

# Making Sales Training Work

So everything isn't going just right. There are few things that need to be improved. Sales. Gross margins. New business. Product knowledge. Time to do some training, right?

Maybe. Or maybe not. The Progressive MRO Distributor sales training survey indicated that in distribution sales training happens. But that may be about all you can say about it. Based on the results of the survey, it appears that sales training isn't generally managed, measured, or particularly well fitted to today's market. It was training, but not necessarily useful.

Before launching into a sales training program, it might be profitable to stop and consider some simple questions. Questions like:

- Why am I doing this?
- Is it really a training issue?
- If I do it, what is the best way to deliver it?
- How am I going to measure the results of the training in a meaningful fashion?
- How am I going to reinforce it until it becomes a part of the way we do things?

Good answers to all of those questions are essential to training that works. Otherwise the training could be a waste of time, effort and money — three things you'd probably rather not waste.

Following is a simple three-step model for dealing with the questions and creating training that works. In the accompanying case, Terry Meyers, a fictional sales manager works through a highly simplified example of how the model is used. But, first, the model.

1. Identify the problem and isolate the training issues.

2. Create and deliver the training.
3. Determine how you are going to measure the results and reinforce the new skills.

## 1. Identify and Isolate

The first step is the most critical. It's also the trickiest. What kept you awake last night was probably not the problem, but a painful symptom of the problem. A proper statement of the problem itself will indicate a solution; a statement of the symptom will just produce more heartburn.

A simple way to get beyond the symptoms to the problem is to simply ask why until the answer is "that's just the way it is." For instance, worry about a flat sales line doesn't help you very much. The question is "why is it flat." The salespeople aren't making their numbers. *Why aren't they making their numbers?* Because they are not spending their time with the right customers. Why aren't they spending their time with the right customers. Choose one: because they are practicing defensive selling and babysitting customers, because they don't know who the right customers are, because they don't know how to deal with new customers, because life is much easier taking orders than selling.

Notice that for each of these answers we need to ask "why" one more time, but we're far enough along to see that of all the reasons given, only one of the above is a real training issue: they don't know how to deal with new customers.

## 2. Create and Deliver

Once you've isolated the training issues, determine your content and your delivery system. Too often, our kneejerk reaction is to find a package that looks like it

might be useful and feed it to the troops. You're training will be more effective if you consider all the alternatives. Ask yourself:

Do I have someone on staff (including myself) that does all or part of the skills I'm trying to train really well?

Is this something one or more of my manufacturers could help me with?

What is available through my association or other vendors.

If you choose to buy something from your association or someone else, take the time to review it carefully and tailor it to your particular needs. Few generic programs will fit your needs exactly.

Keep this in mind: mediocre training on the right subject, properly reinforced is more effective than great training on the wrong subject or not reinforced.

### **3. Measure and Reinforce**

Before beginning the training, determine how you are going to measure the results and how you will continue to reinforce the skills you are training. The measurement should be specific to the skills. For instance, if you have a manufacturer's rep train your sales people to do a demo on a new product, the first measure is whether they can do it properly at the end of the training.

However, you may want to add an additional short term measure and a long term measure. The short term measure is the number of demos performed; the long term one is the sales of that product. Keep in mind that the only specific measure of the training is the skill itself — whether the salesman can properly perform the demo. The other measures not only include the skills but the salespersons priorities.

Reinforcement simply means maintaining a focus on the skills until they

become a part of the way things are done. In the example above, you could reinforce the product training by having reports on the demos at the weekly sales meeting or by staging a sales contest on that product.

The important point is that if it is not measured and reinforced, it will soon cease to exist.

But there is another important point, one that should be kept in mind as you deal with three-step model. That is that the person you're training needs to see a direct connection between the training activity and his or her own success; it's not enough to simply give it to them.

In a recent focus group a distributor CEO lamented that the company had a detailed training matrix, wonderful training materials, and a commitment to training, but "I still have to beat the employees into completing the training." When asked what was in it for the employees, the CEO replied that it made them better in their jobs. A better answer would have been that it made them more successful in terms of their own objectives; that's what the employees — salespeople, operations people, or management — need to believe before they will take any of your training seriously.

### **The Case of the Recalcitrant Sales Force**

Terry Meyers sat staring at the monthly sales report. He knew from the totals that sales were essentially flat. He also knew that for the most part it was SOSSUF — the same old stuff to the same old folks.

It was irritating. He had worked with each of the seven salespeople to identify a dozen target customers in his or her territory. He had explained how the company needed to expand its customer base. He had given them a real good pep

talk at the last monthly sales meeting. But still, it was SOSSUF.

For the most part there was little or no prospecting. Very few orders from new accounts. Nothing encouraging from the target customers.

