Avoiding the Pitfalls of Sales Training

Developing the Modern Sales Skillset

BREVET

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Traditional Sales Training is Broken

Modern Selling is getting touchier. Expectations of your buyers are greater than ever before and your sales results may not be what they should. To get more out of your sales team, you're probably thinking about investing in sales training.

You wouldn't be alone. 90% of companies invest in some form of sales training. Nearly half spend up to $7k per year pr rep.

Yet, study after study tells us that today's sales training just doesn't work. It's not what sellers need to navigate increasingly compleex deals and more sophisticated buyers. In short, it isn't equipping sales teams with the modern sales skillset.

At best, sales training amounts to little more than a performance bump for the current quarter, and then everyone drops right back to where they started, struggling to make the numbers. Even worse, sales training programs can be a major distraction to the salesforce or even reinforce bad selling behaviors.

Consider these statistics:

90% An ES Research study found that approximately 90% of all sales training has no lasting impact on professional behavior.

85% Research conducted by Xerox showed that 85% of the new knowledge learned in sales training is lost within 12 weeks.

50% Similarly, Sales Performance International research found most sales professionals forget at least 50% of what they learned in training programs in less than five weeks… 84% is lost after 90 days.

Ask yourself, just how much time, money and energy is your organization wasting on poor sales training?

Why do most sales training programs fail?

The simple truth is that the vast majority of today's sales training ignores how salespeople really learn. Advances in brain research and adult learning provide powerful insight into how to get new ideas and skills to stick. Achieving true effectiveness in sales training means much more than high satisfaction or "smiley face" ratings. The key is driving lasting behavior change.

Unfortunately, creating lasting changes in salesperson behavior is difficult. This challenge requires a more thoughtful approach than typically seen from sales training vendors.

Study after study by experts in learning have demonstrated that most sales training is poorly designed, frequently developed by no more than "washed-up" sales guys. These charismatic showmen may put on a good performance, but they rarely understand the principles of adult education. And let's face it, if these folks were so successful, would they be holding training seminars in the basement of the Holiday Inn?

Even worse, most sales training is – let's be kind and call it "academic". It may look good on paper, but the concepts can't really be applied to the rep's day-to-day experience. How many reps have you seen carry around that binder of PowerPoint from your last training class?

Finally, many organizations and trainers have yet to adapt to the big changes in how the new generation of reps works and takes in information. The modern seller – raised on technology, driven by social media, and fueled by short attention spans – has fundamentally different expectations and needs when it comes to learning and development.

How do sales professionals really learn?

Creating truly effective sales training is a much more complicated task than most sales managers or sales trainers realize. Just pulling some ideas off the Internet or a couple of tips from books isn't enough. Relying on what might have worked in the past is no longer a sustainable model.

