
Is it time for certifying sales professionals?



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Introduction

Certification programs are a part of many professions where certain skills and competencies are required for practitioners to be effective and successful. For example, both the healthcare and technology industry sectors offer, and often require, particular levels of expertise from their practitioners in order to validate their competency. The financial services industry is another sector that views levels of certification as valuable and necessary to consumer and company alike.

Browsing the web reveals that Microsoft offers 19 forms of IT certification from a Microsoft Certified Technology Specialist (MCTS) to a Microsoft Certified Learning Consultant (MCLC) and everything in between. This designation provides credibility for IT professionals and their company and is considered a value-added component to the company's product/service offering.

From a provider's perspective perhaps the most valued aspect of having your employee experts certified is the level of trust and confidence that it creates in the minds of their clients. Research says that over 80% of purchases occur because of the trust and confidence that prospects have in their sales representative. For this and other reasons that follow we believe it's time to consider certifying sales professionals.

This paper presents and reviews the concept of certifying sales professionals as a means of :

1. **Improving** sales performance
2. **Providing** an organization assurance that their sales team represents them with a high degree of professionalism and ethics
3. **Most** importantly, greatly enhancing the prospect and customer experience.

First, we'll look at what's at stake. Then we'll look at how the certification process differs from traditional sales training. Third, we'll consider approaches to the sales certification process and its potential impact on the sales professional, the organization they represent and the prospect/customer experience. And lastly, we'll evaluate what's important to look for in a sales certification program and provider.

What's at Stake?

The recent global recession has left many small and mid-size companies with depleted sales and marketing resources and budgets that allow little room to fund important revenue producing initiatives. However, history has proven that an investment in sales and marketing during recessionary and/or recovery times can at worst sustain a company and at best catapult them over weaker competitors to capture some of the available market share.

In addition to industry and market growth opportunities, there are company revenue and margin targets that must be achieved. These of course are impacted by individual sales rep productivity which affects most everything. The adage that nothing happens in a company until something is sold has never been truer than it has in the last 2 years.

There are a couple of metrics reported by CSO Insights, a respected sales research firm, that illustrate the challenge in front of small and mid-size companies to rally back from the “Great Recession”. A little less than half, or 42%, of all sales people did not meet or exceeded their sales quotas in 2010 ⁱ. This can represent a significant challenge for sales managers in 2011 with most quotas going up.

Additional research that further indicates what's at stake, are what sales organizations report as their top two initiatives for 2011:

1. **Improve** sales team's ability to show value and
2. **Optimize** sales process ⁱⁱ. Other initiatives with high ratings are reducing sales cycle time(s) and improving margins by reducing discounting.

Looking at sales process alone, over half or 60.2% of small and mid-size companies have a random or informal sales process while 39.8% have a formal

or dynamic process. Of those that have a formal/dynamic process over 80% reported a modest or significant increase in sales when it was first introduced. And lastly, the companies that adopt a formal/dynamic sales process report a 20% increase in sales reps who achieve their quota. ^{lii}

Taking a “macro” perspective one could argue the US unemployment rate of over 9% could be reduced if there was an overall increase in corporate sales and revenues that lead to re-employment to meet the increased demand for goods and services. So there’s a lot at stake.

If it's Broke – Fix it!

One of the greatest challenges for many companies is to consistently meet or beat their revenue and sales goals year after year. The difficulty is due to a lack of a proven and predictable sales process for a company and less than effective sales practice performance levels among their sales team.

These two deficiencies are due, in part, to inconsistent or non-existent sales improvement initiatives within the organization. The typical approach to addressing these problems is for a company to conduct a 2 to 3 day shot-in-arm “sales training event” every year or so. Most companies figure if we throw some money at it, things will somehow improve. The practice of conducting a training event produces at best, a temporary spike in sales, but rarely produces sustained and universal sales increases.

So how much should a company commit to training their sales team? CSO reports that 58% of companies spend up to \$1,500 per rep, while 27% spend between \$1,500 and \$5,000. So the good news is that companies are doing something about it; however, the same survey reports that over a third (39%) of companies believe that the sales skill training they receive needs improvement .

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All too often, the need to “do something to improve sales” results in a one-time sales training event. In spite of the economy, some companies are still spending significant dollars to fly their sales team into corporate headquarters or to a nice destination resort. Big bucks are committed to bringing in the high priced sales trainer/facilitator. The sales team takes valuable field sales time to travel to the training location. On average, the cost for this kind of sales training event can easily exceed \$7,000 to \$9,000 per person. And as stated earlier, after all this time and money has been spent the results are less than impressive.

What's missing is retention and utilization of the new training. Sales team members having the fire hose experience typically reach the saturation point after 6 to 8 hours of continuous training. This, combined with lecture style learning, reduces retention to less than 25% of what is presented. And when retention is down, so is utilization.

