Inside Sales

10 Rules for Effective Sales Training

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Most Sales Reps dislike training because it takes time away from activities that help them make quota. This attitude is quite common and is a result of past experiences where training was unproductive, ineffective, or meaningless from the perspective of the Sales Reps. Most Reps will agree that meaningful, productive training can help make them better at their jobs (i.e. help them make their quota), but are leery that it will ever materialize.

The result is that your Reps aren't paying attention during training, and worse, aren't retaining any of the information you prepared. Thus, you have Reps that are less knowledge about your products, industry, processes, selling strategy, etc. than they should be – It's not difficult to imagine the negative impact this can have on your pipeline.

1. Content should be relevant and useful

Consider your audience. Are you putting together training on "what's new" or training for new sales reps? Will the training include both new reps and veteran reps? You need to structure the content of the training such that it covers the necessary topics, but isn't too advanced or too remedial for the audience.

If you are trying to put together a training session for a team of mixed experience levels, it is important to do some level-setting with newer reps so they are prepared to absorb the information in the training. Review product information in advance of the team training, walk thru process examples, go over systems and tools. The goal is to familiarize newer reps with the products, processes, systems, tools, and challenges of their role as these topics will likely be raised in training.

2. Get feedback from the Sales Reps on what they want training on

As a manager, you have an idea of what you think your sales reps should know to do their job effectively. However, different reps have different proficiency levels. Ask your reps about areas where they feel they could use more training.

Given that some reps are less open to admitting potential deficiencies, try phrasing your question something like this: "I know we all have areas for improvement. What do you feel you would like more training on to be more successful in your role?"

Probe into their responses, perhaps they would like more training on:

- positioning against competition
- messaging around certain products
- strategies for penetrating specific verticals

- using the CRM system to prioritize their workload
- tips on time management
- objection handling
- sales strategy

3. Build flexibility into the schedule

Create a schedule that includes frequent breaks – a 30 minute break for every 1.5 hours of training. This may seem like a lot, but frequent breaks allow individuals to refresh. They also build in a buffer for staying on schedule. Without breaks, individuals are prone to zoning out, dozing off, and retaining less of the valuable information being communicated.

Another benefit of building breaks into the schedule is that you can use them to help catch up if you find yourself behind schedule. For example, if your last presentation or discussion ran over 15 minutes, shorten the break to 15 minutes. The participants will still be able to get up and stretch, use the restroom and refresh their beverage before the next session.

4. Expert Presenters – Pros and Cons

Pros: They know the subject matter better than most and can answer tough questions about specifics.

Cons: They may give you more information than you need or can digest, making it difficult to discern what's important.

Sales Reps need to know about product features and capabilities, true, but more importantly they need to be able to communicate the top three reasons a prospect should buy your solution over your competitor's solution. If possible, review the expert's presentations before the session and help them distill the information.

If your presenter can't distill the material down to what's important, consider having someone else present, or following up the presentation with a cheat sheet tool or discussion to help the Reps discern what is really important to prospects. You can still have the experts on hand to answer tough questions.

This is a great way to connect your sales teams with the other resources in the organization, creating more cooperation between sales and marketing, product management, sales ops, engineering, etc.

5. Create relevant and frequent opportunities for interaction

It's nice to think that everyone is learning what is being communicated during a training session, but how can you be sure? Just like when you were in school, you don't really know how well you have learned something until you are tested on it. This is not to say that every sales training should be followed by a multiple choice test. You should, however, ask questions to test retention and understanding.

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For example, John:

- Tell me what this means to you?
- Is this helpful to you?
- How will you use this in your day?
- How is this different from what you have been doing?
- How do you feel prospects will respond to this messaging?
- Tell me what you feel the key differences are in this newer version of the product.
- How would you summarize this for a prospect?

When covering complex or dense material, it's good to pause after each major point or group of slides and ask these questions. Waiting too long, or after too much material, can make discussions of that material too general and not meaningful.

The goal is to have targeted discussions around meaningful topics.

6. Introduce complex process changes or new sales tools

Group training can be the perfect opportunity to introduce complex process changes, review process expectations, discuss sales tools, or reinforce systems use. Discussing these complex topics can be difficult over the phone and often lack the interactive component that makes them stick in most of our minds. Reviewing these items in training allows for discussion and clarification. You can walk through real examples together and answer questions about those unique cases that we all run into.

7. Get feedback after each session

It is essential to get feedback when the information and experience is still fresh in the participant's mind. Ask participants what they liked and disliked about the session. Also, have them complete a short written evaluation form to capture candid thoughts that participants might not want to share with the group.

This information is not only helpful in planning future trainings, but can let you know if course corrections are needed for the current training. For example, one participant expressed that it would be helpful to have paper copies of the slides presented so they could take notes directly on the slides. We were able to do this for all of the remaining sessions of that training. Another participant found a discussion with a Regional VP very helpful to understanding how to position the solution, so we included that Regional VP in future discussions of a similar nature.

8. Keep the group small

To the extent possible, break larger groups into smaller groups for training. Groups of no more than 10 are best for fostering participation and active learning. Also, given that public speaking is still the #1 fear for most professionals, participants are more likely to contribute thoughts and concerns in a smaller group setting.

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For example, if you are having an annual sales meeting, consider breaking into groups by function (i.e. sales development reps, field reps, sales engineers, account management, etc.) for more detailed or complicated topics.

9. The MC is in charge

If you are leading the training, you are also in charge of making sure that the goals of the training are being met. You should, within reason, try to:

- Get feedback on the agenda ahead of time to make sure everyone's expectations for the training are in line
- Manage discussions so they stay on topic, and encourage participation by posing questions to the participants.
- Be mindful of staying on schedule, including letting presenters know when their time is almost up
- Take note of follow-on tasks or action items that come out of training, and manage those items
- Elicit feedback, through verbal discussion or written evaluations, at the close of each training session
- Manage distractions – suggest everyone only check email or voicemail during break time (another reason to have frequent breaks)
- Manage the mood of the training – if participants are falling asleep, suggest a short break, or move to a quick, fun activity to re-engage everyone

10. Have fun

Depending on your organization, if some Reps are remote, it may not be often that your entire group is together in one room. Set up opportunities for your team to get to know each other better. This helps Reps feel more bonded to each other and the team, and can yield higher cooperation, motivation and job satisfaction.

Team building activities shouldn't be limited to night time dinners and cocktail hours. Start the day with a quick activity. For example, ask each participant to share a short story or anecdote that no one in the group knows about them (i.e. completed a marathon, was in a band in college, met the Rolling Stones, am addicted to the Food Network, etc.).

Lastly, don't underestimate the power of humor. When used appropriately and with sensitivity to cultural norms, humor can increase productivity and reduce stress, and make your training sessions more meaningful for the participants. See http://www.powerfullyfunny.com/Articles/Ways-to-Make-Humor-Work.pdf for ideas on how to inject humor into your sales training.

This white paper was created by SalesRamp, LLC to provide educational tools to sales and marketing professionals. SalesRamp is a sales and marketing consulting firm in Mountain View, CA. To learn more, please visit www.salesramp.com