Sales training programs must balance the topics that need to be covered (such as, product knowledge, administrative procedures, and selling methodologies) with the level of proficiency that the learner should achieve on each topic. The various levels of learning proficiency are presented below in Figure 1.
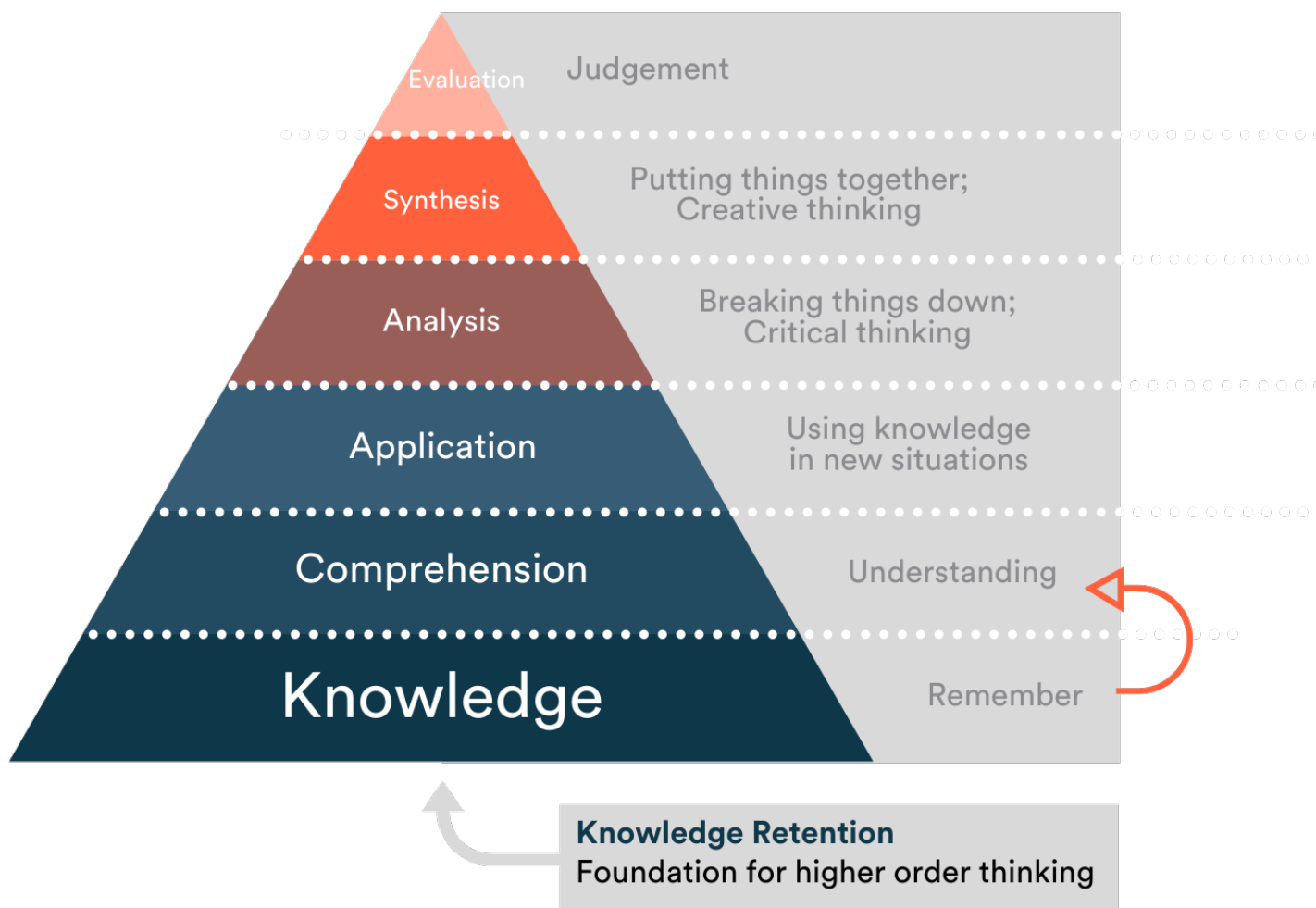

Figure 1. The Learning Based View of Sales Training Development
(based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning)

All too often, the person charged with developing a company's sales training becomes consumed with the breadth of information that needs to be conveyed. This "topic-based" view of curriculum design can leave sales reps floating around the bottom of the learning pyramid.

Learners that receive this type of training may be able to recall basic facts. They may also get some understanding of how these facts are related.

However, sales teams exposed to this training approach will lack the ability to apply the concepts in the appropriate situations. They're no better than school children who can recite the alphabet or even recognize certain words by sight, yet can't read a book.

More critically, training that focuses on basic knowledge transfer creates sales reps who can't analyze situations and determine ways to improve on their own. These salespeople simply won't have the important high-order learning.

With a more "learning-based" view of sales training, concepts can be mapped to the stages of a selling career and to the level of thinking that must be present in order to succeed at respective points in time.

This is important because it not only dictates the topic to be covered, but also the type of exercises that should be used in teaching the topic based on these stages in the career-cycle.

An example of this mapping of exercises is found in Figure 2. This table illustrates the learning-based view of sales training curriculum and how it can guide the developer in laying out exercises for sales trainees in the case of the skill of objection handling. Note the strategy of moving reps through all stages of learning from lower-order to higher-order thinking.

