



The Future of Sales Training

Part II of a III part series:

The Evolution of Sales Training

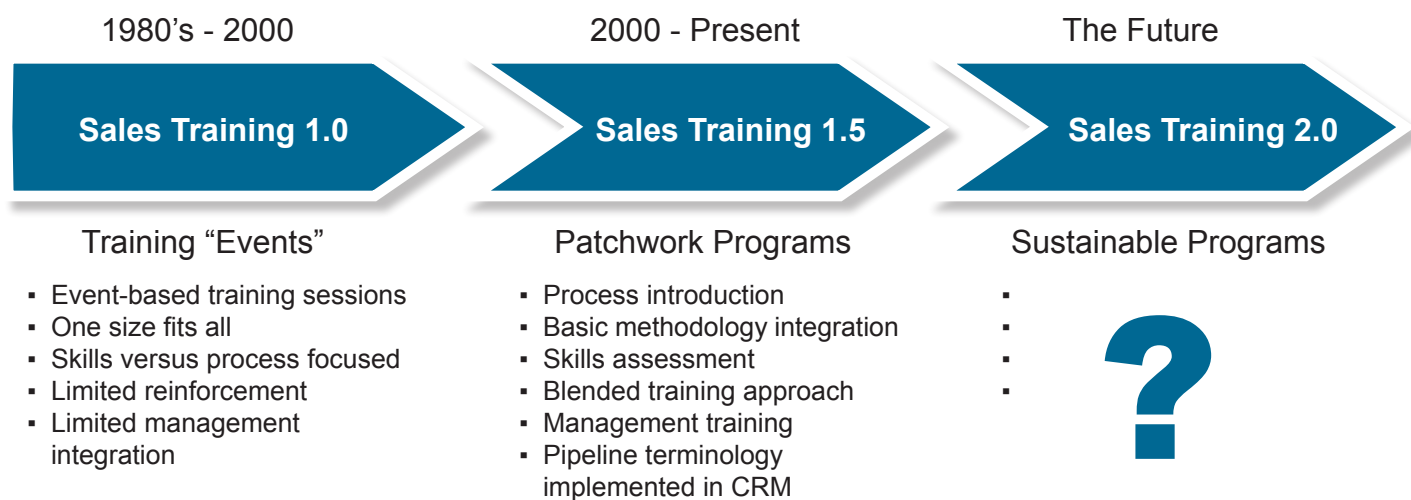
Article at a glance: For decades, hundreds of sales methodology firms have focused almost exclusively on event-based training as the primary learning vehicle. While current practices are more holistic than traditional event-only approaches, most organizations continue to struggle with broad based adoption of sales process and methodology. Annual research indicates that only 14% of companies have attained a “world class” maturity level in process and methodology adherence. Additionally, aggregate performance metrics suggest that most companies continue to perform at levels lower than pre year 2000 benchmarks. To maximize their return on sales training investments, sales leaders and managers need to consider three key issues before investing in a sales training initiative.

The Evolution of Sales Training

Part II of a III part series...

Mainstream sales methodologies began to appear in the late 1970's, and were in part a by-product of the technology boom and the nascent information age. A multitude of rapidly emerging technology firms in this era resulted in a critical need to scale and train sales organizations. This demand rich period also produced a large volume of complex, high potential sales opportunities that needed to be worked systematically. As a result, processes and procedures that make up an “opportunity management system” became prevalent for many companies. A number of sales training vendors capitalized on this market by creating their own methodology and training practices.

For the next two decades, hundreds of sales methodology firms sprang up, and focused almost exclusively on instructor-led “events” as the primary learning vehicle. By the mid 90's, the Internet created a connectivity environment that allowed new forms of learning to reach geographically dispersed audiences cost effectively. By 2000, companies were beginning to augment event-based training approaches with eLearning, as well as with some level of process standardization and pipeline terminology incorporated into CRM usage.



While current practices are more holistic than traditional, event-only approaches, most organizations continue to struggle with broad based adoption of sales process and methodology. Annual research performed by Sales Performance International and CSO Insights indicates that only 14% of companies have attained a “world class” maturity level in process and methodology adherence. And aggregate performance metrics suggest that in the past decade, most companies continue to perform at levels lower than pre year 2000 benchmarks.

