

The Evolution of Sales Training

Dave Stein

Only now in 2007 do we have evidence that the 130-year-old discipline of sales training is on the right path to meeting the special needs of its direct customers: salespeople and their managers.

Why has this taken so long? Is anyone accountable? What is occurring now that wasn't occurring earlier that facilitated this advancement in the right direction? What can we look forward to regarding how corporations train the people responsible for delivering their top line?

Sales is Last in Line

Most departments within a typical business have a set of processes or procedures to guide them and metrics or standards by which performance of that function is measured. Finance must comply with generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). Manufacturing departments seek an ISO 9000 and/or Six Sigma designation. Measuring a customer care department's effectiveness through surveys has become a standard business practice.

Even marketing has learned about process and measurement — direct marketing campaigns are measured through conversion rates. In many companies, sales is last in line when it comes to the employment of and compliance with formal processes, ongoing performance measurement and a strategic approach to training.

Generally speaking, the traits, personalities and behavior patterns of sales leaders have been a root cause of this lag. Many sales leaders, having come up through the sales ranks without having had formal sales methodologies to guide them, opted for event-based sales training rather than the strategic approach that has been the preference of their counterparts in other departments within their own companies.

A Look Back

When we look back at the early days of sales training, we begin to realize, as legendary sales trainer Zig Ziglar so aptly describes it, the purpose of sales training is to teach people how to persuade. As long ago as the 1870s, there was formal sales training (then in the form of "Sales Talk," which was provided to the men — because there were no saleswomen at that time — who sold subscription books.)

In 1904, P.W. Searles discussed how salesmanship was taught to new recruits at large manufacturing companies. Sales managers did the instructing, covering things such as how to stand when talking with a customer and how to hand over the pen when closing a sale — clearly tricks of the trade for those who persuade.

Tom Hopkins, another sales training trailblazer, points out that Arthur Sheldon, founder of the Sheldon School in downtown Chicago, already had taught many thousands the "science of salesmanship" by the turn of the 20th century.

Most of the sales training that took place during the next 50 years or so took the form of direct coaching by sales managers. Hopkins lists Willie Gayle, Fred Herman,

Elmer Leterman (author of “The Sale Begins When the Customer Says No”) and Elmer Wheeler as some of the early pundits.

It was Wheeler who served up the well-known phrase, “Don’t sell the steak — sell the sizzle!” from his position as head of the Tested Selling Institute in New York City during the 1930s.

(The importance of relationships in selling in the 1930s and for decades to come was underscored by the success of Dale Carnegie’s book, “How to Make Friends and Influence People,” which still hovers around the 200th best-selling book on Amazon.com.)

Salespeople and their managers had few choices when it came to training. Of course, the world was considerably less complex then, but buyers all too often were seen as prey.

That sentiment was brought into the forefront by Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” in 1949. Ziglar said that play did more to create obstacles for salespeople than anything that came before or after.

“It’s the opposite of what selling is about,” Ziglar said. “It shows a loser and gives selling a bad name.”

Ziglar points to integrity as the most important trait required for successful selling. Noted sales trainer Bill Brooks agrees and suggests that if you were in sales in the 1960s, you were in a less-than-respected profession. That is a perception that hasn’t changed in some circles.

Technology Enters Training

In the mid-1950s, J. Douglas Edwards brought technology into the sales training arena with his vinyl record, “13 Effective Methods for Closing the Sale.” Later, Earl Nightingale (who was more motivator than sales trainer) began to deliver content in audio. He eventually formed a company that would become the leader in personal development products.

As eight-track and later cassette players began appearing in automobiles in the mid-1970s, a salesperson’s car became the classroom. (By 1985, it wasn’t at all unusual for salespeople to have collections of cassette programs in the trunk and for them to be listening to one every moment they were in their cars.)

In 1976, Hopkins dived into video — he created the first how-to video training systems. Taking a total turnkey solution approach, Hopkins sold his customers an RCA video player along with his videos, which were recorded with three cameras. One faced the “seller,” one faced the “buyer” and the third camera looking down from above. Facing that camera, Hopkins delivered commentary, taking breaks at appropriate points during the role-playing. That was mid-1970s technology at its best.

Addressing Corporate Training Requirements

In 1965 Larry Wilson founded Wilson Learning, which became the second-largest

training company in the United States by addressing the training requirements of corporations. These were the early days of what is now a \$4.3 billion industry: corporate sales training. Although today's estimate is that fewer than half of corporations engage with third-party sales training vendors, there are literally hundreds of them, representing one of the most fragmented markets in any industry.

Before 1970, sellers realized that although there were many basics in common, selling to consumers was different than selling to businesspeople. By 1985, there were new challenges.

As products became more complex, it often took many people on the buying side to fully evaluate their alternatives, resulting in buying committees and evaluation teams. Sellers responded with a new, consultative selling approach that addressed customers' business challenges with their "solutions."