The Learning Spectrum in Sales Training for Objection Handling

	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Build	Evaluate
Outcome	Sales Rep can list the steps in handling objections using the 4-part approach	Sales Rep can state how the steps in the 4-part method are related and why they are important	Sales rep can recognize an objection and match an appropriate 4-part response to the objection	Sales Rep can build their own 4-part responses from other rep and recognize which steps were missing	Sales Rep can build their own 4-part responses to common and uncommon objections	Sales Rep can review another sales rep's handling of objections, judge the quality of the handling and provide specific feedback on how to improve.
Teaching Exercises Based on Desired Outcome	Have sales rep watch online tutorial on the 4-part method for handling objections.	Have sales rep explain the 4-part process and why it works	Have sales rep explain the 4-part process and why it works	Have sales rep watch sales call video and have them answer short quiz on what steps were missing.	Send sales rep a list of common objections and have them write out how to handle them using 4-part method.	Have sales rep role-play objection handling with another rep and coach the rep on how to improve

Figure 2. Example of the Learning-Based View of Sales Training as Applied to Objection Handling Training

In reality, the aim of most sales training programs is to get salespeople to be proficient in applying the concept. Thus, effective training should seek to get the sales rep to this level and then let experience in the field provide the "training" that will eventually get the rep to the advanced stage of learning beyond application.

The Bottom Line

Whether you've felt the pain and want to avoid it next time, or you're ahead of the game and want to position you and your firm for success, you need know why sales training fails. More importantly, you need to know how to address these common pitfalls to create an effective modern training program for your sales team.

In the next section, we'll showcase the five most common mistakes that lead to sales training failure. More importantly, we'll share strategies for avoiding these issues, so your training achieves the best results possible.

5 Common Mistakes in Sales Training

Mistake #1: Too Much "What", Not Enough "How"

A consistent mistake that companies make in their sales training programs is being lured into thinking a particular selling strategy or methodology is the solution. This perspective inevitably leads to an over-emphasis on the "what" and giving little or no consideration to the "how".

In this model, sales leaders seek to introduce a one-size-fits-all selling framework or methodology to their salesforce. These executives might first evaluate different selling frameworks to find the one that best aligns with their sales objectives.

Other times, they might be drawn to a particular selling system they were first trained in or what they used at their last job. And it's not surprising for overworked, time-constrained sales leaders to become attached to a new best-selling sales book or a pre-packaged program being pushed by an off-the-shelf methodology vendor. It's easy to fall for the idea that there is one "silver bullet" that could transform your sales results.
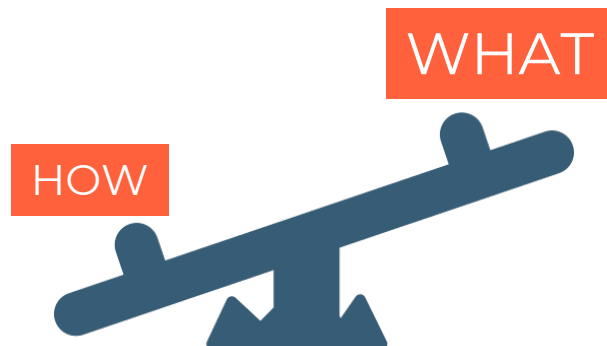
But whether it's Challenging, SPINning, Strategic, Conceptual or Solution Selling, these programs are essentially expensive, often stale, off-the-shelf content: acronyms, big ideas, and maybe a few colored worksheets. This isn't what the modern seller needs.

Beyond the content, the more important issue is that little or no real consideration is given to how, exactly, are the reps supposed to learn and adopt the new concepts? What approach will you use to deliver the content so that the sales organization will actually absorb it? How can the concepts be practiced, assessed, and reinforced?

Selecting sales training content without thinking through the learning and delivery process would be like a college professor selecting the book for the semester with no thought given to any other aspect of the course.

It may sound like common sense, but far too many sales training programs only address the "what" and ignore the "how." Only by taking the two together do you get a true training system.

MODERN SALES TRAINING 2.0
How to avoid Mistake #1:
Too Much "What", Not Enough "How"

Effective sales training drives true learning and behavior change. To achieve positive ROI, your sales training program needs to be a complete system: content combines with a set of additional components.