And lastly, there's generally little if any follow-up to the training. Experience shows that any form of reinforcement, like refreshers or 1-on-1 coaching sessions will more than double the retention and adoption of newly learned sales practices/processes. So how are we doing with the reinforcement process to help reps bring in more business? When salespeople are asked if they need help, 54% of them say they need more coaching on identifying and closing important deals. So more than half of sales reps say they would like more coaching. Unfortunately, many of their sales managers feel ill equipped to provide the assistance they need with over 60% of them (sales managers) saying they need to improve their coaching/mentoring skills. ^v

Today, many companies are saying "Enough!" to this approach. As we recover from the recession, those companies that made it through are determined to get more bang for their training buck. They realize the sales training cost/benefit ratio has not measured up. They're confessing to a level of insanity for having "continued to do the same thing for years, expecting different results". Something needs to change. So if the traditional approach to improving sales is broke what can be done to fix it?

Certification: Measurable and Sustainable

First off, “fixing it” means the major stakeholders (CEO & VP of Sales), who commit to, and fund the activity see immediate, measureable and sustained increases in sales. By measureable we mean there is a commitment to compare pre and post training initiative performance levels for each sales person involved in the program. For example, it means having beginning and ending lead-to-close ratios, for each sales person, for each of their lead sources and target markets they call on. Then after comparing them, discover what impacted them.

It also means having and comparing pre and post training sales practice “competency” ratings, and holding sales team members accountable for qualitative and quantitative improvements that are validated by prospect sales cycle advances and close and/or conversion rates.

And lastly but most importantly, measurable means comparing pre and post training sales margin levels.

There are other metrics we could measure and track but these are three important ones that tell us about the effectiveness and ROI on a training initiative’s success or failure.

Sustained . . . means the CEO and VP of Sales can track continuous improvement in all the metrics listed above for more than a quarter or two. Ideally sales and margin improvements should continue quarter after quarter and year after year and not just occur immediately after the training and then fade away. A key component of sales improvement sustainability is consistent reinforcement with existing and newly hired sales staff. When individualized coaching and deal strategy sessions are interspersed with new training, that’s deployed over time (several months), adoption rates are even higher. This kind of reinforced program generally produces sustained and measurable results.

Certification as a Solution?

Certification implies that a level of performance or competency has been attained. A certified sales professional has achieved and been observed and measured performing acknowledged best sales practices/processes for his/her industry and target market(s). Further, both the science (quantitative) and the art (qualitative) of each practice/process should be executed and assessed in real-life sales scenarios and/or exercises. A sales professional desiring certification needs to excel at both. And of course those certifying the sales person's performance must be sales experts familiar with the industry and target markets being served, products/services being sold, and the selling practices/processes being certified.

Some management teams may question if it's realistic to expect independent, ego-driven sales professionals to commit to and be held accountable to completing a sales certification program. It's a valid question. Smart sales managers will want to enlist and motivate their veterans to be mentors and examples for the younger team members to emulate and learn from. The involvement of a seasoned pro, who is willing to share their years of industry, product and sales knowledge will not only enrich a certification program – it can validate it.

The biggest gain in a sales team certification program can come when new hires are immediately enrolled in a program. Research shows that new sales reps that are trained in a proven and predictable sales process will reach quota-level production levels in half the normal time. Savvy sales managers will challenge their new hires to commit to a sales certification training program to not only guarantee their success with the company, but as a way of enhancing their resume.

With energy and enthusiasm levels so high could there be a better way, or a better time, to orient, train and ramp-up a new recruit?

Summary

In today's economy it's important for executive management to consider all alternatives to improve their company's top line. Traditional sales training initiatives have not produced the desired results, yet companies, perhaps out of not knowing what else to do continue to throw good money after bad. With over a billion dollars spent on sales training initiatives globally, there's room for improvement. This author believes a well designed sales certification program that is customized to a company's industry, target market(s) and products/services can produce the sales and margin increases that companies need and are looking for.

Certification programs that are administered by highly skilled former sales executives, with "been there, done that" track records, are able to engage sales professionals of all experience levels in a challenging, fun and stimulating adult learning experience. And best of all both the company and the sales reps that invest in a sales certification program have the potential to see measurable and sustained results beyond what they had with previous sales performance improvement initiatives. So is it time to consider certifying sales professionals? I say yes.

i 2010 Sales Performance Optimization Survey, CSO Insights (Denver. CO.) p.4

ii Jim Dickey & Barry Traylor, 2011 Sales Management Optimization Survey, (Denver. CO.) p.12

iii 2010 Sales Performance Optimization Survey, CSO Insights (Denver. CO.) p.79

iv Ibid., p. 8

v Jim Dickey & Barry Traylor, 2011 Sales Management Optimization Survey, (Denver. CO.), p.5

Contact Us

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