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There's a better way to **select** sales training

BY DAVE STEIN



Strictly speaking, sales training is nothing more than a means to an end. The end is sales performance improvement, which is measured by an increase in the amount of products and services your team sells at higher margins, in less time and more predictably—than before the training. If you provide your team with ineffective sales training, your sales will not improve. That’s an opportunity squandered.

Consider this sobering statistic: 85 to 90 percent of sales training results in no more than a 120-day uptick in productivity. Post-mortem analysis of hundreds of failed sales training initiatives clearly reveals that selecting the wrong provider is high on the list of major reasons for failure. One immutable truth in sales training is this: In order to get it right, you must select the right training provider.

When companies wind up with the wrong provider, it’s almost always the result of someone having made a subjective rather than an objective decision. Sales training wrecks typically occur because a decision maker selected a trainer who, for example, trained them when they were a sales rep, recently published a new book, presented a compelling webinar, was recommended by a colleague, had a recognized brand, or was identified through other subjective means without an assessment of their capabilities.

Where Should You Start?

Before you invite any trainers to speak with you, it’s critical to invest in a comprehensive and objective assessment of your sales training requirements. If a training provider is involved in the process of defining your company’s requirements, you may wind up with a list that magically coincides with their unique offerings rather than what you really need. The trainer does not uncover your real selling challenges because their expertise is in other areas, or worse, they ignore a challenge because they do not have a solution for it. Either way, you lose.

The sales methodology and the sales processes it contains form the backbone of any strategic approach to sales training. Ultimately, the purpose of training is to get salespeople to use the company’s sales process. That transformation requires behavioral change, which means change management strategies and ongoing reinforcement are required components. Some providers will adapt an existing methodology to your situation; others will build one for you from scratch. Either method can be effective, but only if it is built on the foundation of your company’s selling process.

A definition of your requirements must include the gap between how your customers buy—trends, preferences, alternatives, processes, etc.—and the ability of your salespeople to meet those characteristics to close business. For example, if you are selling into an industry where a business justification must be provided to the customer by the supplier and your salespeople are not capable of building and delivering one, they are not going to sell effectively.

Most sales training providers strongly resist responding to an RFP or formal requirements definition, and there are legitimate reasons for this. You stand a better chance of having providers respond to your request when you assure them that you have a budget, executive-level sponsorship, a compelling need, and that none of their competitors are talking to you or have influenced the requirements definition. You adapt your selling approach to your customers’ buying process; you should expect anyone who sells to you to adhere to the same rules.

Who Should You Include on Your Long List?

The best provider for your company could very well be one you’ve never heard of. The sales training industry is highly fragmented, comprised of thousands of firms and individuals. Many are capable of making a positive impact on your team’s performance. A while back, an ES Research Group client—a division of Honeywell—selected Performance Methods, Inc. after we introduced them. Before that, Honeywell had no idea that PMI existed. The two companies now enjoy a long-term, mutually profitable relationship (see *Sales and Marketing Management* magazine, March 2007). Last summer, we introduced a European client to BayGroup International, a provider that the client didn’t know about. (Disclosure: Performance Methods, Inc. and BayGroup International are ES Research Group subscribers.)

Use the Internet to identify possible providers, but be aware that the best training companies for your situation are not necessarily the ones that show up first in a Google search, are not always included in the increasing number of Top 10 and Top 20 lists, or active in social media. Speak with colleagues from other companies and independent consultants. Read case studies posted on sales training provider websites. Contact your

counterparts from those organizations who were cited in those cases. Ideally, your long list should include six to eight companies.

What's next?

Perform a dispassionate comparison of each company against your requirements. Add a weighting factor to assure that you zero in on providers whose strengths match your most important criteria.

When you've culled out a short list of two to three firms, invite them to meet with you, relevant senior executives, and other stakeholders. Allow them to execute their discovery process. Give them an opportunity to learn more about your team and your challenges. Observe how they sell. If they are not effective selling to you, it's unlikely they will provide much value to your team.