Figure 1: Components of an Effective Sales Training System
(Source: The Brevet Group)

World-class sales organizations treat sales training as a structured process that includes quality content, methods of delivering content, activities to drive home the content, plans to reinforce the content, tools and job-aids that support application and assessments to evaluate learning success and potential gaps.

Mistake #2: Confusing Product Training with Sales Training

Even though most organizations make Mistake #1 and over-emphasize the training content, that's not to say that they always do a good job of developing quality sales training content.

This brings us to Mistake #2.One of the most popular complaints of buyers that we interview is the "walking product brochure" complaint. Prospects are very reluctant to buy from reps that provide no value beyond being able to recite product specs. The customer appreciates the product knowledge but is dismayed by the salesperson's product-centric approach versus a rep that tries to build a real partnership through a more consultative approach to selling. Product centric sales reps are prone to "sell fast" in that they move into product discussions much too quickly without gaining a true understanding of the customer's specific needs and challenges.

You know we have had a few issues with quality....

Did you say quality? Let me tell you, we have the best quality in the business. In fact, our products are made to the highest specs... blah, blah, blah, ... other customers... blah, blah, blah...'

Some sales organizations fail to realize that they actually condition their reps to be "walking product brochures" with their sales training programs. This is because the sales training is not really sales training at all. These situations are created when the company heavily weighs or completely focuses on product knowledge in the training program.

MODERN SALES TRAINING 2.0
How to avoid Mistake #2:
Confusing product Training with Sales Training

Today's buyers need business consultants, not walking product brochures. True consultants are credible experts that add value by providing insight and help clarifying issues and potential solutions. They don't sell by promoting and pushing what you have to offer. Instead, they focus on understanding the customer's needs, identifying problems, and then collaborating on the best path forward.

The best performing reps are demand-side rather than supply-side oriented. With this mindset, they turn their attention to the customer's business first, then work to align their products or services to help their prospect solve a specific problem or achieve a particular business objective.

While product, company, and industry knowledge is essential, it's just one side of the sales training equation. To turn your sales reps into trusted advisors they need to develop foundational sales skills. These skills include prospecting, sales call planning, asking questions to uncover needs, making effective presentations, handling objections, and maximizing account revenue. Also, don't ignore some of the so-called "soft" skills essential to rep success, including effective time management, motivation, and selling ethics and professionalism.

Today's fast changing sales environment also creates new capability requirements for reps. Sales professionals need quality training in the realities of today's decision-makers, the increasingly complex buying process, and strategies for assessing the business issues of prospects.

Mistake #3: Training Through a One-Time Event

According to neuroscientist David Rock, too many corporate training programs are "the mental equivalent of trying to eat a week of meals in a day." In other words, the proverbial "drinking from a fire hose."

The large majority of sales organizations routinely bring in their salespeople for live training sessions. These events are best characterized as one shot "paint jobs" that are meant to expose the salesforce to the new training content. In rare situations, these events may include a pre-read, but the primary focus is on the in-person 2- or 3-day experience.

Does this sound familiar? Is it how your company rolls-out training? This is Mistake #3, treating sales training as an event.

We challenge you to think of a single learning experience that achieves its goal in just one event. Playing the guitar, learning the game of golf, understanding algebra – all of these require learning over time and using a structured learning process.

So why do organizations treat sales training differently? It is simply unrealistic to assume that sales reps are going to adopt a new consultative selling approach to interacting with customers for instance, after just one training event.
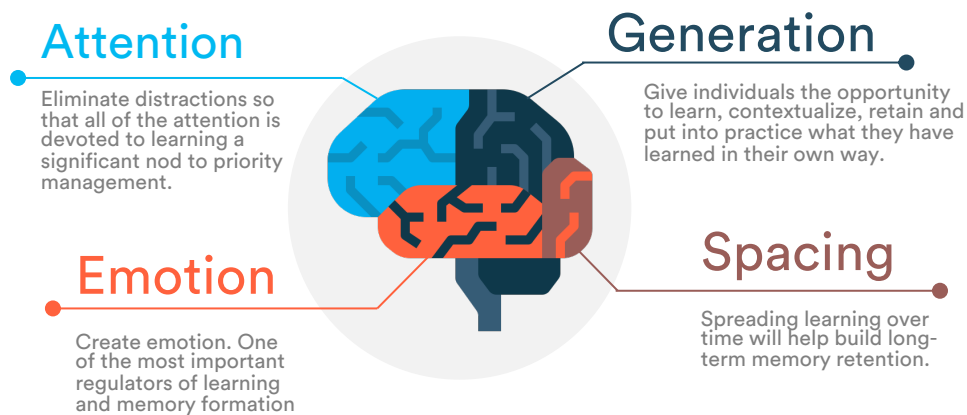
MODERN SALES TRAINING 2.0
How to avoid Mistake #3:
Training Through a One-Time event

