



Sales training: Does my team need it? And does it work?

Does *training* work? Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. Not the answer you were expecting from someone who makes his living as a sales trainer, was it? Well, it's true. And we all know it from experience, right? So let's call a spade a spade, shall we? An investment in training is like any other investment we make in life - we get out of it only what we put into it. Let's say you're a golfer who's somewhat satisfied with your game, but you know you could play a lot better - like some of the other guys and gals you see out there. A pro spots you screaming and cursing, trying without much success to hack your way out of the rough. Eventually you finish the hole, and as you leave the green, the pro comes up to you and suggests that a series of lessons will improve your game. You agree, and set a goal of shaving six strokes off your game this year. And so you start your lessons. The pro works with you to refine (not change) your existing technique, and teaches you some new skills and course strategies. He also has you practicing - under his tutelage - what you're learning. At the conclusion of the lessons, he prescribes a dedicated regimen of time at the range, which you dutifully follow. And which he oversees from time to time. Are you not more likely to achieve that goal than if you hadn't invested that time and effort? Of course you are.

As in our golfing example, training in a corporate environment works when you have the commitment of the participants, an effective instructor, *plus* one additional component: the commitment of the manager. Conversely, training doesn't work - or doesn't work as well - when any one of these three is missing, or in short supply. Think about it - on **the front end**, if the staff you "send to training" doesn't understand "what's in it for me", and therefore isn't committed to learning - can we really expect them to pay attention, to be active learners, and to take anything away from the training? Of course not. And what about on **the back end**? We're all familiar with the common knock on training: "In one ear, out the other. *What a waste of time and money!*" It's human nature to stick with that with that with which we are comfortable. It's therefore incumbent upon the manager - who presumably is paying for this - to ride herd on his staff and make sure his team is using what he paid for them to use.

And that leads us to **the third component of training success - the effectiveness of the instructor**. Volumes have been written on what makes a successful trainer; we're not

going to try to cover that here. What we *will* say is that the truly effective instructor is the one whose participants actually use the skills and concepts learned, *use* them *effectively*, and in so doing achieve the sales manager's goals. Not coincidentally, this trainer is one who not only is effective in the classroom, but one who is effective in gaining *pre-session buy-in*, and who *sticks around for post-session follow-through* to ensure that what was taught is actually working. Because in the end, it all boils down to one thing: were the agreed-upon goals of the training investment achieved? Am I seeing the improvement I expected? Did I get/am I getting my money's worth? That's really it, isn't it.

And what of our second question: Does *sales* training work? We've seen how training your staff, or yourself, can, *in general*, work. So why shouldn't training your staff, or yourself, to be better at sales, work? In response to this, I've heard every excuse in the book:

- **"That's all well and good if you're training, say, support staff to operate a new piece of software. But does this really work for sales people?"**
- **"Sales is different - it can't be taught. It's learned through experience out in the field - like I did. You know, the school of hard knocks!"**
- **"My people won't pay attention"**

Perhaps these claims are true for the organizations to which these individuals belong. But how, then, do we explain comments such as these, from real sales directors at real companies:

- "We participated in a three-hour Gaining the Meeting/ Appointment seminar. After the session, our team secured 30 appointments and ultimately closed 11 new clients." - Sales Manager, Leading Professional Services Firm
- "Representatives who have participated in and implemented the skills and concepts are consistently and significantly outperforming other representatives in our sales force." - Sales Manager, Global Pharmaceutical Products Manufacturer
- "Having a process has given our team more confidence in their ability to help my clients and prospects. Our winning percentage has improved drastically" - Sales Executive, Communications Company

Granted, sales people are a breed unto themselves. But so are doctors. So are accountants. So are carpenters. Yet all these people, who were formally trained in their professions, continue their education (sometimes by fiat) long after their formal "apprenticeships" are

over. They all want to succeed, to stay on top of their game, to be the best they can be, and to make as much money as they can. In that respect, are sales people really any different? I think not. As for the claim that sales skill can only be learned in the field, that's like claiming you can only learn to do surgery by operating on live patients! Sure you'll do a lot of things right, but you're likely to do some things wrong. Of course, a mistake in sales will (only) cost you a deal, whereas a mistake in surgery, well.....And for those who claim their sales people won't pay attention, if you and the instructor do a good job of selling them on what's in it for them (and between the two of you sales experts, you ought to be able to!), that should never even be an issue.

The legendary Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, observed, "To know, yet to think that one does not know, is best; not to know, yet to think that one knows, will lead to difficulty." Sales training is for those who know how good their teams are, yet continuously strive to make them even better.

Good Selling!