



Breaking The Bank

Sales training skills that stick

Why are sales training programs so often unsuccessful? Financial services companies spend tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars to put their entire sales force through the latest, hottest training program touted to increase its numbers. However, just as with all the previous sales training efforts, only a small percentage of participants embrace the new skills taught. For everyone else, the status quo reins, and the bottom line doesn't move one bit. What went wrong, and how can it be done right?

Five Steps To Breakthrough Sales Training

"The standard approach to sales training is to spray it on and then pray it sticks," says Dean Minuto, president of Teligent (www.ready2perform.com), a performance coach who focuses on the mortgage industry and has trained more than 4,500 loan officers. "It may stick for a week or a month, but not for the long term."

The simple truth is that "spray-on" sales training does not work because trainees are not ready to be trained. While a

By Chuck Mache

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few highly motivated individuals may enthusiastically embrace the new information that will get them to the next level of success, the majority are stuck in their comfort zones. They get by with minimal effort, totally unmotivated to move to the next level.

Here is a five-step model that moves people through uncomfortable territory into breakthrough achievement for peak performance:

Step 1: Conduct sales force assessment.

Getting to the next level in selling requires a careful evaluation of the salesperson's true intentions. They cannot improve unless they are absolutely honest about who they are, how good they are and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Only then can behavior be modified. There are only four types of salespeople and sales training success is highly dependent on the makeup of the sales team. The four types are:

- Performers are the natural-born top producers. They have big egos and are emotional, intuitive, passionate, competitive, extroverted and impatient. Performers don't learn in training sessions, they learn by doing.
- Professionals are also top producers, but they are even-tempered, analytical, logical and quietly competitive. They are internally passionate and patient and have a very controlled ego. They thrive in the classroom setting.
- Caretakers are those who are stuck in a comfort zone. They are passive-aggressive, don't like change and don't like to attempt anything difficult. Although they show signs of brilliance, they are inconsistent or mediocre producers. The good news is that they are sleeping Performers or Professionals, depending on their personalities.
- Searchers get into sales because they perceive it to be easy, but then they don't do what it takes to be successful because it is too painful for them. Victims of poor hiring decisions, they soon realize they really dislike sales. They are fearful, knowing they don't belong, but they are too afraid of change to even look for a more suitable job. Searchers do not belong in sales positions.

These marked differences between individuals explain why sales training can never be a one-size-fits-all proposition. Not all reps have the same intentions or motivations and therefore are not equally prepared for training. That's why standard training programs work for only a small minority, while leaving the majority of the audience unmoved.

In hiring, the ideal is, of course, to find as many Performers and Professionals as possible and keep Caretakers and Searchers out of the sales department. However, even with the best recruiting methods, it's impossible to be perfect.

There is hope for a current sales force made up of all four types. By following the next four steps of the Breakthrough Model, it is possible to not only move Performers and Professionals to even higher levels of success, but also to convert those honest and willing Caretakers into the Performers or Professionals they have the potential to become. Searchers should not be in sales and need assistance with finding new careers.

Once all reps have gained a clear understanding of the four different kinds of salespeople, they may or may not openly admit in which category they belong, but that is not the point. It is meant to be an eye-opening exercise to give both rep and manager a basis for future discussion in a one-on-one meeting.

Even in a private session, reaching agreement can be challenging, but one thing is certain: productivity never lies. If someone is in the top tier or is showing consistent upward sales, he or she is most likely a Performer or a Professional. If not, the rep belongs in one of the other two categories.

The remaining steps of the breakthrough model focus on developing customized training based on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the individual and then getting personal commitments to change from all those willing to do so.

Step 2: Identify what makes a superstar salesperson.

The question to ask is, who are the company's very best salespeople, and what are they doing that makes them the best?

“Most organizations don’t have a sales process,” says Minuto. “They’re winging it and have no idea what their top people do that makes them successful. After all, why spend time on the top producers since they are already doing well? That attitude is a huge mistake. Unless you have a baseline of what actually constitutes excellent performance, how can you know what to strive for? The idea is to identify the best salespeople’s best practices and then model them for everyone else.”

