

» GETTING A RETURN ON SALES TRAINING INVESTMENT

Organizations make tremendous investments in training each year. They buy or create programs and tools that teach sales skills, product knowledge, sales process, customer acumen, technology tools, and other topics perceived as vital to generating sales success. Not only is there a hard dollar expenditure associated with the training but a soft dollar cost associated with time out of the field. With such a huge investment, why is it so many sales executives continue to spend money but are disappointed with the outcomes?

The low return is based on the erroneous assumption salespeople are motivated and able to mesh training content into daily activities. What typically happens is salespeople struggle to see the material's applicability to their job and avoid taking the time to figure out how it might increase production. This is accentuated for a number of reasons. Training programs tend to emphasize a single skill or piece of knowledge, while not focusing on its daily use in the field. Exercises, role-plays, or small group discussions can be interesting, fun, and provide an opportunity to practice a concept, but usually fall short of simulating the "real world". This minimizes the impact of the learning experience and the probability of use in the field. Salespeople have little patience for anything that is not seen as directly applicable to their job.

The obvious solution is to have those providing the training create and deliver a better learning experience. Those designing and conducting the learning must have the knowledge and ability to customize the training to real work situations and challenge the current actions and thinking of salespeople. What highlights the problem is the significant limitations of a group learning experience. Seminar settings at best lay the groundwork for new skills. The real learning must happen in the field. This forces the solution for application to reside with sales management.

All managers want salespeople to take responsibility and initiative to transfer the learning to his or her daily activities. This is not a reality. What makes matters worse is the organizational norm of providing regular training and expecting no change. Salespeople know this. Managers tend to be too busy, complacent, or lack motivation to break the pattern. Getting a return on sales training requires managers to break the paradigm and hold salespeople accountable for establishing new behaviors. This mandates managers first learn and know the content of the program their people attend. They must prepare themselves to turn the learning into new actions that generate results. This task is not easy and takes commitment and time. Today's managers must understand that without intense coaching nothing changes.

Sales management must recognize a seminar or program is simply the beginning of the learning experience. Managers must be the integrators, translators, and dot connectors. They must:

- Determine how the learning applies to each salesperson and how it could impact that individual's short and long term performance.
- Communicate clearly to every individual how he/she is to integrate the learning on the job. Explain the potential impact to sales productivity expectations:
 - More effective with all sales activities
 - More efficient use of selling time
 - More sales

- Determine and implement the means to gather accurate performance data on an individual's proficiency in applying new knowledge or skills.
- Provide regular and frequent feedback on progress.
- Give permission to make mistakes as the new behaviors are pursued.

Progress occurs when the above are done one-on-one and customized to each individual. In today's "fast paced get results now" society to expect a salesperson to take time to reflect, practice, and experiment on the job without involvement of management is fantasy. Only a committed sales manager focused on developing his/her people to another level of performance can meet the challenge and really generate a significant return on a sales training investment.