



5 PITFALLS TO AVOID FOR SUCCESSFUL SALES TRAINING



A WHITEPAPER BY THE BROOKS GROUP

USING A COMBINATION OF OUR OWN RESEARCH, THAT OF OTHERS AND OUR EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE, WE HAVE COMPILED A LIST OF FIVE WAYS IN WHICH SALES TRAINING INITIATIVES INEVITABLY FAIL.

Successful training will avoid these five pitfalls.

- Failing to attain the full support of the executive suite
- Failing to secure adequate funding for the sales training initiative
- Failing to solicit the opinions and ideas of members of the sales team about sales training
- Failing to include the sales management team in the training initiative
- Failing to incorporate ongoing reinforcement and follow-up to cement and measure the impact of the sales training

This document addresses each one of these pitfalls individually and offers insights about how to avoid seeing your own efforts fall victim to the mistakes others have already made.



First, what is sales training?

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of what to avoid and how to succeed, let's settle on a definition of "sales training." Traditionally, sales training has been synonymous with product training. In fact, research by Professors Christine Galea and Carl Wiens revealed that 40% of sales training is focused on developing product knowledge. Additional research by Professor Alfred Pelham published in the Journal of Personal Selling and Major Account Management revealed that a mere 10% addresses questioning and listening skills - both of which are essential ingredients in a recipe for sales success.

Simply put, product knowledge alone is not sufficient.

TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN A CONTEMPORARY SELLING ENVIRONMENT, SALESPEOPLE MUST FOCUS ON HOW THE PRODUCT ADDRESSES THE SPECIFIC NEEDS AND WANTS OF THEIR CUSTOMERS - NOT ONLY ON HOW THEIR PRODUCT WORKS OR THEIR SERVICE IS DESIGNED.

Certainly, an understanding of product is important, but the only way to truly understand how to properly apply any product or solution to a customer's needs is by first asking the right questions and then listening to a prospect's responses. These are two skills addressed by sales training that teach salespeople how to be customer-focused advisors, rather than product "pitch people." Importantly, whatever training you do *must* mesh with your existing culture, and avoiding these pitfalls will ensure that occurs.



Here are the five stumbling blocks to effective sales training and how to address them:

1 Failing to attain the full support of the executive suite

Complete buy-in by top management is not only required, but absolutely essential. Sales is the “lifeblood” of any company.

CLEARLY, TOP MANAGEMENT MUST UNDERSTAND HOW VITAL A WELL-TRAINED SALES FORCE IS TO THE SUCCESS OF AN ORGANIZATION.

However, executives tend to side with the department or arm from which they came. In other words, a CEO with an engineering background will tend to believe that engineering is the most important side of the house. Another, with a financial background, will see that function as being the most essential.

By the same logic, an organization led by executives with a sales background will seem to advantage the sales department. In many cases, that leader can be persuaded about the importance of the sales function more readily than some others. However, another potential problem arises with these leaders. These executives may not support sales training efforts if they sold many years ago and have ‘old school’ views of what selling is all about. Or worse, if they were ‘naturals’ who were gifted at sales and can’t understand why someone would need to be trained to do something ‘so easy.’

EACH EXECUTIVE MUST BE ‘SOLD’ ON THE VALUE OF SALES TRAINING.

2 Failing to secure adequate funding for the sales training initiative

Sales training is not something that can (in most every case) be done without help. Unfortunately, many organizations will attempt to ‘train-on-the-cheap.’ They will develop a sales training program on their own or hire an inexpensive speaker to come in and motivate their team. Rarely do either of these work.



IN MOST CASES, EFFECTIVE SALES TRAINING INVOLVES A TOTAL CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION.

That is a painful realization for many penny-pinchers. It is simply not possible to develop an organizational transformation without a significant investment. The other side of the coin is more comforting. According to both anecdotal and hard-data evidence, sales training - when properly launched, implemented and followed-up on - has significant impact on the bottom line. When adequately funded, the impact more than covers any up-front cost.

In short, if it's done wrong, your sales training investment will be the most expensive mistake you've ever made. If done properly, however, it will be the best thing you've ever done.

