

SUCCESS IN SALES

With changing industry, old approach may not work and training is crucial

By ERINN HUTKIN Special to U-T San Diego 5:05 a.m. June 9, 2014

With his office within sight of the San Diego Chargers training facility, Jim Dunn has come to think sales isn't much different from sports.

Dunn, president of the sales training company The Whetstone Group, said members of a sales force need to get training and then work on their skills to be successful, much like pro athletes.

And in an era when the sales world is drastically different than it was a few years ago – Dunn said sales have changed more in the past five years than they have in the past 50 – training has become even more important.

Because the field has changed so quickly, Dunn said sales tactics that worked before may now be outdated. In the past, a salesperson's job was to educate a prospect about a company or product. With the Internet, clients are already armed with that knowledge. He said the job of today's sales force is to understand a customer's issues and needs.

Key guidelines

That sentiment was echoed by Andy Paul, a San Diego-based sales author, speaker and trainer.

"In the B2B space, it is estimated that the average prospect is 50 percent to 75 percent of the way through their buying process before they talk to a salesperson," he said. "This should necessarily change the way that salespeople engage with their educated and empowered prospects. But most salespeople are still selling the old-fashioned way to modern prospects."

That's where training comes in. While there are countless ways to train a staff, experts agree there's no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to sales coaching, but there are key guidelines that should be followed when educating and coaching a sales team.

To start, effective sales training requires coaching to be done on a consistent, ongoing basis.

"Too often, companies think about sales training only when they have run into a sales slump and are looking for a quick fix," said Paul. "Sales training is not a quick fix. It is about building capabilities within a sales organization, and it should be a standard part of every sales team's personnel development plan."

Three areas of training

He said businesses can't afford not to train their salespeople, and training needs to happen in three areas. The first is training to learn the basic features and benefits of the company's products and how they are used. This training "provides fresh ideas and perspectives to the customer that help them arrive at a better solution to their problems," said Paul.

The second category is strategic sales training to provide insights about how selling and buying has transformed in recent years and teaching strategies for weaving these new perspectives into sales.

The third category, Dunn said, is conventional sales training focused on specific skills such as prospecting, cold calling, phone techniques, social selling and email writing that involve role-playing and other exercises.

Reinforcing training

Dick Ruff, principal of Sales Momentum, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based sales training company, said what's done before and after training is as important as the training itself.

He said sales training must also be customized to specific challenges the company is facing. He said an instructor who runs through a PowerPoint presentation and only lectures usually isn't effective.

"You have to engage the learner via exercises and discussions," said Dunn. "Training is worth it if you do it right."

Ruff said training must also be reinforced after it occurs. He said research shows if training is not reinforced, 87 percent of skills developed from training will be lost after three months.

One reason it's up to companies to provide training, said Julie Thomas, president and CEO of San Diego's ValueSelling Associates Inc., is because most universities and colleges don't teach students how to sell, yet many graduates land sales jobs or have business development as a key responsibility.

"So if our education system isn't teaching them the key skills and processes, then the employer must," she said. "Sales is a skill and must be developed."

Specialized skills

That said, she stressed sales isn't a generic skill set. Much like a pediatrician wouldn't be expected to perform brain surgery, a sales rep calling on small businesses needs different skills than a sales executive calling on a large multinational company.

And while training can help boost performance, Paul said statistically, there's always a performance spectrum where the largest percentage of salespeople are average or below average – superstars are always going to be a small fraction of a sales team.

To combat this, he said companies must "raise the bar on average." by putting sales processes in place targeted at increasing productivity of average performers, then measuring performance in areas such as responsiveness, quick and effective follow-up, product knowledge and rapid qualification, and selling value vs. price.

Cutting bad players

"People need to be given a fair chance to succeed," said Paul. "They have to be given the right training and treated fairly when it comes to the territory and account base that they are working."

To continue the sales-sports analogy, he said he recently heard Billy Beane, general manager of the Oakland A's and creator of the "moneyball" approach to baseball team-building, speak at a conference. Beane said that one of the key things done now is proactively eliminating the bad players from the team. They cut from the bottom, Paul said, and sales teams must do the same.

On the plus side, Paul said taking time to train even the average performers can mean big returns for a business.

"Helping the average players increase productivity by 5 percent yields a big payoff for a company," he said.

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