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Product Sales Training: Overcoming Death by PowerPoint

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The consultative sales approach requires sales representatives to know products inside and out. So why do many organizations relegate product training to sleep-inducing manuals and online presentations?

A young woman sat down next to me on a flight to the East Coast last year. Soon after the plane took off, she brought out a large binder. I glanced over and noticed it was a training manual for an insomnia drug. That caught my interest, since my specialty is training design, including sales training for the pharmaceutical industry. So I struck up a conversation and learned that she was a sales rep on her way to a new-hire training session and this huge binder was her prework assignment.

After our brief discussion, she began to read her binder. Within two minutes, the young women fell fast asleep. When she awoke, I couldn't resist saying, "Your training manual is a better cure for insomnia than the drug it describes!"

While some salespeople attribute their success to relationship building and "schmoozing" ability, that strategy is no longer enough for non-commodity sales. The consultative sales approach requires sales representatives to know their products and services inside and out, especially with complex products. So why do many organizations relegate product training to death by PowerPoint or sleep-inducing manuals and online presentations?

Product Knowledge Training Study
My colleagues and I recently completed a study of the challenges organizations face in product knowledge training and what approaches they are taking to meet those challenges. We interviewed leaders of sales training from companies in automotive, consumer products, insurance, pharmaceutical, technology and other industries.

The challenges we found boil down to:

1. **Information overload:** The need for reps to know a large amount of changing product information.
2. **Sales effectiveness:** The need for reps to sell effectively and consultatively in increasingly complex and competitive markets.
3. **Time crunch:** The need to meet the two above challenges in shorter amounts of time.

The solutions include:

1. **Case-based learning:** Create a systematic set of c-based learning experiences that integrate selling skills and product knowledge.
2. **Point-of-need information:** Provide up-to-date product knowledge at at the point of need, during or before a sales interaction.
3. **Knowledge sharing:** Provide methods for sharing knowledge and best practices among sales reps.

Information Overload
Salespeople are goal-oriented. Product knowledge is not intrinsically interesting to them unless they see how it will help them sell.

However, in many organizations, reps get an information dump with little or no regard for how that information can be used in selling situations. If you ask product managers, they will typically say, “Reps need to know everything about this product. The more they know, the better.” If you ask sales reps, they will say, “Give me the information I need to make a sale. No more, no less.”

There is a limit to how much information people can absorb, especially when it is not in the context of sales situations. When product information is presented out of context (or with token context), sales reps are left to figure out how to use that information on their own in front of customers. This trial-and-error process takes time and leads to diminished sales, frustrated reps and sometimes unsatisfied customers.

Sales Effectiveness
As more companies are moving toward a consultative, customer-focused sales approach, it is becoming more important for sales reps to understand their products thoroughly. They need to be able to flexibly engage in sales conversations with customers. A scripted or memorized presentation no longer cuts it.

Sales reps need to get an understanding of their customer’s needs and match the precise piece of information about their product to each specific need. These days, sales reps are called upon to become trusted advisers and consultants to their customers and to give them targeted useful information.

Time Crunch
Many organizations are facing a dilemma. They expect their sales reps to be more consultative, which takes more product knowledge and skills, but they are also under pressure to cut training costs, reduce time out of the field and get new reps up to speed faster. Some organizations say it takes a minimum of six months to a year, or longer, to become fully proficient in selling complex products and services. They are not talking about the length of training. It is the time that it takes after training to reach an acceptable level of revenue generation.

One large insurance company reduced costs by significantly cutting the time for new-agent training. That seemed like a good thing, except that it soon became clear that, following training, most new agents were not being effective in bringing in new business. Many left in frustration and discouragement, and those who succeeded took a long time to become proficient.

It turned out that the training cost savings were overwhelmed by greater costs in lost people investments and lost sales. When the company recognized the mistake, the learning leader I interviewed was asked to revamp the new-agent training. She increased the training time, changed the way training was done and accelerated the speed to proficiency. That investment in training led to results in the field.

Case-Based Learning
How can sales organizations shift from death by PowerPoint to targeted product training that enables reps to flexibly and consultatively use product knowledge in conversation with customers? How can they accelerate the speed to proficiency? The first step in designing training that reduces the time to proficiency is to define proficiency. The best way to do that is to analyze what the most successful reps do and the critical thought processes they use in sales situations.

