



Prosell

When performance matters

**Why is so Much Sales Training
so Ineffective?**

This article looks at the fundamentals of why sales training is so ineffective and what you can do about it. Let's start with some context;



According to Dettaman and Sternberg (Transfer on Trial 1996) 86% of skills training fails to transfer into the workplace, and of the 14% that does there is dissipation within four months. What is even more astounding is that when we talk about these figures to those who have been on sales training courses and even those who organise such events, they all seem to agree.

Problem 1: Pre-prescribed guesswork

Many sales training companies have a 'methodology'. These focus on a number of supposedly critical areas of the sales process. These include account planning processes, the steps of the sale, need development models and so on. The problem here is a fairly straightforward one. These companies are selling a pre-prescribed solution to an as yet unknown problem. What happens is that minor adaptation is made to convince you that this will meet your need, or evidence is given of similar issues being resolved with this methodology. That's a bit like someone going to the doctor complaining of chest pains and being told that 'a simple heart by-pass will fix the problem and we'll get you in for an operation'.

When you ask why the doctor thinks this is the right solution, the doctor tells you, 'we had someone the same age and health as you, very similar indeed with the same problem and it worked for him'.

Using an example from our own archives, we had a client who had bought a well-known training programme in questioning processes.

When we ran our diagnosis we found that the most significant problem was the sales team's ability to engage at the right level outside of the 3/4 year tendering process, so there was no real chance to use the skills that they had been trained with.

A more common problem in this area is the words we often hear from sales management – 'our sales people struggle to get deals over the line and keep discounting to do so and therefore we need training in negotiation skills and closing'. Again our diagnosis over many years has told us that in almost all cases, it is the ability to effectively develop needs and the ability to articulate your company's value proposition that leads to pressure on price and lack of urgency.



The Solution: - Get training that genuinely addresses core needs

You need to use a process that accurately analyses the blockages in your sales process. Then identify which of these are a genuine skills / training issue. Without this any solution looks alluring. None of us is perfect and it is therefore very easy to take a solution and prove it will improve capability. Unless it removes a core blockage however, (a core blockage being something that prevents sales), it will not improve results.

There will always be situations that are unique to your country / industry / market / customers that sales people struggle with (and these things change depending on economic circumstances) and no pre-prepared, foreign made, shrunk wrapped, highly produced training manual will help.

Another important point about a consultative and collaborative approach to identifying the right training is that the process involves dialogue with sales people and their managers. Remember, 'an idea imposed is an idea opposed'. There is a vast difference between going through a development process that you know will address your needs, because you have had input into the design and going through a parachuted in program. (And it is important to note that unless training is relevant, applicable and well-received, performance often goes down not up.)



Problem 2: Who is responsible for sales people's effectiveness?

Too many sales operations see HR and L&D departments as those responsible for the training and development of sales people. HR's role is to provide valuable support and expertise in helping to define the problem and potential solutions.

Sales management, not HR are responsible for making sure that their people have the right skills, at the right level, to do the job. It is very alluring to abdicate development responsibility to HR. Sales managers have busy schedules and addressing skill improvement needs takes time. Central to this problem is the lack of investment in sales management training.

Most companies with a reasonable sized sales force will have allocated budget for sales training. Almost certainly these same companies will not have allocated budget for sales management training. There seems to be an unhealthy reliance on 'intuitive' skills in some organisations, who see sales more as an art than a science. We know from our experience that well directed sales management equals strong sales performance, just as poorly directed sales management equals poor performance.

The Solution: - Have clearly defined roles and development for sales managers

If sales managers have not played a central role in the design and training phase, then their ability to provide the correct development and support diminishes significantly. So HR should play a role in solution design whilst sales management should be responsible for solution implementation.



Most organisations allocate money for sales training, but we see very few of these allocating money for sales management training. The organisation firstly needs to be absolutely clear what capabilities the sales manager needs. See our article on research into sales management for more information on this.

[Sales Management Effectiveness Article](#) Most sales management Job Descriptions that we see focus on activities and results required, but no capabilities or competencies. Once we are clear what we want from sales management we then need to follow a process that trains, coaches and develops these critical skills. We all know that training sales people without follow up coaching is a huge waste of money, but need to recognise that the same is true of sales management. Who coaches the sales managers in your organisation?

