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Yes, You *Can* Measure the Results of Your Sales Training

By Heather Baldwin

Talk to any sales manager about the results of a sales training initiative and most will tell you they can't measure the impact of that training. As the popular thinking goes, you can't separate the impact of training from, say, a big ad campaign that ran shortly after training was completed, or the appearance of your CEO on MSNBC. Even a training vendor's impact measurement is suspect, say many managers, because vendors have too vested an interest in showing a successful outcome. As a result, sales training has come to be viewed much like advertising: companies know they need to do it but accept they won't know exactly what it contributed to the bottom line.

That conventional wisdom is now being challenged by ES Research, an independent evaluator of sales training vendors (www.esresearch.com). ES Research asserts that not only is sales training measurable, but organizations that measure sales performance improvement are more productive than organizations that do not. ES Research recently spent a full year working with sales training companies and end users to determine how vendors could measure training in a way that ensured their measurements were credible, valid, and real. The result is ESR's Certified Measurement Program (CMP) under which four training vendors have been certified so far: The Complex Sale, Performance Methods Inc., Sales Performance International, and Wilson Learning.

"If you want to improve performance, you have to know what was attributable to training versus other factors," explains Wilson Learning's Steve Callender (www.wilsonlearning.com). "You must measure to know if training worked and, even more important, you must measure long-term results because anything can work in the short-term." He recommends sales managers think of training like the sport of curling instead of like bowling. In bowling, you release the ball and there's nothing you can do to influence where it goes after it has left your hands. In curling, however, the release of the stone is just the beginning. After the stone leaves the starting line – i.e., after the training is completed – "we're sweeping and brushing and making fine adjustments and making sure the rock is sliding along the right course," says Callender.

To do its "sweeping and brushing," Wilson Learning conducts surveys with its clients to find out which tools and skills salespeople are using and what percentage of a sale is attributable to those skills. The surveys are extensive and the results are conservative, culling out all other factors that may have contributed to a sale such as a competitor going out of business, a big advertising push, or a drop in price, says Callender. In this way, Wilson not only is able to provide clients with an accurate measurement of training impact, it also illuminates areas that need more emphasis or a minor course correction. For instance, after surveying an electronic component reseller with whom Wilson had worked, it was clear that some parts of the sales process were being used less regularly than others. This finding influenced the company's follow-up and reinforcement plans for 2008. The company now plans to use case studies on DVD for sales managers to conduct two half-day "mini clinics" reviewing some of

the core application issues.

"There aren't enough end users who are demanding measurement," laments Dave Stein, CEO of ES Research. He says fewer than 20 percent of organizations have implemented some type of program beyond the basic one-page evaluation surveys or "smile sheets" at the end of a training intervention. "The few companies that are saying, 'We are now going to measure improvement' are able to manage their business much better. They're not running their businesses looking in the rearview mirror all the time."