Get More Value from Your Sales Training Efforts

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Overview

Sales training has always had a heavy influence on the way sales teams prospect and close deals. Given the major shifts in sales over the last decade, how can sales leaders make sure that training initiatives are serving their reps' current needs? In this white paper, we'll review the basic components of a sound sales-training approach and explore how sales leaders can leverage training-delivery methods to get maximum ROI from training initiatives.

The Value of a Well-Trained Sales Force

Talented sales reps are a sales organization's most valuable resource. They are also its most expensive resource. That's why productivity per rep is a metric that many sales leaders keep top of mind. If your reps' daily actions aren't adding up to revenue, then it's time to examine 1) exactly what activities your reps are engaged in and 2) how effective they are in their sales efforts.

Training can address both issues and be used by sales leaders as a tool to enhance productivity across the entire team. Traditionally, sales training has had three basic components: knowledge, skills, and methodology.

Knowledge Training
Salespeople need a wealth of knowledge to operate effectively and perform at peak productivity. This knowledge is not limited to just the products and services your company provides. A deep knowledge base includes

- market research,
- industry analysis,
- information about the prospect's company,
- information about competing products and services.

Because customers are self-educating online about potential purchases, salespeople must be able to prove that they know just as much as the customer.

Skills Training
In addition to knowledge, reps need sharp selling skills. The right training can help them approach prospects successfully and provide guidance on what steps to take to advance the sale.

Skills training is intended to develop a rep's expertise in the art of selling. Reps with strong selling skills can successfully create relationships with customers. Examples of selling skills include overcoming objections, asking for the close, negotiating on price, and establishing rapport.

Methodology Training

Selling skills are intimately related to sales process and methodology. Skills help sales reps interact with customers and cultivate relationships. A methodology – such as Challenger Selling or Solution Selling – gives them a framework to help recognize valid sales opportunities and move them through the pipeline accordingly.

The challenge today is that sales leaders must take into account the fact that reps are operating in a hyperconnected, online, and socially dynamic environment. Knowledge, skills, and methodology are all still vital to a rep's ability to craft a successful approach with prospects. But these elements are not enough for organizations that want to remain competitive.

Delivery and Reinforcement of Sales Training

According to a recent Selling Power Sales Enablement Survey, 48 percent of B2B sales executives polled said ensuring that sales reps are properly trained and can communicate the right message to clients and prospects is one of their biggest sales-management challenges. This challenge can be addressed in part by examining the ways in which training is delivered to reps.

Additionally, the same survey showed that 32 percent of sales executives said it is moderately difficult for their reps to access the resources they need to be effective at closing deals. During the last decade, developments in sales-training delivery methods have opened up new opportunities to help reps access the right message at the time they need it most.

Developments in Training-Delivery Methods

One of the first beneficial developments in delivery methods was online repositories of information. They enabled sales leaders to off-load the delivery of knowledge training and store it in a central location that reps can access at any time, from anywhere. This way, sales leaders make gathering information a convenience instead of a burden, and sales leaders sidestep the challenge of asking reps to figure out a way to stay on top of a growing mountain of information, including new products and pricing, trends and industry news, and competitor messaging. The company also saves the expense and time involved in coordinating traditional in-person training sessions in classrooms, seminars, and workshops.

On-demand access to information is one approach that can enhance the effectiveness of sales training. It is also an ideal way to capture knowledge that's disseminated at a high-level, one-time event, such as an annual sales kickoff meeting. But even more recent developments have raised the bar even higher for potential return on sales-training efforts. Specifically, many companies are now establishing virtual sales-resource centers that have both a live and on-demand component.

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The largest of such virtual environments would include corporate virtual-training centers and would incorporate several parts:

- live, on-demand training webcasts,
- virtual booths or training centers,
- virtual networking rooms,
- one-to-one and one-to-many communciation,
- forums, chats, polls, surveys, and collaboration tools.

