

SALES

# Your Sales Training Is Probably Lackluster. Here's How to Fix It

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U.S. companies spend over \$70 billion annually on training, and an average of \$1,459 per salesperson – almost 20 percent more than they spend on workers in all other functions. Yet, when it comes to equipping sales teams with relevant knowledge and skills, the ROI of sales training is disappointing. Studies indicate that participants in traditional curriculum-based training forget more than 80 percent of the information they were taught within 90 days.

As alarming as those numbers are, they shouldn't come as a surprise if you consider how sales training is usually conducted. On-boarding, for example, is usually a one-off session in which reps are expected to absorb large amounts of information in a limited amount of time. Then, further training is usually limited to new production introductions or annual "kick-off" meetings to set quotas, where reps are flown in, given information and marching orders, and "fired-up" by a motivational speaker or exercise (more hot coals, anyone?). Further, on the off-chance that training is consistent and continuous, reps aren't usually provided with coaching or given serious performance evaluations during which development (not only compensation) is discussed.

Although curriculum-based training – classroom-type courses typically focused on a selling methodology and activities like time management – has its place, it should only be treated as a foundation.

To increase retention and effectiveness, companies should offer reps additional training at times of need, provide them with access to supplemental material that reinforces what they've already been taught, and allow them opportunities to practice their skills in time frames connected to actual buying processes. They can do so by using the same technologies that are "disrupting" their customer-contact activities: videos and mobile apps that reps can view on their devices before, during, and after training initiatives.

In addition to providing reps with easier and timelier access to information, videos and apps improve comprehension when someone hears information, they remember about 10% of it three days later, but, when a picture is added, retention increases to 65%.

Here are some ways to incorporate better technology into training:

**Before.** Salespeople must learn about strategy and sales tasks at your firm, not only a generic sales methodology. They must learn how other functions affect, and are affected by, selling activities: for example, product management, marketing, pre-sale application support, and post-sale service. They don't need to know how to do those jobs. But increasingly they do need to know what those jobs are and how they affect customers.

Because of this, on-boarding should be treated as an on-going process, not a one-off event. This can be achieved through a smart combination of on-site and on-demand videos that can be used anytime and anywhere while delivering consistent messages to your reps.

Consider Salesforce Commerce Cloud. To supplement their quarterly “boot camps” for new hires, the company uses a mobile platform to give sales reps access to the most relevant content, product positioning, and messaging. As one new rep testified, the videos quickly brought her up to speed on company messaging and customer stories. As a result, she felt more connected to Sales Commerce Cloud and confident in her corporate knowledge and relevant sales tasks before her start date.

**During:** In order for reps to develop new behavioral skills, they must practice a behavior multiple times before it becomes comfortable and effective. And it has to be related to a relevant task. If salespeople are motivated by a deal, they’ll be more incentivized to learn. In other words, in order for training to be effective, you’ll need to deliver the content at a time of need.

Technology can help make this happen, allowing reps to continuously learn from mobile content that is customized to their needs. When combined with traditional training, this approach helps reps turn product, market, and selling factoids into coherent narratives and behavioral models.

For example, Pacific Life Insurance Company, which sells insurance, retirement products, and mutual funds to financial advisors via its field wholesalers, uses video coaching. This allows its wholesalers to record their practice pitches and share them with their regional sales managers (RSMs), who give feedback from their mobile devices when and where reps need it. This helps Pacific Life leverage its scarcest resource: face time with advisers.

Additionally, each wholesaler must articulate a positioning statement for a particular investment product via a five-minute video. Regional sales managers then select the best videos and use them as examples of engaging sales presentations. This helps the wholesalers refine, rather than improvise, their presentations, established best practices, and creates consistency. It also builds confidence in reps, increases their competency, and establishes continuous improvement process.

**After.** Like other professionals, salespeople improve by identifying specific areas where they must improve and then receiving clear feedback on performance. Feedback is crucial to getting people to practice the right things, eliminate bad or outdated habits, set priorities, and clarify accountabilities owned by the rep versus the manager or the firm – all keys to effective sales leadership.

Technology can help extend the reach of good sales managers. Pacific Life, for example, faces an increasingly common challenge: How can sales managers effectively coach a geographically-dispersed salesforce while minimizing time taken out of the field for training? Mobile video coaching has allowed RSMs to coach wholesalers without the need to be in the same time zone. It also enables managers to identify potential weaknesses and improve wholesalers' message delivery, rather than have them practice on advisers.

Unlike many today, we do not intend to oversell the power of technology. Selling is not reducible to a two-minute YouTube video or a 17-minute TED talk, and managers who can't or won't do coaching and performance reviews will be ineffective regardless of the technologies they employ. Since companies already spend a ton on sales training, the leverage resides in how you spend that time and money, not how much.



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