Because if you don't, you have to accept it is happening badly, if at all and that this has disastrous consequences for your business. See the article for more information on the importance of coaching in sales operations. [Why So Many Sales People Fail Article](#)

Problem 3: Changing customer behaviour and changing world economy

A significant amount of sales training methodology was developed through the period 1960 – 1985. These were relative boom times for the western economies and therefore allowed the time, space and budget to investigate and research sales techniques. The fast changing nature of the world of business has rendered much of these practices obsolete and quite often dangerous. Many of the old 'hard sell' closing type courses and methods have been replaced with more professional practices. The bulk of business to business training programs and methods however, have not really evolved at all.

If one considers that the buyers' behaviour has changed beyond recognition in the last 30 years, (the internet, the ability to research products and suppliers etc.), one has to question sales methodologies which have not. Buyers typically engage with suppliers much later in the sales process and the traditional sales role of showing how your product / service meets an established need is much less critical. The customer has already matched need to a short list of suppliers.

The other major change in our world in the last few years has been a massive economic re-alignment. It is not recession in the normal way that we understand it, because recession implies a sharp dip followed by a recovery. The GFC has left organisations



with a focus on cost reduction and close budget management that is here to stay. In a flat economy, sales forces need to focus on the techniques that work with a market share strategy (taking business from the competition) rather than a growth strategy (the market is growing and therefore we will take a percentage of that growth.) See our article for more information [The Challenge for Sales in a Slow Economy - Are you Fit Enough to Survive?](#)

The Solution: Use sales diagnostic tools to work out what skills you really need

We see a major change in the sales cycle as a result of buyers being more educated and engaging later.



The customer no longer uses salespeople to educate them about products and services – they do this themselves. This means that the customer is no longer asking 'why this product?', but 'why you as opposed to the others I am considering?'

Salespeople have to be able to strongly articulate their company's value proposition versus the competition. How well do you train the value proposition? How well do you provide your teams with competitive data, information and their latest tactics? How happy are you that your sales teams can talk knowledgeably about their market and the key players in it?

Not only do sales people need different skills in this economy, they need different attitudes. We ask sales people to be consultative and be trusted advisors, but with no real guidance on what this means in terms of attitude and behaviour. To be seen as equal by our customers we have to behave this way and training is needed to do this. But this is a modern training need and is not addressed by 'old' sales methodologies.

The recent publication, *The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation*, by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, has a clear message on this subject. The book and the points we have made are general observations from recent experience. As ever, the correct way to go is to find out what the right 'new' skills are in your market and company, by analysing what the sale looks like today and which skills will work.

The other classic sales training mistakes

Below is a brief list of the main reasons why the transfer from classroom to workplace of much sales training is so poor, even if you do get the content right.

- **No management involvement** – line managers must attend training to know what their people are being asked to do. If they don't they will not be able to help their people and the worst even dismiss the value of the training because they are threatened by it. Senior management need to know what standards their sales force are working to and must reinforce it.
- **No measurement** – if there is no system in place to measure change in practice and improvement in skills, then the sales people revert back to old practices very quickly. Most organisations don't really understand how to measure sales effectiveness and how good (or bad) their sales people are.
- **Bad training** – sales training (like all good training), should allow people to prove to themselves that they can now do something better than before. Much training in sales is slides and story-telling – ego driven trainer behaviours rather than allowing people to practice and improve.
- **Just too much** – many sales training programs have too much content and not enough practice. This is made worse by generic content, where things that may actually be useful are lost in the myriad of slides, models and tips. Good training in sales focuses on improving a few critical things only and is structured accordingly. I challenge anyone to remember more than 20% of what is covered in a 3 day course, let alone try and implement it. Once described by a confused trainee as 'trying to drink from a fire hose.'
- **No follow up** – we know that the training course itself only exposes people to best practice, it does not improve their effectiveness. This happens through regular and high quality coaching. If coaching does not happen, most of the investment is wasted and people revert quickly to old habits.



Summary

The issues arise mainly because the maturity in buying sales training is low, compared to other buying processes. This is because many people buy sales training based on past experience and better known courses. Sales training is bought infrequently and as a result the rigour does not always exist to thoroughly evaluate.

So if you are told;

'Our standard courses will meet your need'

Or 'our methodology will improve your sales'

Or 'our course will make your people effective'

Then question the validity of such catch-all statements. And if the training;

- *Has less than 40% practice*
- *Is content and powerpoint heavy*
- *Has out-dated sales techniques*
- *Has not been updated since the world economy has changed*
- *Doesn't have sales managers role at its core*
- *Is not customised*
- *Doesn't have measurable outputs*
- *Doesn't have clear workplace coaching support*

Then we must accept the figure at the beginning of this article will probably apply – 86% of the training will have no impact and more crucially, no ROI for your business.