



TRAINING
INDUSTRY
MAGAZINE

EMERGING TRENDS

THE FUTURE
OF SALES TRAINING

Raising the Bar for Customer Engagement

RAISING *the* BAR:

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THE IMPACT OF SALES TRAINING ON EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

If you've been to sales training, you know the feeling. You participate in the training session, and there is a buzz or a glow for a few days or weeks after the event.

And then, nothing really changes. Participants fill out evaluations and say good things about the facilitator, and the facilitator reports that the class went well. Yet, nothing really changes. And, wanting to impact their entire organization with these new sales best practices, the sales leadership and learning and development teams train hundreds or perhaps even thousands of people on the new material. And all too often, nothing really changes.

SO, WHY IS THIS THE CASE, WHEN ALL SIGNS INDICATE THE TRAINING EXPERIENCE WENT WELL?

The sales training profession faces many challenges as it tries to keep up with changing customer expectations, buying patterns, technology trends and the "rise of procurement" during the down economy. There are six key success factors for increasing the value of sales training, allowing it to become more oriented to impacting effective customer engagement before and beyond the sale to remain relevant.

The bottom line is that sales training needs to evolve beyond just making the sale and the tips and tricks required to close business. Otherwise, it won't keep up with the next generation of buyers that are demanding more from their suppliers than ever before. Today's salespeople and account managers are trying to meet customer expectations in a world of commoditization, increasing competition and complex customer decision-making processes. In doing so, they are facing difficulties that go far beyond those that existed in the 80s and 90s.





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Customer Engagement is the new driver of growth, 2x engagement equals a 2x size business.

Yet, many of the tools they are being provided through sales training are vintage, which explains, in part, why nothing really changes after sales training. The new world of business-to-business commerce requires a fresh new look at the bigger picture of customer/supplier dynamics.

To keep up with the changing face of B2B commerce, the sales training of the future must focus more on creating measurable and sustainable value for customers and less on processing them through a model that is designed to provide a win/lose outcome in favor of the seller. Customers are smarter and more enabled with technology than ever before, and they have choices. For sales training to remain relevant and have an impact on next generation sales, it must become more about “engaging with” than “selling to” the customer, and it must do more than tell salespeople and account managers what to do, because what they really want to know is how to do it.

CUSTOMIZED TO FIT

A primary reason nothing changes after sales training is that it doesn’t fit the supplier’s business. Thus, when the participating salespeople and account managers go out to apply it, they feel awkward, can’t make the leap from classroom to real-world and in the end, they don’t adopt. Most sales training providers offer essentially the same solution to all of their clients, which means that all providers of solutions, such as healthcare, information technology and automotive, are trained the exact same way.

In such a high percentage of sales training, there is little or no customization to the supplier’s business, market and sales process. So, there is no investment of time on the front-end to understand

why and how the most successful salespeople and account managers are effective. Additionally, there is typically little or no attempt made to understand what types of existing best and next practices should be leveraged into the new sales training methodology, and so the supplier moves forward with a standard, off-the-shelf sales training product that hardly has a chance of being successful with the deck stacked against it from the outset.

The customization of content to a supplier’s business is one of the most important ingredients of successful sales training, and the only way to achieve the level of fit that is required for true adoption is to move from the “outside in” approach of the past to the “inside out” approach of the future. Through effective customization, sales training providers can equip their suppliers with processes, skills and tools that fit their businesses, connect with their customers and differentiate them from their competition. Finally, customization ensures that sales training hits the mark by considering the uniqueness of the supplier’s go-to-market strategies and enabling these with customer engagement best practices that have been proven to work.

CONTEMPORARY AND PRACTICAL

Sales training is not necessarily bad just because it’s dated, but the question that must be raised is about its relevance in light of dramatic evolution in buying and decision-making processes. To say that B2B commerce has undergone transformation in the new millennium would be an understatement, yet, despite this fact, a significant percentage of sales training being provided today is based on methodologies and concepts that were developed long ago.

RAISING THE SALES TRAINING BAR

MOVING FROM THE PAST...