For example, top reps engage customers in genuine conversations about their needs and how their needs can be met. When we dig deeper into the thought processes and knowledge organization of these reps using knowledge engineering techniques, we find that they rapidly formulate a set of mental judgments and goals at each stage of the customer conversation. They automatically and unconsciously consider things like the current state of the customer, what additional customer information they need, where they want the conversation to go next and what product knowledge is best to bring out given their understanding of the customer at each moment. It is the flexible and skillful linking of product knowledge to customer needs that distinguishes the top salespeople from the rest.

The problem is that that this type of sales expertise can take years to develop. How can training accelerate that process? The answer is to tie product knowledge to sales cases or scenarios. Start with a brief introduction and then use sales scenarios and situations as the organizer for product knowledge training.

As the reps work through a simulated scenario either in a workshop or through e-learning, they encounter choice points. At these teachable moments, reps look up product knowledge that is relevant at that point in the sales process. When using this learning method, salespeople are motivated to learn because they see how sales info is tied to their sales goals, remember the product information because they use it right away and apply it in real sales situations because it is linked to the way it is used on the job.

Development of this type of training takes collaboration between trainers, product managers and top sales reps. The best way to design training that works is to:

- Put the top sales reps, product managers and training developers into the same room to work out the training content together.
- Use a systematic process of identifying and categorizing the types of sales situations that are encountered.
- Work through prototypical sales situations together to uncover how the sales reps think about it and identify what product knowledge is needed at each point in the sales call.
- Identify what product info is not needed. That nice-to-know information can go into a reference guide.
- Uncover the implicit thought processes that top reps use to make sales, make them explicit and incorporate them into training.
- Develop a series of scenarios that set up teachable moments that require reps to access and apply the relevant product knowledge in context.

A large electronics company we interviewed used this method successfully to train reps to sell to engineers in a consultative way. They created workshops in which groups of sales reps worked through an increasingly challenging series of sales situations. As they got to specific choice points in the sales process, they would stop and, using a set of questions developed by analyzing the implicit thought process of their top reps, they consulted sales literature and discussed the best way to approach each customer query.

Product managers were asked questions at those teachable moments and shared the key product information with reps that were eager to hear it because they needed it to solve their sales scenarios. Both reps and product managers thought this approach was better than the PowerPoint lectures they used in the past, and more importantly, it led to better sales results in the field.

Point-of-Need Information

While well-designed training can jump-start the process of learning and accelerate the time to proficiency, no training program can do it all alone. Training events must be followed by ongoing learning, coaching, performance support tools and knowledge-sharing communities. In most cases, there is more product information available than is possible to remember. Many organizations we interviewed had some method of providing product information to reps for use in the field, ranging from producing paper manuals and catalogs to storing info on a Web site or intranet to product knowledge repositories.

Even when the information is available, it often is not easy to find. One solution is to make product knowledge available just in time as part of the sales-call planning process. Reps are provided with an online knowledge base (sometimes linked to the customer relationship management database) of the key information they can easily access at the point of need.

Knowledge Sharing

Most reps are looking for ways to learn from each other. One of the best ways to learn is through sharing stories of successes and failures. However, many factors get in the way of sharing, such as competitiveness, lack of incentive, lack of opportunities and lack of information-sharing venues and tools. For example, when they are brought into a meeting, many reps prefer more time to share best practices with each other and less time sitting in product presentations.

One of the most difficult challenges is keeping information up-to-date with changing product and marketing information. Many organizations have difficulty keeping information current mainly due to lack of resources. Some mention the idea of distributing responsibility for updating, such as requiring everyone involved to use social media, such as wikis. However, there are concerns about the quality and accuracy of information, and in the health care field, there are regulatory concerns.

Most of the organizations studied are just beginning to experiment with social media for knowledge-sharing forums, wikis and other Web 2.0 tools. They see the potential of these knowledge-sharing tools but are still figuring out how to make them work effectively in their organizations.

By incorporating some of these best practices, case-based learning, point-of-need content and knowledge sharing, sales organizations can make product training relevant, useful and motivating. It will be a way to achieve results, not the world's most effective sleeping pill.

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