

It's *Never* a Good Time for Training!

T H O M A S F R E E S E

More than any other time since the industrial revolution, companies and individuals in all industries are feverishly looking for ways to retain customers, boost top line revenue, and maintain overall profit margins. To survive and ultimately flourish in this new environment, we must reexamine the way we deal with customers; and frankly, some of the necessary adjustments are long overdue.

The sales function is the lifeblood of every organization and sales effectiveness is no longer optional. As a result, a Darwinian style recalibration is now underway where the salesperson will play a more crucial role in their own success than ever before.

It's true. There's no good time for any type of training let alone taking salespeople out of the field for two or three days. Believe me, if I had a nickel from every time I felt that way back when I was a salesperson or manager, I wouldn't need to write books.

I tell salespeople, if you're not absolutely convinced that a certain type of training will produce a significant return on your investment in terms of increased sales, profit margins, and pipeline activity, then don't bother investing the time or money! If people don't buy into the approach, they simply won't use it.

If you are a salesperson, I would encourage you to continue investing in yourself.

At this point, sellers essentially have two options. One is to resist change and continue with the current approach. For most sales organizations, however, the status quo is your enemy. It is simply unrealistic to expect competitors to just sit back and remain idle while your company enjoys a strategic advantage. History has proven that natural market forces will prevail, and we now know that if you are not aggressively working to improve your skills and your position in the marketplace, then you are likely falling behind.

The other option is to embrace change as a strategy to stay ahead of a rapidly evolving sales environment. Embracing change means taking a proactive role in the ongoing development of your sales team. It also means stepping outside the box of traditional thinking with regard to giving your sales team a competitive advantage in your respective industry.

The question is how? Choosing a sales methodology is risky business, however, because the cost of making a mistake is enormous. Managers know all too well that their credibility is at stake, and choosing the wrong program could cost them their job! On the other hand, someone is going to earn the customer's confidence and win the business, and whether or not you are the selected vendor has a lot to do with your own personal effectiveness.

The type of training system you choose really should depend on what problem you are trying to solve. Sometimes managers are looking to improve their team's organizational effectiveness, in which case, they implement a company-wide sales process like Miller-Heiman's Strategic Selling™, Power-Based Selling™, or Target Account Selling™ or SPIN Selling.™

The challenge is, most sales organizations already have a sales process in place, and simply redefining the step with a different flavor of the month isn't likely to make the sales team more effective. Frankly, most of your competitors have a sales process just like yours, so it's important to realize that just defining the sales process is no longer a differentiator. Moreover, I would argue that you should run the other way from anything that could be characterized as a 'refresher' course, as your salespeople have a sense of "what" they are trying to accomplish in their respective terri-

tories. For example, let me guess: Step One in your current sales process has something to do with identifying new prospect opportunities, right? Step Two is to make the initial contact, hopefully to penetrate accounts at the appropriate decision levels. Then there's Step Three, which usually refers to the discovery phase where you uncover needs and qualifying the opportunity. Am I close? There is nothing wrong with having a predefined sales process or trying to be sure everyone is on the same page relative to steps of the sale. Having structure is

certainly better than having a random approach across your sales organization.

Given that sellers already have a clear picture of "what" they are trying to accomplish, the challenge facing salesperson and sales organizations is really to identify "how" to execute more effectively. Put it this way, it's the successful execution of

the sales process that will ultimately separate top performing salespeople from the rest of the "noise" in the marketplace.

As a result, the desire for sales training has shifted from simply defining the sales process, to actually increasing the execution skills and strategic effectiveness of the organization. As I have said many times, the true value of training is today's market is to teach sellers "how" to penetrate more new accounts given that potential buyers are more cautious and standoffish than ever before. They also want to know how to get more return calls when prospecting for new opportunities. Once past the gatekeeper, they want to know how to pique the prospect's interest, and how to uncover more needs. They also want to know how to differentiate their value proposition from competitive alternatives, how to deal with possible objections, and how to increase the prospect's sense of urgency for moving forward with a decision.



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So, you should first decide what problem it is that you are trying to solve. Are you simply wanting to redefine the steps of your company's sales process, or do you want to raise the strategic effectiveness of yourself and the rest of your sales team?

What about Motivational Speaking?