That's at the broadest scale of what a virtual learning environment can look like. But there's also the smaller, virtual sales-resource center, which can be seen as a virtual briefing environment. This is a single, online location where reps can view webcasts and access a number of different types of content, including scheduled events (such as classes), coursework, white papers, data sheets, and sales guides.

"Many organizations are using virtual training centers, and they function as a central portal where live training can take place," says Mark Bornstein, Director of Content Marketing at ON24. "Training resources can also be posted there, or reps can attend classes, either live, in real time, or on demand."

Previously, says Bornstein, the trend in virtual training was to simply deliver training via static online tools, such as slides and tutorials. Lately, however, the approach to virtual training has evolved. "Today we're using webcasts, and they put the trainer back in the picture." Bornstein says.

Because webcasts can incorporate polls and surveys, testing, and certification, they make for a much more engaging learning experience. "It's social, it can be accessed from anywhere, and it's highly interactive," says Bornstein. "This is the future of sales training. This is how we're making it more effective. The static, online tutorial is just not the best way to deliver training to a growing and geographically dispersed sales force."

According to Bornstein, virtual learning environments are effective because they're persistent. They provide reps with direct access to training and resources via their laptops or mobile devices. The mobile and social aspects of training are major considerations for sales leaders looking to save time and expense on training efforts.

"You cannot ignore social and mobile these days," says Bornstein. "You can now create compelling training experiences that keep reps entertained and engaged. People can use chat boxes to open up discussions or submit and vote on ideas using idea-generation tools. This is not just a trainer-to-trainee learning experience. You also have socially enabled learning taking place, as well."

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Sales Training As Sales Enablement

In this respect, sales training is also a form of sales enablement; when they receive the proper information delivered in the right way, reps can save time, operate with greater efficiency, and improve their existing selling skills. If you ask reps to create presentations from scratch, memorize minutiae related to your offerings, or leave the field a few times a month or quarter for training sessions, however, they'll have less time for prospecting and selling. The Selling Power Sales Enablement Survey revealed that only 12 percent of sales executives say that reps are always well prepared to have initial conversations with qualified leads and prospects. Virtual training environments and online repositories can help alleviate those issues for sales leaders.

The paradox of training is that it yields the best productivity results when delivered on a frequent, routine basis – yet sales leaders want to avoid decreasing reps' productivity by taking them out of the field for training. "Essentially you want to be in front of them more often, but you can't have them traveling to headquarters on a monthly or quarterly basis," says Bornstein. "So the question becomes, how do you deal with the issue of needing to deliver more training but avoid disrupting the flow of selling activity?"

As many sales leaders are finding, the answer is to find ways to allow reps to absorb training at their convenience: from the road, between meetings, or en route to work. An on-demand strategy is essential to any competitive sales-training initiative today.

"It's about providing the access to learning," says Bornstein, "hence the virtual environments and classrooms. It's about making learning available anytime. When you make learning mobile, you remove the barrier to access. You allow your team to become more effective and continue to engage in the activities that will contribute to revenue and eliminate the need to put the selling on pause."

Summary

Almost all sales leaders recognize that sales training has value. Too often, however, they don't understand what they need to do to *realize* that value and maximize their investment in sales-training initiatives. Sales training has two essential components: One is content. What are you teaching reps? How is this information improving their ability to sell? The second is delivery. How are you delivering that content? What steps are you taking to make sure reps can access that content at any time, from anywhere?

Expanding into new areas when it comes to training delivery can help sales organizations become more competitive. Currently, 76 percent of sales leaders polled in the Selling Power Sales Enablement Survey report that they are still relying on live, in-person training methods. Only 29 percent are tapping virtual meeting centers, and 21 percent are leveraging mobile as part of their training strategy. This leaves the field wide open for innovative sales leaders to craft an infrastructure that supports more dynamic, interactive, and engaging ways for sales reps to learn and access the information that will help them achieve peak productivity.