

## **Why Most Sales Training Fails to Deliver Its Promised Results**



**Vantage Point Performance**

### **Expensive Mistakes**

Sales training is big business, as companies spend billions of dollars each year in pursuit of improved sales performance. Sales training is also a big disappointment, as most of these companies will never see the returns they were promised on their substantial training investments. Why does sales training so frequently disappoint? Blame typically falls on having the wrong trainers, stubborn salespeople, or poor reinforcement, but these are rarely the real reasons sales training fails to deliver its anticipated results.

In reality, most sales training is doomed to fail before the first PowerPoint slide is ever shown. The reason sales training typically fails, though, is *not* because it was executed poorly or lacked support. Most training fails because one of these two things occurs:

1. It did not develop the particular skills that your salespeople actually needed to improve their capabilities
2. It was not accompanied by complementary changes in your strategies, processes, tools, and metrics

The only way to make wise investments that will dramatically improve your sales performance is to identify the *real* training that your salespeople need most and then put it in the context of your overall selling system. Otherwise, you will commit a lot of resources to the effort, create a lot of disruption in your sales team, and get little or nothing in return.

### **The Wrong Medicine**

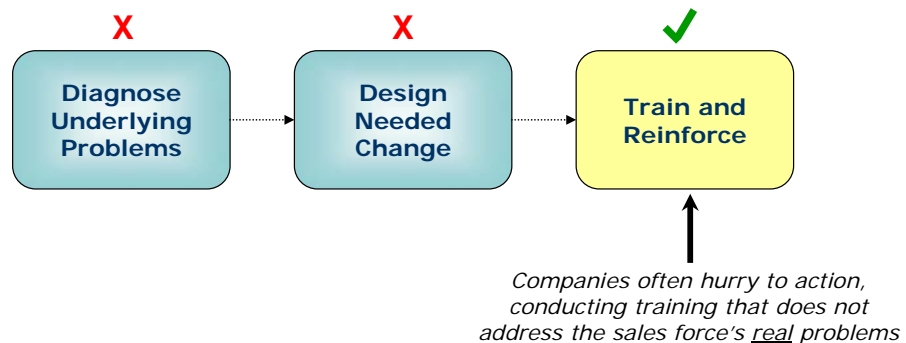
It's interesting to think of sales training as medicine for a sales force. Training should, in theory, heal what is ailing your salespeople. The problem is that most sales executives don't first diagnose the real ailments that are hindering their salespeople's performance. They sprint down the aisles of the pharmacy, picking out medicines that have the most attractive packaging and promise the fastest healing; yet, they don't know which maladies they're actually trying to cure. If they happen upon the right drug, their sales force will be well in no time. If not, their patients will remain puzzlingly sick.

We frequently see this type of behavior when sales executives decide to invest in training for their salespeople. They choose a training program that they know was successful for another company, or they saw in a magazine, or they heard about from a colleague. Anything is fair game, as long as it fits their budget and promises something new and exciting. However, there's no good reason to

believe that this training will actually resolve the critical underlying needs of the sales force. There's been no diagnosis – only a guesswork prescription.

In fairness, it's not easy to identify the type of training your sales force most needs to dramatically boost its productivity, and it's almost never readily apparent. However, there are analyses that can help you diagnose before you prescribe<sup>1</sup>. If you take the time to uncover the real obstacles and opportunities within your sales force, then you can make smart decisions about what skills will enable your salespeople to reach higher levels of productivity. You can give them the medicine that they desperately need.

**Figure 1: Successful Training Must Meet Critical Needs**



### Too Little Change

The second reason that sales training fails to produce impressive, lasting results is that companies frequently rely on training alone to improve a sales force. Even if you have accurately identified the improvements you need to make in your salespeople, simple skills training and reinforcement is not enough to transform a sales force. There are many other influencers of sales performance, and you have to make changes in each of the areas.

When we work with clients, we change not only in the skills of their salespeople, but also the strategies, processes, tools, and metrics of the sales force. For example, suppose we discover through analysis that you need to improve your salespeople's ability to uncover the business needs of their prospects. The first (and often only) thing many companies will do is schedule some training to improve the questioning skills of their salespeople. This would be a good first step, but it's truly optimistic to think that it will fix the problem.

Many studies have shown that training fades over time, and old habits die hard. The only way to solidify changes in your sales force is to imbed them throughout your organization. For instance, in addition to training your salespeople, you may

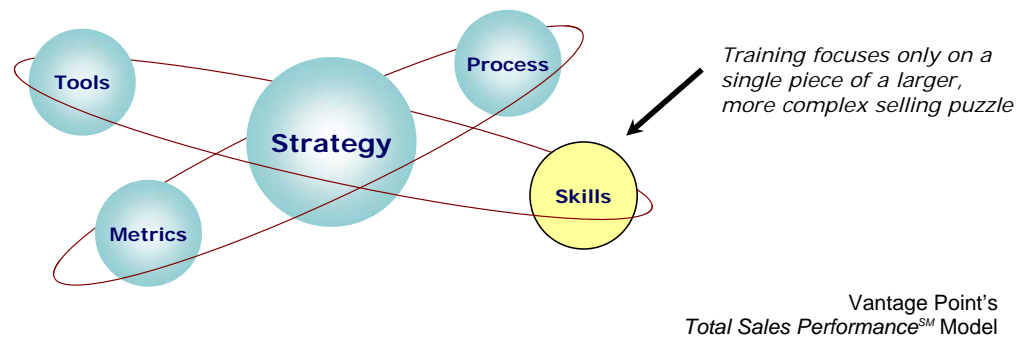
<sup>1</sup> See our white papers *Closing the Performance Gap* and *Building a Solutions Sales Force* for in-depth descriptions of two such analyses.

also make changes such as:

- Strategy: Realign your salespeople by industry, so they become more intimately familiar with the issues facing their clients
- Process: Make your salespeople complete a 'business needs analysis' when they create a pipeline opportunity, forcing them to identify and articulate the prospects' needs early in the sales cycle
- Tools: Create 'cheat sheets' that map common business problems to your various types of buyers, so your salespeople can plan relevant questions to ask before they enter a sales call
- Metrics: Collect data from your prospects on how well your proposed products meet their specific needs

Training your salespeople on questioning skills might *enable* them to improve their performance, but combining the training with new strategies, processes, tools, and metrics will *guarantee* that it happens.

**Figure 2: Training Alone Is Insufficient to Create Change**



### Where's the Help?

So why don't companies get the advice that would help them avoid these two common pitfalls? Why do they leap to buy sales training and ignore the other pieces of the selling puzzle? We believe it's because the sales improvement industry is dominated by training firms and other product vendors that solve only very specific problems. Training firms don't venture to identify your sales force's real obstacles, because they might not have the training programs to solve them. And they don't address the strategies, processes, tools, and metrics that will complement your salespeople's skills, because these components are outside of their core business. While they'll tell you that a simple training program will cure your sales force's ills, history has unfortunately proven that it's never that easy.

As sales executives, it is incumbent upon you to make certain that you are developing the *most important skills* in your salespeople and building an *entire system* that will enforce and reinforce those changes. We recommend that you invest some resources up front to identify and prioritize your sales force's specific needs. Then make holistic changes across your organization to ensure that your

salespeople are capable and motivated to improve the way they sell. Sales training is a substantial commitment of time and effort for any sales force, but you can maximize its impact and assure yourself of results if you dedicate yourself to deliberate and meaningful change.

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