To increase the effectiveness of sales training and avoid Mistake #3, some of our intuitive understanding about learning needs to change.

The AGES model was derived from research into advanced neuroscience, specifically the way the brain learns and how it optimizes the formation of memory. In other words, this model is all about getting training to stick...

AGES is an acronym that stands for the key factors that drive long-term learning

Attention
Eliminate distractions so that all of the attention is devoted to learning a significant nod to priority management.

Generation
Give individuals the opportunity to learn, contextualize, retain and put into practice what they have learned in their own way.

Emotion
Create emotion. One of the most important regulators of learning and memory formation

Spacing
Spreading learning over time will help build long-term memory retention.

Good sales training should drive focused *attention*, allow participants to *generate* their own learning through activities and reviews, and include *emotion* (often humor is a good emotion to incorporate).

Lastly, the AGES model emphasizes the need to spread learning over time instead of cramming everything into one long session. This is the AGES principle we see most frequently violated in sales training.

Concentrated learning or massing large amounts of content in short periods of time, may actually increase short-term performance. This is why most learners often rate training events highly on exit surveys. However, it is well documented that long-term performance gains are poor from event-based training alone.

To facilitate successful long-term improvements with your salesforce, training needs to move from a focus on massing to spacing. Spacing is the breaking up of different concepts to be trained into bite-sized nuggets distributed over time. This is very important with sales professionals, who commonly have short attention spans and are notoriously impatient.

The spacing approach applied to sales training should involve dividing up not only the major concepts into separate topic modules, but also "chunking" the major elements within each topic. This model allows reps to move through the learning at their own pace.

This also points to the need for a structured reinforcement plan. Good reinforcement includes multiple touches and sources of feedback: the first-line manager, virtual training sessions, on-the-job tools, and other learning tactics are critical.

Mistake #4: Ignoring the Sales Manager

Few sales organizations understand an irrefutable principle of influencing sales rep behavior. This principle is simple: There is no greater influence on a sales rep's behavior change than the front-line sales manager. Think about it, who else spends the most time observing the behaviors of reps? And who else has the greatest pull in guiding reps to change behaviors?

Research by The Brevet Group and others overwhelmingly supports the idea that the front-line sales manager is the lynchpin in modern sales rep behavior modification. Studies have shown this to be true in situations involving the salesforce adopting new products, using new administrative procedures, becoming more ethical, and most importantly, in changing their approach to customer interactions.

Despite this, organizations continue to perpetuate Mistake #4 by ignoring the essential role that the sales manager plays in effective sales training. This is not about expecting the sales manager to carry all the responsibility for sales training. Rather, this is about acknowledging and equipping managers to reinforce the key concepts taught in the training.

In addition, few sales teams do a good enough job actually training their sales managers to be effective coaches. Sure, these folks may be excellent reps and they may have considerable product knowledge.

But without training in the fundamentals of good sales coaching, they will not be effective. For those who do provide basic sales manager training, too often it does not involve a systematic coaching framework, nor does it cover the foundational selling skills being trained to their reps.

MODERN SALES TRAINING 2.0
How to avoid Mistake #4:
Ignoring the Sales Manager in Sales Rep Training

Formal, structured sales training will not achieve its full potential if isn't bolstered by strong reinforcement in the field. This reinforcement falls on the manager in his or her role.

A well-designed sales training program provides managers with the process and tools they need to coach the specific concepts that reps will learn in their training program.