To sell these solutions, more than product training was required — salespeople needed to be trained to manage increasingly complex and lengthy customer-buying cycles and to lead multifunctional resources from their own companies in a team-selling approach. Modern sales methodologies were born to support effective selling in this new, extremely demanding environment.

Internal versus External

Even as Wilson was building his company and the founders of firms such as Sandler, Miller Heiman and Acclivus were building theirs from 1965 to 1985, internal sales training was starting to be taken very seriously. Companies such as Burroughs and Xerox put their new recruits through as much as six months of training before they were allowed to meet one on one with a customer. The Xerox program was so effective, it was marketed successfully to other companies for many years as the Xerox Learning System.

As corporations continued to build in-house sales training capabilities into the early 1990s, third-party vendors were progressing into new areas such as sales opportunity management and political and competitive strategies.

"Sales managers and training departments were also realizing that one training course did not meet all the competencies required by salespeople and therefore began to cobble together multiple vendors into multilevel sales training curricula: individual skills and product knowledge, opportunity management, large account management, and sales messaging and content," said Rick Page, The Complex Sale CEO. "Single-product training vendors began expanding their offerings to address multiple levels and training needs."

The divergence of in-house and third-party approaches still exists today. Much of the in-house training curricula is product-, market- and company-centric and focuses on basic sales skills. Many companies engage with third-party providers for advanced skills training in large-account management, opportunity management, competitive strategy, team selling and sales management, as well as the processes that support those functions.

As the 1990s progressed, more and more third-party vendors began to customize

their solutions to meet the specific needs of their clients.

Sales Training Sidetracked

Crossing over into the 21st century, the advancement of sales effectiveness hit a major speed bump. Customer relationship management (CRM) vendors were extolling the virtues of software that would automate much of the work salespeople had to perform, especially for reporting. Much to the chagrin of countless salespeople, many sales executives began to look at CRM systems as a panacea that would cure many of their sales-related problems, so much so that training budgets were reduced to pay for them. And some of the sales training taking place was refocused on training to use the CRM systems.

Advances in Technology and Tools

During the past 10 years, tools and technologies have been developed that have helped mitigate some of the burdens placed on salespeople by the compulsory use of CRM systems. Because of these technology advances, training departments and vendors have many options from which they can design effective learning programs.

One example of a major leap forward is the employment of assessments in the preparation for training programs.

“Tools such as the Sales Skills Assessment Tool from PI Worldwide are giving trainers a much clearer picture of the audience and allow for more effective customization,” sales trainer Steve Waterhouse said.

Firms such as the Gallup Organization and The HR Chally Group have enabled both in-house and outsourced trainers to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their program participants.

“Today, salespeople are increasingly developing a mindset toward education that skips the boundaries of where training can take place, how learning is undertaken and how it is disseminated,” said LaVon Koerner, CEO of Chicago-based Revenue Storm. “In this world, the coffee shop has become the seminar room as social, educational and recreational activities blur. Some salespeople even use their mobiles or laptops during lectures to ‘background,’ connecting to the Web for real-time fact-checking or cross-referencing.”

Many internal training organizations, as well as vendors, have embraced technology and are employing a blended learning approach to meet their customers’ ever-changing environment and needs. Classroom-only training approaches are out, as is “one size fits all.” The iPod has become a coach, and program content is being customized down to the individual participant.

An Optimistic Future

Look around, and you’ll see where sales training is headed. Companies such as OutStart have developed tools that support on-demand learning and have extended the learning environment into a collaborative, community effort in which learners can ask questions, get answers and collaborate with peers and experts to truly enable the learning process. Those learners must be better-equipped than ever before to meet the demands from buyers for value articulation and business knowledge.

Companies that already provide strong sales methodologies and processes, including The TAS Group, Richardson, Wilson Learning, Sales Performance International (SPI), Performance Methods and Acclivus, are driving the use of sales performance measurement frameworks that deliver hard evidence of the business value of their training programs.

In addition, there are about three dozen U.S. universities that have courses of study in professional selling, turning out a little more than 4,100 graduates a year. Over the next 10 years, this number is likely to grow, with graduates of these programs funneling directly into the workforce as rookie — but highly educated and trained — salespeople. Because they are being schooled in process, as well as the basics, they will have an immediate and positive impact on the companies for which they eventually will work.

The Bottom Line

There have been many great developments, yet sales is still last in line for many companies. All the education, training and technology in the world will not improve how people sell if they, their management and those who educate and train continue to look at sales training as a series of unconnected, tactical events, the results of which are not measured, rather than a critical support component in the broad adoption of a formal, institutionalized sales methodology.

For companies that have figured this out — and there are more every day — sales training is the means to an end. Total compliance with their company's methodology and underlying processes that result in measurably better performance is the end.

For these companies, sales training is not filling an available time slot at a sales meeting. Rather, it provides their salespeople with precisely what they need to know and do to sell products and services in an increasingly competitive and demanding market. These companies are leveraging their sales training and the underlying methodology and processes to their fullest, providing them with superior competitive advantage.

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