

Source: GallupJournal.com

Location: <http://www.gallupjournal.com/CA/sm/20020114.asp>

Sales Management

IS SALES TRAINING A WASTE?

Why training programs may not affect outcomes

[BY BENSON SMITH AND TONY RUTIGLIANO]

After a recent presentation to sales professionals, a national sales trainer for a very large organization questioned us about our comments on sales training. "I was surprised that you appear so negative on training," he said, "and I'm puzzled about your attitude. What gives?"

His comment and question touched on a controversial point. After all, how can training be bad? Of course, the real question is not whether training is bad or good, but whether it is *effective*. Do salespeople get better at selling because of additional training? Do companies get their money's worth when they invest in training programs? In many instances where we have observed training efforts, the results have been disappointing.

When we say "results," we're talking about improved performance rather than verbal endorsements from those who have been trained. It's not unusual to have people leave a training program and express very positive reactions to the session. But will their performance get any better as result?

Up-close observations

In many occupations, training is an essential ingredient. You wouldn't want to have your house designed by an "intuitive" architect who has no training. Nor would you entrust your medical care to a "natural-born" surgeon with a flair for operating, but no medical schooling. We take assurance in well-trained pilots, carpenters, computer specialists, accountants, and dozens of other occupations. Shouldn't training be just as important for sales professionals? Well, according to our research, "it ain't necessarily so."

A few years ago we observed a direct sales organization. Every newly hired salesperson attended an extensive training program to learn about the company's products. These new hires were also put through a course on how to sell. The course focused on crucial parts of the sales presentation, especially a section that involved asking the prospect some very pointed questions. These questions essentially asked prospective customers if they would make a decision one way or the other at the conclusion of the presentation. During the training program, the sales representatives rehearsed this section again and again until they knew it word for word.

Yet once they were out on sales calls, almost eight out of 10 representatives were unable to ask these questions in front of a real, live customer. Yes, the training was effective for 20 percent of the sales force, but for the remaining 80 percent, it was a waste of time, energy, and money. Teaching people how to sell only seems effective when people have the talent to sell in the first place.

What about advanced training for more experienced sales forces? Have we seen better results in those cases? Not much!

From our vantage point, we've observed a great many training programs as they were instituted in a number of different companies. These training programs tended to focus on selling skills, such as probing, prospecting, or closing. In some instances the programs presented a completely new approach to selling, such as consultative selling, or some other fad-of-the-month program.

From our observations, we've concluded that the individuals who benefit most from training are those who already excel at their job. As performance levels rise, so do the benefits we see from training. And as performance levels go down, the positive impact of training diminishes.

When we have evaluated post-training productivity, we find that half of the people who were trained -- the bottom half -- showed no performance improvement. The money spent to train low-end performers was completely wasted. Yet many companies pour a majority of their limited resources into training the poorest

performers. The initial response to these programs may be quite enthusiastic, and often times there is a spike in improvement. But this spike is usually short-lived, and before long, old performance patterns re-establish themselves.

Perhaps you may think these examples are just from poorly designed training programs. Some of them probably are. However, we have seen the same pattern over and over. The better the salesperson performs, the more likely he or she is to benefit from training. The worse he or she performs, the lower the benefit is from training.

Explanation

Why is this true? Our observation is that training programs often try to teach the wrong things, or they try to teach the right things to the wrong people.

In many cases, companies design training programs by studying what the best employees do and how they do it. Companies then build [training](#) that attempts to get everyone else to do exactly the same thing. While this seems logical, the problem is that the people at the bottom of the heap will never attain the same level of success as the best employees because they do not have the necessary talents. For salespeople in particular, success in generating sales and developing customer loyalty does not come from training them to read the right script exactly the same way on every sales call.

The best salespeople gained the most from training, because their existing and constructive patterns of dealing with customers were reinforced. They were encouraged to do more of what they already did well. But most training programs are not designed around the needs of the best performers. Best performers need individual coaching that is built around their talents and strengths. What are the talents they have to influence customers, build relationships, and solve customer problems? How can they enhance their selling style by using their talents more effectively?

On the other hand, poor performers usually don't benefit substantially from additional training. Yet in many organizations, poor performance is what qualifies a person to *receive* additional training.

Look around your own organization, and you may find that the worst speakers are the ones who have been sent to speaking classes. The worst closers in your organization have been sent to a program on closing techniques. Or more typically, everyone in the sales organization has been put through the same training program, while management assumes they will all benefit equally.

Of course, training and development are important aspects of improving job performance. We put on many training and development programs each year ourselves. If you are the manager in charge of this important function in your organization, here are some questions you should ask yourself:

1. Are you spending more to train your best people, or do you train everybody equally?
2. Are you reinforcing good performance with training, or using training to prop up poor performers?
3. Are you tracking the results of your training efforts, or are you satisfied as long as people tell you how good it was and how much they liked it?
4. Are you building on an individual's strengths, or are you training to create cookie-cutter images of what you think successful performance looks like?

The answers to these questions can help you assess how much your training efforts will contribute to the bottom line. When approached correctly, training should be an investment that produces measurable and tangible results, not simply an expense that makes people feel good for a while.

We hope this clarifies comments we have made about training. We enjoy it when our audience members and readers [contact us](#), and we look forward to answering your questions in future columns.

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Benson Smith and Tony Rutigliano will present their insights on building a world-class sales organization in cities across the United States in 2002. A limited number of seats are available for these powerful presentations. For a schedule of dates and locations, or for more information, visit the [Summit on World Class Sales](#) page at www.gallup.com, or contact [Mary Penner-Lovci@gallup.com](mailto:Mary.Penner-Lovci@gallup.com) (212-899-4773). To learn how Gallup's research-based approach can help you build a world-class sales force, e-mail benson_smith@gallup.com.

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