Except for Kerry. Kerry was a bright spot. She was young and new, and she seemed to enjoy the challenge of new business. She had essentially carved a territory out of an area that had been underserved for years. But except for her, Terry's sales force was babysitting the customers who knew and loved them.

That was bad enough. But what was worse was that he had committed to Fred Fletcher, the CEO, that the sales force would substantially expand the customer base this year. When Terry was hired as sales manager eighteen months ago, Fred had emphasized that he was concerned that they kept living off of the same customers. He felt that this made them vulnerable in an increasingly competitive market. Fred was right. If they were going to grow, they needed new business. And if they were going to get new business, his people were going to have to quit babysitting customers and get outside of their comfort zones.

Terry put down the sales report and picked up a pad. The sales report was history, and he needed to deal with the future. Now, he wondered, why aren't they capturing new business. He wrote two lines on the pad: Don't want to. Don't know how.

Both those things were true. It was much easier to make a sale to a customer you already had — if you could call it selling. More like very expensive order taking. But, as he sat there chewing the tip of his pencil, Terry could understand why they would do it. Taking an order for \$1,000 from one of their favorite customers

earned them exactly the same commission as cracking a new account and getting a \$1,000 order. They weren't getting paid for the extra work.

That was one reason they didn't want to. And he could talk or train or threaten until Hell froze over and unless they thought they were getting paid for the extra work, they still wouldn't attack new business. Terry made a note to discuss a change in the sales compensation program with Fred. He could increase the commission on new business and balance it with a decrease in SOSSOF business. That would get their attention.

Now, what else? He had had a meeting with Jerry last week and when he asked Jerry why he didn't seem to be prospecting, Jerry said he didn't have time. That day he had been following up on a late order that Klellen Industries was yelling about. Jerry was right. The salespeople were doing a lot of fire fighting. He wrote a note to talk with the inside and outside salespeople to see what they could do about improving the system for dealing with brush fires.

Then Terry looked at the note at the top of the page that said, "Don't know how?" Just what was it they needed to know to be more comfortable and more effective in capturing new business. He started making a list: prospecting (where, how to qualify), territory management (make sure they spend the right amount of time with the right kinds of customers), sales planning (what's the plan for capturing the customer). Terry stopped and looked at the list. There were probably more things that he could add, but if he could get them to prospect, to properly allocate their time, and to think through the sale, he would be taking a giant step forward.

He tore the top sheet from his pad and started a fresh page. He drew two lines down the page, creating three columns. He

labeled the three columns “skill,” “delivery,” and “measurement.”

Then he copied the training subjects into the first column.

The first skill was “finding prospects.” Immediately under it was “qualifying prospects.” Okay, the next question was how are we going to train them to do that. Terry started rummaging through his bottom drawer to find the catalog of training videos he received a while back. Then he stopped; he already had somebody who obviously knew how to find and qualify prospects. That’s how Kerry had built her territory. He wrote Kerry’s name under “delivery”; she could do a couple of one-hour sessions on how she did it. He made a note to discuss how she would present it so that the older salespeople wouldn’t ignore it. The obvious answer was to position it as a money-making tool for the salespeople.

Now, how to tell whether it worked or not. One way would be to check the call reports. That would tell whether the guys were calling on prospects or not, but it wouldn’t tell whether they were properly qualifying them. He thought about measuring conversions — how many prospects became customers. Terry decided he needed to do that anyway, but it wasn’t a very good measurement of the training. He put a question mark under the measurement column for now.

The next item he put in the skills column was “Territory Planning.” That would take some research. Maybe the association had something or could refer him to someone. But he know what the measurement would be: time spent with customers with a great potential. He could chart the calls to the target customers from the call reports. He could also chart the percentage of sales that came from that group.

Sales planning was next. Terry decided he could do that. When he was a field salesman, his manager had demanded detailed sales plans for the target accounts. Terry knew that the plans helped. The measurement would be easy. He would just ask to see the sales plans for each of the target accounts. That would tell him if they could do a plan; the call reports and weekly meetings would tell him if they were following it.

Then he had one more idea. Daptec had just come out with a new product, one that had some serious advantages over the competition. He would get Larry Schwartz, the Daptec rep, to do a session on product demos with the new product. That would give the guys something to talk about to new customers. The measurement would be simple; each of the salespeople could do the demo for the group and they could critique each other. Then, just to make it a little more interesting, Terry decided to put a bounty on the demos, maybe dinner for two for anybody who does five.

Terry looked at the list. Two things left to do. One is to find a good Territory Management program or somebody to come in and teach it. The other is to come up with a measurement for the prospect qualification training.

After all, if you don’t measure it, it probably won’t happen.

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