Brief

B2B Sales Has Changed – Why Your Training Should, Too

Just as B2B sales strategies must adapt to increasingly savvy buyers, sales training must change too. This brief discusses how newer training content and methods can result in a better, smarter sales force.

Today's buyers have unprecedented access to resources and information, making them well-positioned to call the shots. And end a sales call.

Companies across all industries have been responding by fighting fire with fire, using technology to get smarter and gain an edge. But for true sales effectiveness – and better outcomes – organizations have to change more than their selling process. They need to change their sales training right along with it, in two key ways:

- **The training content** – What is shared with sales teams and learners
- **The method of delivery** – How content is distributed

Timely and targeted tactics

Because buying behavior has changed significantly, it only makes sense that training reps to respond to that behavior must change as well.

> **Solid training content teaches reps to spend time gaining particular intelligence about a buyer.**

Solid training content has to move reps away from sending mass "shotgun blast" communications out to all prospects; instead, teach them to spend time gaining particular intelligence about a buyer and then leveraging it to approach them. This gives each rep a head-start in initiating a conversation and making a connection faster.

We're in a rapidly moving digital world – salespeople must learn to take advantage of it just as buyers have. They should know how to optimize online searches about buyers, understand how to use time wisely to review an article or a 10-Q statement about a company, or identify and engage with decision-makers via social media. When a sales rep is trained on how to locate and respond to this type of information, their first sales contact is sensible, not slipshod.

If sales reps aren't using LinkedIn to the fullest, they should be. An effective training program will ensure that a sales force knows how to use this ubiquitous networking tool, which has become an ideal place to make introductions or gain favorable referrals – and thus, get an edge on the competition. Any sales rep would rather be walked in the door by a friendly, trusted face than have to bang on that door with the hopes of getting in.

Introduce and reinforce insight selling

Once sales reps have adopted these newer, more effective ways to get in front of the buyer, they have to be prepared for a different kind of conversation. This is where training on insight selling can pay dividends.

Insight selling is the idea of bringing high degrees of expertise into the process, to spark a buyer's interest, illuminate a problem they didn't think they had, and even develop an empathy between buyer and seller. To do insight selling right, a sales rep needs to come loaded with marketplace-related intelligence they can insert into the conversation.

Executives list the top problems holding their organizations back from reaching full potential.

Cutting the time it takes for new reps to close first deals	43%
Onboarding new reps quickly and effectively	41%
Increasing percentage of reps who reach quota	41%

Source: Forbes Insights and Brainshark survey, 2015

As an example, let's say a tech company was selling a better parking meter. The rep should be armed with research about issues that older meters have and how those issues could be overcome. To fuel the conversation, the sales rep would have facts, figures and market data that reflect an expert understanding of the situation and a path toward how to improve it.

Sales training sessions should work this type of conversation into the curriculum, especially with role-playing scenarios. Buyers can often be overwhelmed with the amount of information at hand. When reps can learn how to present themselves as subject matter experts, with data and solutions, they'll immediately be seen as trusted industry advisors.

Change the training structure

Traditional live classroom training has plenty of benefits, such as team-building and opportunities to talk directly with subject matter experts and leaders. But to be truly effective, classroom training must undergo radical change (more on that later) and it cannot be the only source of learning.

The two-day cadence of "classroom, conversation, cocktail" doesn't work. Research shows that 87% of the time, training is forgotten within 30 days. Training needs to be more pervasive and more convenient.

Sales training works best when it begins *before* the classroom time, with assigned pre-work – but not via the old method of distributing long handouts and imploring reps to read them. Pre-work should be made of short, bite-sized eLearning modules that busy reps can access online on their own time. This changes the training dynamic, putting convenience directly in the reps' hands.

Testing is a must

To ensure that pre-work is being completed, testing should be incorporated into the eLearning process. A series of integrated questions can return scores to trainers and, more simply, can prevent the learner from finishing the session until they've answered the questions correctly.

This helps trainers understand the effectiveness and completion rate of their material, and gives sales managers insight into which reps are most motivated to integrate new messaging into their daily work.

As the sales force shows they're moving along in their learning, trainers can layer in more information over time in small chunks, building confidence and progress – without a boring, 37-page document in sight.

Preparing for classroom sessions

Reviewing detailed instructions for classroom activities *while in the classroom* wastes precious time. Instead, deliver that information to sales reps *before* they arrive for live learning, right after their pre-work.

This can best be done via a virtual, instructor-led session, for which reps log in wherever they are, to preview the exercises that will take place when they arrive for class.

Then, it's in-person, classroom training time. As previously mentioned, live training needs to change radically, and here's how: Flip the traditional teaching construct. **Lose the instructor lecturing – it's a poor use of time that doesn't drive retention or interest.**

Instead, go right into full participation by all, with role-playing exercises that include repetitive practice and direct expert feedback. This is an ideal way to change poor behaviors and cement positive skills, in person, face to face.

Use technology for just-in-time training

Let's not overlook the value of training once sales reps are out in the field. Picture a rep prepping for the next day's meeting in a hotel room or from his or her car. Fast and focused learning is paramount. The answer: on-demand videos and modules that reps can access for just-in-time training relating to a particular selling situation. This delivers a level of immediacy and information that disparate slides and printed handouts just can't.

Summary

Sales managers can't expect reps to improve performance in a challenging marketplace if their sales training doesn't improve as well. By restructuring training framework to more naturally cater to the way a person learns, and by optimizing the training content, managers and trainers can help reps learn – and sell – faster.