method to the phase of the implementation. For example, use self-directed tools, such as e-learning, for building commitment prior to classroom training. Similarly, use just-in-time knowledge (as on a portal) for the reinforcement of key skills. If you want maximum results, find ways to engage all levels of the sales organization in ways that take into account their environment and the role they play in the sales process. *Source: Seleste Lunsford, solution architect consultant, AchieveGlobal*

Secret #4

Get an independent assessment of your team’s strengths and weaknesses.

If it’s true that people can be separated into pessimists and optimists, it’s also true that the vast majority of sales professionals are optimists. When something good happens, they take credit for it; when something bad happens, well, that’s just bad luck. While this optimism is essential to remain happy in a sales job, it doesn’t give sales professionals the kind of critical analysis tools that would allow them to look objectively at what they, and their team, are doing well and doing poorly. What’s needed isn’t the “we’ll pull through somehow” attitude that keeps sales team afloat, but an objective view of what’s really working and what’s not. The only way to get that is to look outside the organization. This typically means hiring a professional sales process analyst who will query your customers about how they view your sales efforts. They will come up with a map of what’s needed to address that market more effectively. This is one case where “do-it-yourself” simply isn’t going to hack it. *Source: Steve Calendar, manager of demand creation, Wilson Learning*

Secret #5

Hire a training firm that can meetyour business objectives.

Skills training must be customized to incorporate the entire profile of what your firm needs to accomplish: strategy, markets, solutions, challenges and opportunities, and tools. The training must be highly customized to your business and your audience so that every minute of training reflects what salespeople need to be doing with your firms’ clients. As a general rule, sales training should bring the strategy, sales process, skills, knowledge, and tools together. Ideally, sales training should be interactive, with coaching and feedback and a “learn by doing” methodology. Sales training should also have a solid reinforcement plan (with tools to do the reinforcing), manageable precourse work (so that the training classroom time can be used for application and feedback), and alternate training methodologies including e-learning. Finally, the training firm itself should have a proven track record of achieving ROI for its clients, as well as sufficient personnel to meet your time frame and rollout needs. *Source: Linda Richardson, chairman, Richardson*

Secret #6

Position all training in the context of the larger sales process.

While you may choose to prioritize what training you provide and when you provide it, it’s important to make certain that all training fits into an overriding system that makes sense for the sales process. For example, if all salespeople are trained in a systematic way to identify ideal-fit clients and to not waste time with prospects that have a very low likelihood of closure, a new skill set will dramatically improve the results of the entire process. Similarly, if all salespeople have a clear roadmap for determining and executing a strategy to win a big piece of business, it will create some dramatic results. Finally, if all salespeople in a company manage their large accounts via a consistent methodology, then the ability of the company to make the right investment decisions and continue to expand their existing relationships is greatly enhanced. *Source: Sam Reese, CEO, Miller Heiman*

Secret #7

Make line managers responsible for training success.

Managers should actively participate in the sales training, either through a manager briefing or through actually participating in the full program, so that they can reinforce the training through coaching and role modeling. When managers participate in the training with their reporting team, the role of the manager should be as a coach working with the trainer. Acting as a coach forces the manager to grasp the concepts, skills, language, and tools that will be necessary for post-training coaching and feedback. (To make this effective, line managers must sometimes receive additional training on how to be good coaches and how to give useful feedback.) Most important, make sure that there's a way to measure the result of the post-training coaching, so that the line managers can assess how they're doing. Typical measurement methods include benchmarking before-and-after training performance and setting criteria, such as cross-selling goals, increased number of referrals, and higher closing ratios. *Source: Linda Richardson, chairman, Richardson*

Secret #8

Use real customer data for the sales training.

All too many sales training programs are heavy on the theory of selling and the importance of sales process, but they are not tied to the day-to-day reality of selling. The best way to ensure that sales training isn't academic and theoretical is to use real customers as part of the sales training process. For example, if part of the training is building a comprehensive sales campaign for a major customer, use currently active customers in the pipeline as the example. In addition to ensuring accuracy, you can bet that the reps who are assigned those customers will be paying close attention and thus are more likely to incorporate the skills being taught into their day-to-day work. But using real customers has another extremely important benefit. At the very least, when those reps walk out of the sales training session, they'll have a much better chance of closing business with those customers. Even if they completely forget what they've learned (which is highly unlikely under these circumstances), you will have gotten substantial value for your training dollars. *Source: Ryan Kubacki, president, Holden International*

Secret #9

Run a pilot program to prove the training's usefulness.

When a company's top management is convinced that a certain kind of sales training will increase revenue and profit, there's a tendency to roll the training out to the entire company in one gigantic rush. However, even if the powers that be are completely convinced that a program is a panacea, it should be rolled into a sales organization gradually. The best way to do this is to always start with a pilot program. There are three reasons why this is effective. First, starting with a relatively small program allows the sales trainers to focus their energies on a small group, which makes the pilot more likely to be successful. Second, every training effort requires some fine tuning, and the pilot allows the sales trainers to make adjustments necessary to make the training as effective as possible. Third, and most important, when the pilot is successful, especially in terms of increased sales, that success will quickly become clear to the other sales teams, who will clamor to get trained. This is a far cry from the usual scenario in which sales reps resist training because they see it as distracting them from the business of making their numbers. *Source: Steve Calendar, manager of demand creation, Wilson Learning*