Off-the-shelf and you fit your business to the training

Theoretical, dated and about “what to do”

Primarily focused on the sales process and closing deals

Lecture-based and intended for salespeople

Event-based and effectiveness typically not measured

Required time away from the field and customers

INTO THE FUTURE

Customized to fit your business and sales environment

Practical, contemporary and about “how to do it”

Focused on customer engagement and on value creation

Team-based and intended for customer-facing employees

Effectiveness-based and measured by actual behavioral change

Involves working on real accounts and opportunities

Contemporary sales training means more than simply referring to age and shelf-life, it suggests that the content and learning approaches are both modern and up to date. In the sales training business, it's much easier to be theoretical and complex than it is to be practical and simple. Yet, when salespeople and account managers are asked post-training, why they aren't using their sales training concepts in the field, common responses include: "It's not practical" or "It doesn't work with my customers."

The reality is this: if sales training can't sell itself to the salespeople and account managers that it proposes to equip and enable for improved performance, then why should they use it? A key output of effective sales training should be hearts and minds that are more open to change and receptive to trying new approaches, because these new approaches make them feel more confident, not hesitant. With this in mind, it's little wonder why sales training that is considered past its prime, complex and/or too theoretical is not going to be successful. The sales training of the future must align with the next generation of B2B commerce practitioners, which includes suppliers, their sales and account management professionals and the customers that they serve.

CUSTOMER-FOCUSED

If the focus of sales training is primarily on the sales process and closing sales, then chances are the customer felt as if they were sold something as opposed to having bought something. Customers frequently experience a feature-benefit approach that is all about the supplier, their products/solutions and what they think they can do for the customer. Selling with tired techniques that are "feature/ benefit/response" oriented simply isn't good enough if you are going to align effectively with your customers, position your solutions, differentiate your value and win business.

Being customer-focused is more than just espousing the benefits of the supplier's solution. It's about being prepared by researching the customer's business, gathering the necessary information and creating thought-provoking questions that lead to discussions about the things the customer values most. It's about validating your understanding and sharing ideas in a consultative manner that brings clarity to both the supplier and the customer.

The sales training of the future must help create a customer-focused mindset where salespeople constantly ask themselves, "What do I need to do to earn the right to engage further?" The actions

below, when executed properly, will help establish credibility, build a foundation of trust with the customer and differentiate from the competition.

- Understand the customer's external pressures, business objectives and internal challenges by asking the right questions of the right people at the right times.
- Discover how the customer defines value early in the sales process.
- Recommend ways to solve customer problems and address customer business objectives by appropriately positioning ideas and solutions.
- Create and differentiate the "unique value" that will be most important to the customer and is a stronger fit against their requirements than any other alternative.

THE NEW WORLD OF BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS COMMERCE
REQUIRES A FRESH NEW LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE
OF CUSTOMER/SUPPLIER DYNAMICS.

COLLABORATIVE AND TEAM-ORIENTED

It is fascinating to see an account team get together for the purpose of focusing on the growth and well-being of a key prospect/customer. Yet, most sales training is lecture-based, targeted only at the sales team and does not include all customer-facing team members.

More and more customers are engaging in team-buying with a greater emphasis from the procurement/sourcing area. This dynamic is a characteristic of more complex selling environments, and it creates a logistics issue that can either become a strong advantage for the supplier or a stark disadvantage. To succeed in this type of selling environment, it is important that the supplier be effective at team-to-team alignment.

Team-to-team alignment has two aspects:

- **External team** – the customer's decision and implementation team
- **Internal team** – the supplier's sales and account team, as well as the internal stakeholders.

Many sales organizations will say they have two sales cycles: one to the external team and one with their own internal team. Creating alignment with both teams is extremely critical to succeeding at winning new business and growing existing business.