3 Failing to solicit the opinions and ideas of members of the sales team about sales training

Just as top executives must understand the importance of sales training, salespeople must also be shown how important it is. Human beings, by their very nature, resist change. Homeostasis or balance is the goal. And change is not about balance. A complete cultural transformation is not easy and will require some significant adjustment for individuals, departments and the organization as a whole.

As a result of all of this change, salespeople must see just how much the sales training can benefit not only their organization, but also their individual incomes and sales numbers.

Buy-in from the sales department can also come when they are involved in the early development of the training program. Put another way, it is important for salespeople to have more to do with the program than simply showing up to be taught.



An important aspect of soliciting the opinions and ideas of the sales team requires maximizing their training time. For most salespeople, this means seeing just how much it can do for their individual incomes or sales numbers, in whatever way those numbers are calculated.

This is a very real concern for salespeople because the only real inventory a salesperson has is time. It's absolutely essential that every second of sales training time be maximized and provide measurable results.

THE BOTTOM LINE IS THIS: EVERY MOMENT SALESPEOPLE SPEND DOING SOMETHING OTHER THAN SELLING MUST, IN SOME WAY, HELP THEM SELL BETTER.

4 Failing to include the sales management team in the training initiative

Too often we see sales training initiatives fail because organizations believe that they'll see positive changes simply by training the salespeople. In fact, it is essential to train their managers right along side them. In other words, an important component of the sales training effort must be geared toward the unique requirements of the sales management team.



If a sales team learns a new principle, and the sales management team is not made aware of how to coach or develop their team around that new principle, it will not have its full benefit.

Let's consider the fictitious (but highly representative) sales team at an organization we'll call XYZ Industries. Let's say those salespeople attend a sales training program in which they learn a new sales process. Let's further say that it is a questions-based, linked, sequential process that has been proven to improve closing ratios by more than 50%. Let's make the additional statement that their management team is not given a sales-management-specific version of training in the process.

The questions we can pose are relatively clear: How can they manage the process? How can they coach within the process? How will they bring new hires up to speed quickly within the framework of the process?

CLEARLY, TRAINING SALES MANAGERS IS ESSENTIAL TO THE ONGOING SUCCESS OF ANY TRAINING INITIATIVE. AFTER ALL, THEY WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTINUITY OF WHATEVER IS TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOM.

Failing to incorporate ongoing reinforcement and follow-up to cement and measure the impact of the sales training

Training can't stop at the classroom door, it must be reinforced in the field. The research clearly shows that sales training that includes additional follow-up and reinforcement components is far more effective than training that occurs in the vacuum of a periodic sales meeting.

The ongoing reinforcement should emphasize the most impactful and meaningful elements of the initial training initiative. It must cause the sales team (and their managers) to gain further insight into the particular requirements of their own selling environment.



Training will inevitably fail if it is simply a one-time event. Common sense (and decades of research) leave no doubt that changes in behavior – and their underlying attitudes – occur over time.

A SALES-DRIVEN ORGANIZATION THAT HOPES TO SEE LASTING BENEFIT FROM ANY SALES TRAINING INITIATIVE WILL ENSURE THAT WHAT IS TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOM IS REINFORCED.

Conclusion

To be effective, sales training programs must avoid the five pitfalls and be seamlessly integrated into the unique environment in which they're being deployed. Successfully training a sales team is no easy task, and a program can not be developed in a vacuum. It is essential to find a strategic partner to advise and assist in the development of any effective sales training program.



Key Takeaways:

- Complete buy-in for the sales training initiative by top management is not only required, but absolutely essential.
- In most cases, effective sales training involves a total cultural transformation—and that will require a certain level of commitment in both time and resources.
- During a change initiative, salespeople must see just how much the sales training can benefit not only their organization, but their individual success as sellers.
- Training sales managers with the new methodology is essential to the ongoing success of any training program.

About The Brooks Group

With nearly 40 years of industry experience, The Brooks Group achieves sustainable sales culture transformation for clients by delivering targeted training that becomes operationalized by threading into an organization's existing systems.

The Brooks Group takes a holistic approach to practical culture shifts and focuses on customized “street smart” sales and sales management programs, with a high level of relevance and practicality for the individual learner. Training gets reinforced with an industry-leading cloud-based sales and sales management coaching platform.

For more information

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