For me, listening to motivational speakers is great fun. Having been in corporate sales the bulk of my career, I have had many opportunities to listen to professional athletes, astronauts, politicians, celebrities, news anchors, explorers, and people who have overcome physical disabilities, talk about highly motivating personal life experiences. Most of these speakers share a success story that contains an underlying moral lesson.

After they talk, we feel motivated because we think, "If that person can do it, I can too!"

After a wonderful motivational experience, the problem occurs when sellers return to their territories. No matter how interesting the speaker was, if your salespeople go back to using their same approach, they will likely get the same results-in which case, whatever enthusiasm that was created by the motivational speaker will predictably wear off relatively quickly.

I am not speaking out against the idea of hiring a speaker for your next sales meeting or conference. As an author of three books, I get asked to deliver a fair number of sales talks and keynote speeches myself. You must realize, however, that the objectives of a sales talk are very different than the objectives of a full QBS Methodology training course. The goal of a training program is ultimately to change

behavior. After two or three days, you want salespeople to recognize opportunities to adjust their current approach, and then adopt the strategies and techniques they learned to execute more effectively throughout the sales process. This type of change in sales productivity is not likely to occur as the result of a one or two-hour sales talk. Therefore, let's agree that the objective of a sales talk is simply to energize the audience, as opposed to actually changing behavior.

Since I have never climbed Mt. Everest or played professional sports, my goal when delivering sales talks is to energize audiences with a

vision for how they can be more successful, as opposed to telling stories of personal achievement. Even if you can't change the world in a one or two-hour sales talk, we can cause people to start thinking outside the box with respect to differentiating themselves in a competitive business environment.



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Weeding Through all the Different Choices

Choosing the right methodology is critically important. So is choosing the right trainer. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a crap shoot as there isn't a lot of guidance for choosing the right program or trainer. Therefore, allow me to offer a couple tips on what to look for, along with some of the hard questions that you should ask potential trainers.

The first thing to look for is how a sales trainer approaches you as a potential clients? Don't just ask for references-everyone looks good on paper! Instead, you want to get a sense of their personal philosophy toward selling. Sales trainers have market their own services to prospective clients, and how they approach you

will generally give you a good indication of what they will be teaching your salespeople. Everyone touts their ability to help clients penetrate accounts, uncover needs, close more sales, and blah...blah...blah. Oops!

The next question to ask is: “What do you teach is different than other programs?” If the goal is to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace, you definitely don’t want to bring in more of the same. Rather, you want something that will give your sales team a measurable advantage. Don’t be surprised if this question is difficult for some trainers to answer. The goal is not to put anyone on the spot, it’s simply to get a sense for what you should expect during the actual delivery.

In addition to understanding a trainer’s basic philosophy on sales and what makes their program different, you should have a clear picture of how they plan to customize their material around the nuances of your specific industry’s business environment. Selling technology is different than selling real estate. Likewise, you wouldn’t want a trainer to show up at your pharmaceutical company and use examples about life insurance. Instead, you need to understand how the trainer is planning to customize their material around specific “what if” scenarios that affect your salespeople. Professional athletes, for example, train to perform under certain conditions, and in specific situations. So do airplane pilots, soldiers, and firefighters. They train with specific scenarios in mind to create a heightened preparedness enabling them to perform at the highest levels when called upon.

If we apply this logic to sales training, we can give salespeople the same level of heightened preparedness. So, do yourself a favor. Make sure your chosen trainer invests the time to customize their program and materials to address the specific “what if” scenarios that are most relevant to your business.

Even these near-sighted economic times, it’s important to think about where you want to be down the road. Too often, training courses are evaluated based on feedback from course participants. Since implementation doesn’t happen overnight, it’s important to train your people on something that can have an immediate impact, and also something will stick with and continue to develop over time. In order to maximize the effectiveness of your training, you want the course material to generate measurable increases in performance and results over an extended period of time.

From my perspective, the single most important ingredient to successfully implementing a sales methodology is fostering an ongoing transfer of knowledge. Salespeople can learn from a trainer, but they can also learn from each other. The real opportunity to create lasting changes in behavior, therefore, hinges on the client’s ability to develop internal coaches and mentors who can reinforce the material that was originally communicated. In short, you shouldn’t be talking with sales trainers about an upcoming event. You should talk with them about what will happen after the training to create lasting changes in behavior and produce the desired return on investment.

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