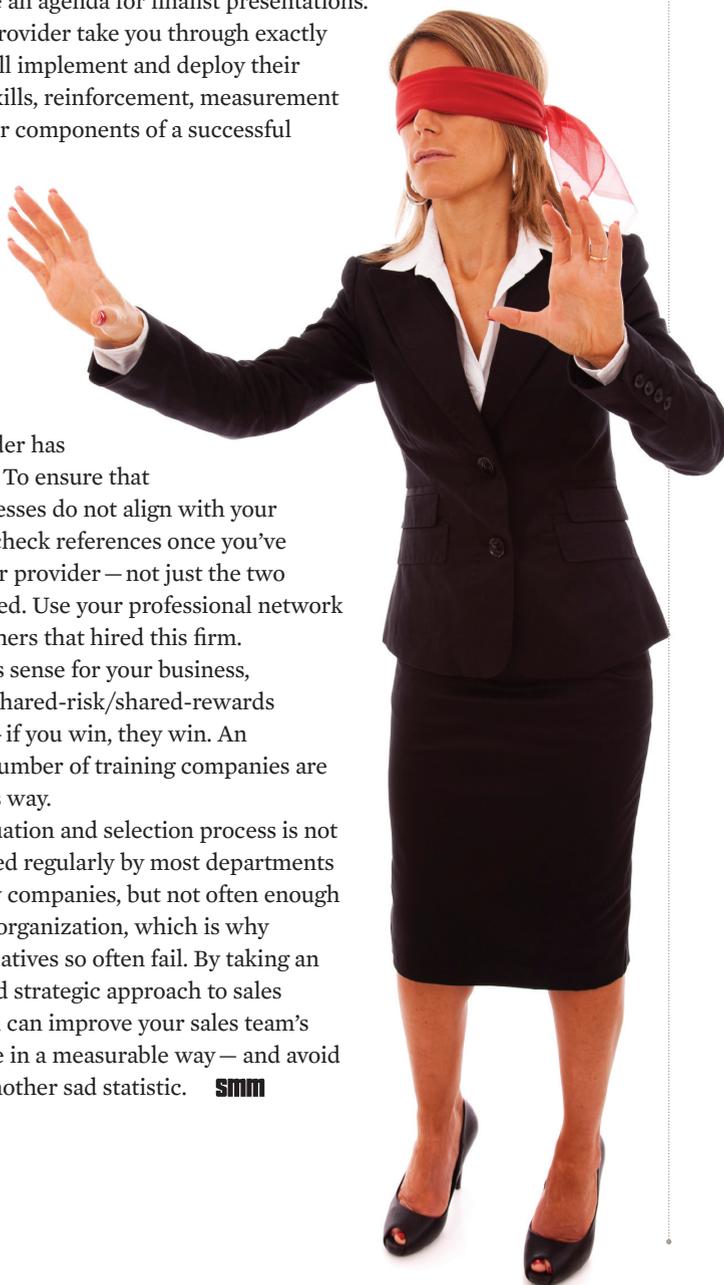
Formulate an agenda for finalist presentations. Have each provider take you through exactly how they will implement and deploy their processes, skills, reinforcement, measurement and the other components of a successful initiative.

Finally...

Every provider has weaknesses. To ensure that their weaknesses do not align with your challenges, check references once you've selected your provider – not just the two they've named. Use your professional network to find 10 others that hired this firm.

If it makes sense for your business, negotiate a shared-risk/shared-rewards agreement – if you win, they win. An increasing number of training companies are working this way.

This evaluation and selection process is not new. It is used regularly by most departments within many companies, but not often enough by the sales organization, which is why training initiatives so often fail. By taking an objective and strategic approach to sales training, you can improve your sales team's performance in a measurable way – and avoid becoming another sad statistic. **smm**



Reps aren't the ones who need revving up!

You could have an endless budget to invest in training and it would only go so far if you and other frontline managers in your company aren't invested personally in the process.

