

DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL SALES FORCE

FEW sales representatives arrive at companies with their sales skills fully developed. Most are “works in progress.” To maximize the competitive edge over other companies in one’s industry, a company must grow its sales representatives faster than the competition does. Growing sales representatives means much more than sending them to motivational seminars or inspiring them with contests and perks.

Developing sales representatives requires two things. First, sales managers need to know the key skills and competencies that are necessary for sales success in their business. Second, they need to know the strengths and weaknesses of each of



their sales representatives. Without this information, training and development activities waste time and money.

Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses

Sales managers usually find it easy to identify and prioritize the critical and important success factors for the job. Gaining awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each sales representative is more difficult. There are a number of ways to assess strengths and weaknesses. These include work performance results, systematic observations, and standardized testing. Systematic observations can be performed with PSP’s 360° surveys, which enable a sales manager to obtain ratings from people who “surround” the sales representative, especially customers, peers and direct reports. Many sales organizations also use PSP’s standardized testing because of the advantages of speed, objectivity and uniform benchmarking for all participants.

Once strengths and weaknesses have been assessed for each individual, they can be compared to the prioritized success factors that sales managers have developed. This comparison, or gap analysis, immediately highlights training needs for each sales

representative. By individualizing training needs, a company can budget training dollars and training time wisely.

Follow-Through on Training Plans

The gap analysis leads directly into formal training plans. Historically, the biggest problem with training plans has been follow-through. While many sales representatives are enthusiastic about training at the outset, sales quotas, life events and busy schedules often take over, and training falls by the wayside.

At PSP, we have learned several ways to increase the chances for follow-through on individualized training plans for sales representatives. First, we have discovered that customizing training plans according to an individual’s preferred learning format can increase follow-through. Some individuals prefer to go to seminars, others to read books. Some like listening to audiotapes in the car and others prefer to watch videotapes at home. Recently, some have expressed a preference for interactive CD-ROMs or e-learning courses online.

PSP also has been able to increase compliance with training plans by providing a menu of training activities in each competency area so that a sales representative can choose among a number of options. Since the menu contains multiple resources on each topic, individuals can return to the menu and select additional resources and training suggestions until they have mastered that particular competency.

The Value of Coaching

Finally, we have learned that the use of coaching can substantially improve training plan follow-through. A monthly meeting with a coach introduces an element of accountability in an otherwise voluntary training plan. Meetings with coaches also have the advantage of keeping the training process moving along without interruption when the natural human tendency would be to let the training program lapse after a three- to six-month tryout.

We have found no shortcut to developing a winning sales force. Most development programs seem to require six to eighteen months, regardless of industry. Carving out an average of two hours per week for training activities seems to be a reasonable expectation for most sales organizations. The results of training conducted in this fashion are essential in building competitive advantage.