Here are some practical things you can do to avoid the all too common Mistake #4:

- Consider sequencing the sales rep training so that managers come through the program before reps. In this way, managers gain a basic understanding of what the reps will be taught. This is also an opportunity to gain their feedback on the rep training. Ultimately, this allows managers to feel like they have had input on shaping the rep training, which increases the odds that the managers will "buy into" the training initiative.

- Following the sales training overview, give managers techniques and exercises that they can use to reinforce sales rep learning. An effective strategy is developing Monday Morning Meeting guides that serve as mini-lesson plans that managers can use in informal meetings with their teams.

- Use role-plays to give managers practice in coaching reps around common challenges at different stages in their careers. Connect these interventions to key selling skill concepts covered in the training.

Mistake #5: Lack of Customization

It's hard to argue that one size can fit all. Yet, that's exactly what far too many companies do when it comes to sales training. By doing so, they dive headfirst into Mistake #5.

Let's face it, it's tempting to look at a sales training program that worked in one company or a concept promoted by a sales training vendor and conclude that such a generic approach might work in your environment.

Most sales executives are under enormous pressure and stretched thin. Training resources and budgets may be limited. This often means the tendency to implement off-the-shelf training programs without properly thinking out the implications of their unique buyers, deal types, and messaging.
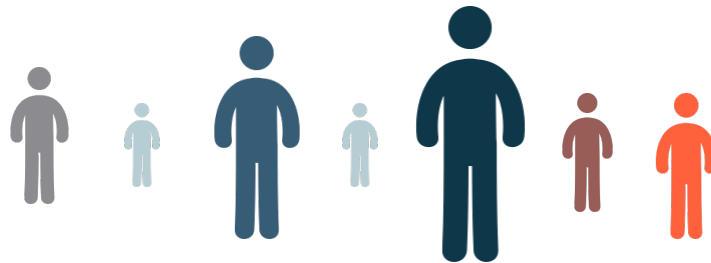
What might be genuinely effective sales training has little to no impact because reps fail to understand how to apply this knowledge within their context. Adoption can also be low as reps view the training as conceptual and not relevant to their particular roles.

Research in adult education repeatedly demonstrates the importance of contextualization in learning. However, too many companies fail to provide this important context. This training is simply too abstract to have any meaning to the salesforce.

MODERN SALES TRAINING 2.0
How to avoid Mistake #5:
Lack of Customization

Tailoring your sales training is key and may occur at a number of different levels. Consider the following ways you might customize your sales training to maximize its overall effectiveness.

- Incorporate key background and selling strategy information into your sales training in some manner. Work with your marketing team to identify the best sales collateral, messaging guides, and spec sheets.

- For more complex selling situations, consider the need to customize your selling tools to reflect your specific buyers and common deal scenarios. Think about how you might adapt key sales actions with insight from your unique selling situation.

- Tailor learning plans for different learning styles. Recognize that not all sales professionals learn in the same way. Some like a more structured approach, others like to focus on application exercises, while others like to watch and replicate the new skills and behaviors.

- Embrace the power of social learning to create peer-to-peer learning opportunities for your specific team. This might be as simple as offering online forums for sharing best practices and posting questions.

Most importantly, avoid inflexible sales training programs. Flexibility and adaptability is key.

Self Diagnostic

How effective is your sales training program?

1. Complete the short questionnaire below by circling YES or NO for each question

2. Count the YES answers

3. <7 YES answers indicates you need to reevaluate your sales training

Has your sales training in the last 6 months improved win rates or average sales price? Do you know?	YES / NO
Is your sales training divided into smaller pieces and accessible to reps over time?	YES / NO
Do you have a structured reinforcement process for key training concept?	YES / NO
Is/was senior leadership involved in the purchase, design and delivery of your sales training?	YES / NO
Do sales managers participate in your sales training?	YES / NO
Do you include exercises and activities that allow reps to apply key training concepts?	YES / NO
Do you employ formal knowledge checks or evaluate the learning progression of your sales reps?	YES / NO
Do you have a way to encourage informal and social learning within your sales team?	YES / NO
Do you balance product training with foundational selling skills training?	YES / NO
Does your training take into account the learning needs of the new generation of sales professionals?	YES / NO
TOTAL COUNT OF "YES"	

BREVET