"You've got to do a coaching session with your frontline managers because it's essentially malpractice if you don't," says Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer of Corporate Visions, a globally recognized provider of marketing and sales training.

Riesterer says research shows that adoption of sales training techniques increases by 40 percent when a manager has been taught how to coach the techniques covered and follows through.

Jeff Seeley, CEO of sales training provider Carew International, says companies' executive teams worry too much about salespeople buying into the training that they invest in and not enough about bringing mid-level managers on board.

"Once we get people in the classroom, there is a thirst for knowledge. Where we have problems with most of our clients is engaging leadership," Seeley says. "They say, 'We have to do something about our sales team,' but the reinforcement, follow-up and making this part of the culture is the tough part."

Carew provides executive briefings before training begins as part of its package. Corporate Visions builds a one-day "train the trainer" sessions into its platform (and prices it aggressively enough to make it a no-brainer).

"The sales manager has all of the influence in the world," says Riesterer. "If they feel like they've been let in on what's going to happen and they had an opportunity to respond to that, we have seen that create the most enthusiasm and best acceptance at companies. All the promotion you can do to salespeople will pale in comparison to what their manager tells them."

– PAUL NOLAN

A deeper look at sales training provider capabilities

When evaluating a potential sales training partner, there are a host of considerations and trade-offs. Best practices in evaluating sales training companies shows us that an objective assessment of a provider's capabilities against your requirements is essential.

Every company seeking the best solution for its needs will have a different list, with different priorities, but here are just some of the capabilities that should be considered during an evaluation process:

- Methodology** Do you currently employ a sales methodology? If not, you will have to buy one or build one. If you hire a trainer that is strong only in selling skills content, delivery will not be sufficient. Their ability to collaborate with you on a methodology is crucial.
- Program breadth and depth** Working with more than one training company can be challenging. Does this provider deliver all the content you need in the way you need it?
- Program effectiveness** Can the provider prove that salespeople who have been through its programs sell more?
- Instructional design** Adults learn differently than children. Many salespeople learn differently than other adults. Have the programs been designed for optimal learning for your team?
- Ability to customize** Using out-of-the-box sales training typically does not yield the same results as a customized offering. What is the provider's approach to customization?

- Learning technology** Some traditional instructor-led training is being supplanted or supplemented by either live or on-demand virtual training. How does the provider deliver virtual content? What is the provider's approach to the ongoing reinforcement that is critical to every sales training intervention?
- Sales manager/coaching programs** Sales managers must be trained on the same content as their sales reps and additionally, how to manage and coach their reps to achieve the behavioral change required for real transformation. What programs and approaches does the provider offer?
- Integration with other departments** How does the provider approach the integration of sales and marketing, service, engineering and other departments that participate directly or indirectly in the selling effort?
- Advanced selling content** For many companies, basic selling alone does not get the job done. Some require capabilities in political leverage, financial acumen, competitive strategies and tactics, and strategic negotiation to name just a few.
- Change management** Many companies have a culture that is resistant to change. Does the provider recognize that and have a proven approach for assuring adoption from top to the bottom within the organization?

— DAVE STEIN

Does your training curriculum emphasize the skills, methods and behavior you desire in your sales professionals today and in the future? Many training programs involve scripted sales presentations or methods that are at odds with the culture of the organization.

The downside of industry expertise

How well should a training provider know your industry? Corporate Visions Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer Tim Riesterer says if a training provider works a lot within your industry, you may want to run in the other direction.

"We had a client in the banking industry who said, 'We don't want you to have any banking experience because we think the way things get marketed and sold in the banking industry is hideous. We want to copy world-class companies in software and business services.'"

The risk of asking if a training provider has worked with other companies in your field is that you won't get anything that's breakthrough, he adds.

"Now all you're doing is trying to copy other companies that are in your industry. The reality is you're having this training because you're trying to stand out and create a difference. You can get trapped in this idea that you have to have certain domain expertise and all that happens is you reinforce the same bad habits."

—PN