

TRAINING TO DO BETTER

Motivate experienced sales professionals to see the value of improving their selling abilities

WHEN it comes to sales training for people with little or no sales experience, the decision to invest in training for them is apparent and the results from training obvious.

Even conducting product knowledge training on the features of new and existing products can also easily add value to even the most seasoned sales staff.

But what about sales training for experienced salesmen?

As a sales trainer, I have seen and trained my fair share of seasoned sales practitioners. People who are more than happy to tell you about their history of success, stories that usually begin with "In my heyday, I used to be able to sell ..." People who have "been there" and "done that".

Don't get me wrong. I have a tremendous amount of respect for seasoned and experienced sales staff.

They have rapport skills, a good contact base and know their way around the customer's organisation.

However, some of their methods may sometimes be a little dated in today's corporate world. Some rely heavily on good rapport skills and aggressive follow-up calls which alone are insufficient to convince increasingly sophisticated customers to part with large amounts of money for what they perceive to be undifferentiated products.



Sales staff are driven and proud of their achievements. - EPAPic

These sophisticated customers are well informed on what the competition has to offer and have access to independent product reviews, often with just a few clicks of the mouse.

So how do we add value to this target group to ensure that they capitalise on their good skills and update their irrelevant ones?

Here are seven pointers to remember when prescribing the right training solutions to the seasoned salesman:

1 Do a gap analysis

No matter how many years of experience they may have, there is bound to be an area of improvement for even experienced sales staff.

Get feedback from their peers, supervisors and even customers or follow them out on field attachments. Sometimes, an open and honest discussion may result in them sharing with you what they feel are areas of improvement in terms of their selling abilities. Identify the gaps so you may prescribe the right type of training.

2 Take care of their self-esteem

Sales staff are driven and proud of their achievements. Hurt their self-esteem and risk having them shut you off. Position their gap analysis as areas for improvement rather than areas which they are lacking in.

3 Let them self-discover

As with most adult learners, just telling them how to improve is not enough. You need to be able to get them to self-discover. Put them through role-plays based on everyday sales scenarios, ask them to describe what happened during a sales call that did not go well and ask them what they could have done differently if given a second chance. Take note of their answers as they will come in useful when you eventually decide what training to prescribe in order to add value to them.

4 Offer proof

Most seasoned sales staff never take what others say at face value. Provide them with white papers that are widely available. Just doing a preliminary Internet search yields more than half a million results on white papers pertaining to sales improvement.

Quote these white papers that are written by experts and backed by research and statistics. Assure them that they are not alone and that many other seasoned sales staff have benefited from upgrading their sales skills.

5 Customise a training plan

Do not limit training to classroom training. Customise a plan comprising a variety of learning strategies like role-playing, coaching or field attachments. Be sure to tailor it to match the requirements that have

been discovered during the gap analysis.

6 Measure their success

"Inspect what you expect" by creating appropriate metrics that have been agreed upon with the sales staff and update him or her on their success rate after training. Gaining agreement from the sales staff allows for greater buy-in and ultimately a greater chance of success.

Measuring success also helps to identify areas of improvement that were missed out during the initial gap analysis. Some examples of success could include improved win ratios or even shorter sales cycles.

7 Celebrate early wins

Share success stories of others with experienced sales staff so they can reap the benefits of sales training. As the saying goes, "success breeds success". As soon as they see their peers improving after training, they too will want a piece of the action. Celebrating wins also helps to publicise the credibility and effectiveness of your training. Remember, do not write off experienced sales staff as people who do not need to be trained further, but rather as valuable diamonds that need to be polished to keep them shining for a long time. - Source - ST/ANN

■ **Article by Bruce Murphy, sales training manager of Ricoh Singapore.**