Future sales training must focus on creating a collaborative environment for customer problem-

IN PRACTICE

Facing strong competition, a commoditized market and an unstable global economy, a Fortune 100 Company looked to change its global sales culture from a transactional, product-focused organization to more of a strategic, customer-focused organization. Here's how they did it:

- Empowered a representative global team of leaders, sales, operations and customers to customize the processes, tools and competencies to ensure fit and buy-in.
- Designed a practical approach to customer engagement that increased their success rate on key accounts and opportunities.
- Focused their training and reinforcement efforts on discovering, articulating and validating what their customers value most.
- Leveraged all customer-facing team members to achieve stronger levels of internal alignment, which resulted in more effective customer alignment.
- Involved sales leaders as coaches in every aspect of deployment; before, during and after sales training.
- Utilized technology to provide on-demand learning to equip and enable customer-facing teams to create customer value.

solving with all the appropriate customer-facing personnel and equip them to do so. This allows the customer and supplier to create a forum in which both parties are able to:

- Connect supplier and customer team members for optimal value creation.
- Explore specific areas of potential mutual value creation to determine priorities, fit and best use of resources.
- Develop customer-specific value propositions for best fit opportunities that both parties are committed to pursue.
- Execute mutual action plans in pursuit of these best fit opportunities by applying the most appropriate resources.
- Follow up to measure results and test the effectiveness of the collaboration, the planning and the execution.

REINFORCED BY COACHING

Another challenge with many sales training initiatives is that they are primarily event based, resulting in participants forgetting what they have learned after the training event. To add insult to injury, sales management typically is not actively involved in the training, reinforcement and measurement going forward. This creates a "flavor of the month" perspective among the training

participants and impacts the adoption and traction of the new processes and tools.

Adoption and traction increases when management is proactively involved from a coaching perspective before, during and after training. Many organizations train their managers on how to coach; however, it is typically generic coaching on how to give feedback or how to be an active listener. This usually happens once or twice a year around performance reviews and focuses on past performance.

In order to be most effective and sustain the desired behavioral changes, the sales training of the future must include the leadership team before, during and after training. Sales managers are most effective at coaching when they are proactively coaching to what's known as leading indicators; those competencies and best practices that, when executed, consistently and effectively lead to successful outcomes.

The need for coaching and reinforcement is growing stronger in a multigenerational workforce where employees desire to be effectively coached and led. When sales leaders and managers are equipped to coach, they learn a set of proven field sales coaching skills to help them create value for their people that lead to winning more business and growing customer relationships.

ENABLED BY TECHNOLOGY

While technology has been used in sales training in the past, few have figured out how to avoid "the technology tail" wagging the "sales training dog." Many will use technology for technology's sake and neglect what's in it for the customer-facing team. Enabling technology can be anything from an Excel spreadsheet for territory and pipeline management to a learning management system (LMS) for e-learning to a CRM system for connecting effectively with social media.

Still, many organizations struggle with how to leverage technology in their sales training, as they try to find the ideal blend between the most cost efficient and most effective ways to sustain learning outcomes. The sales training of the future must be deliberate in how technology will be used to support and enable sales teams with a blended learning approach. And in doing so, the following must be considered:

- **Knowledge Transfer:** use of technology such as e-learning, virtual instructor-led training and social media to equip customer-facing teams with the knowledge necessary to do their jobs.
- **Situational Application:** facilitating face-to-face instructor-led and train-the-trainer sessions working on real accounts and opportunities to learn the skills necessary to create value for customers.
- **Behavioral Evaluation:** use of technology such as CRM and LMS to reinforce the learning through practical usage as well as provide clarity for managers to know when and where to coach.

RAISING YOUR BAR

So, how can you and your organization begin to take steps to ensure that your future sales training investments will have impact and drive effective customer engagement? It all begins with an understanding of how sales training has performed for your salespeople, account

managers and sales managers in the past, and the best way to determine this is to look at sales training past performance in the context of future expectations.

Consider measuring the impact of your previous sales training by utilizing the evaluation table shown in Figure 1 to assess its effectiveness, rating it in each of the six performance zones defined by the six key success factors. If your combined point total is in the 24-30 range, your past sales training has likely had a significant impact on your business, and if it is in the 18-23 range, you’ve likely realized some measurable value as a result.

But anything less than a score of 18 begs the question, “Is sales training really delivering the value that is needed for your organization, your sales teams and your customers?” If you’re not sure, then the answer is probably no. To avoid getting trapped in your sales training past, it may be time to look for ways to get “back to the future” of effective customer engagement. [🔗](#)

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