Best practices are company-specific and may include items such as solid work ethic, strong product knowledge, superb presentation skills, ability to build relationships and passion.

“There’s a vast difference in the way exceptional loan officers and mediocre loan officers handle customer questions,” says Minuto. “For example, exceptional reps take control of the conversation by asking questions that take customers directly into the loan application. In addition,” Minuto recommends that it is necessary to validate those best practices by explaining why they work. In other words, why do customers say, “yes” to the top performers?

Create a template of successful actions for every step of the sales process, from pre-qualification to getting a commitment to have the property appraised or to send in documents. Further, best practices extend to processes such as time management, file organization and a foolproof follow-up system.

“Most companies’ sales training focuses on product knowledge,” says Minuto. “It ignores other key components such as the ability to develop relationships not only with customers, but with referral sources; processes such as desk management and goal setting; and of course motivation, which amplifies all the other components of success.”

Step 3: Evaluate each salesperson’s skills and behaviors against the best practices that have been identified. Begin by having the sales reps rank themselves and each other on a scale of one to five (from weak to strong) on performance according to the best practices established in Step 2. Then, have their manager rank each one in the same manner. Finally, synthesize the scores and come to an agreement on each rep’s ranking in each category.

Step 4: Customize the path to breakthrough achievement. Now that every rep’s strengths and weaknesses have been identified and rated according to the ideal, it becomes possible to customize a path to breakthrough for each individual. Train individuals in the areas in which they are weak, and leverage their strengths to help in the effort. Schedule ongoing training sessions that range from 15 minutes to one hour each, depending on topic and individual needs. Make sure ongoing and consistent weekly or monthly follow-up takes place. It is critical for successful transformation.

“In order to customize a training program, you need a plan and a roadmap to get there,” says Mark Vicini, No. 1 loan officer with Benchmark Lending Group. “Coming into a meeting with ‘rah-rah-rah, knock ‘em dead!’ is not going to push people out of their comfort zone. They have to be put in breakthrough mode. In addition, don’t expect to take Caretakers to Performers in a single meeting. People have to be willing to get better, or you can’t help them. Success comes from targeting pinpointed individual areas that need improvement and continuing to work on it.”

TAKE

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The idea is to identify the best of the best and then model them for everyone else.

Step 5: Get a commitment to change.

Having now gone through the first four steps and prior to launching the actual training sessions, make sure that each rep about to be trained has made an honest commitment to improve. It's difficult to get everyone on board, but if the first four steps are done correctly the percentage of committed salespeople skyrockets. Unless they are motivated to improve performance, no amount of training will succeed. Some people are simply not interested in changing, but these first four steps can break even the hard cases.

When motivation and commitment are strong, a Caretaker can become a Performer or a Professional depending on his or her personality.

"Change has always been uncomfortable for me, but being uncomfortable is what helps you break through to the next level," says Vicini. He started as rookie of the year in 2003 and became loan officer of the year in 2004 and again in 2005.

So how does a Performer guard against the emotional highs and lows and break through to greater heights? One way is by helping others.

"I can't elevate my game unless I'm helping a new player," says Vicini. "We have a mentoring program where we help new salespeople break through. It gets me out of myself and keeps me in the selling zone."

Invest in Success

Pure and simple, traditional sales training programs fail because most participants don't embrace them. They don't embrace them because they have not been trained to be trained. Lacking any motivation to improve, they only go through the motions of the program because they have been told to do so.

Whether training is conducted by the marketing manager or vice president of sales in a smaller company, by an internal training department or outsourced to a national training provider, make sure the dots are connected through the five steps of the Breakthrough Model. Don't waste money on training until the sales force is prepared to train. And remember, there are only four kinds of sales people. Use this classification as the basis for understanding the personalities and training needs of the sales force.



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