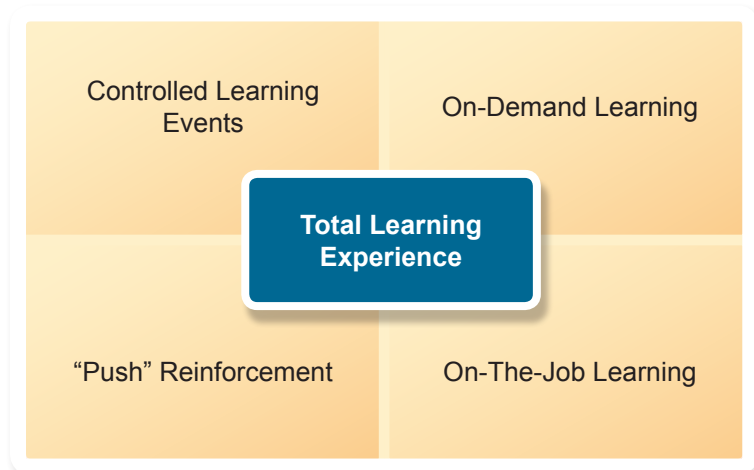
Key Training Issues for Sales Leadership

To maximize their return on sales training investments, sales leaders and managers need to consider three key issues before investing in a sales training initiative, as illustrated below.

- What roles are involved in our sales model?
- What best-practice competencies (set of skills) are essential by role for high performance?
- What types of vehicles provide the best **on-going** learning (and application) experience?



In most corporations, there are multiple selling roles in the overall sales model. These areas may include major account sales, territory sales, inside sales, channel sales, etc. It is important to consider the mix of roles in the sales model in terms of the appropriate sales training and development approach.



Best-practice competencies (as defined here) are a collection of skills required to perform a key task at a high proficiency level. Many high performing sales professionals have developed mastery in as many as 7-10 competency areas that may comprise as many as 20-30 specific skills. It is important to have a clear definition for each of these competencies (by role) as well as objective tools to assess your organization’s proficiency levels at any point in time.

A third critical consideration is how the learning will actually take place – across time. A great deal has been written in recent years about formal versus informal learning and the necessity to consider both. In terms of working with sales organizations, we have refined this perspective to incorporate four distinct types of learning. Each of these types of training play an integral role in successful learning, retention, and application.

Controlled Learning Events

Controlled learning experiences remain an essential part of any rigorous training regimen. These “scheduled” training events can include:

- Instructor-Led Training sessions (ILT)
- Scheduled eLearning
- Virtual Review and Coaching Sessions

Although much has been written about the demise of classroom instruction, most sales organizations still utilize some form of ILT in sales training initiatives. Research by Aberdeen Group indicates that 83% of “best-in-class” sales organizations utilize ILT as a core sales training modality. Live training still offers the richest environment for instructor interaction, group collaboration, and classroom exercises.

While eLearning is considered an “on-demand” resource, it can still be layered into a “scheduled” training regimen as either a pre-requisite for classroom training, or as the primary concepts presentation approach. For learning new concepts that do not require high levels of group interaction, eLearning can be a very effective medium. Virtual “classroom” sessions are typically the least effective approach for teaching new concepts, but these interactive environments (such as WebEx Training Center) can provide an effective vehicle for review and coaching, by allowing collaboration across a geographically dispersed audience.

The key point is that no controlled training approach alone is the silver bullet – but used in concert the combination of these approaches can be extremely effective.

On-Demand Learning

When the term “on-demand” is used with respect to learning, eLearning is typically the first thing that comes to mind. In a well designed program, eLearning can be used as both a “scheduled” prerequisite for either ILT or virtual sessions, or

as an on-demand resource for later review and reinforcement – depending on the design of the eLearning.

There are a number of other on-demand learning resources that can be effectively utilized to improve learning and retention, including:

1. A centrally located knowledge repository for essential tools, “how to’s,” and best practices
2. On-line forums that are organized around key selling competencies
3. Recorded webinars that provide “refresher” material on specific selling and management skills
4. Videos and simulations that illustrate best practices (and not so good practices)

The combination of these on-demand learning resources can provide a form of just-in-time “self coaching” - allowing the individual seller to explore and learn about essentially any skill or topic that they need improvement in. In addition, managers can easily direct individuals or their team to specific skill areas that are critical to performance.

“Push” Reinforcement

On-demand access to learning resources is an integral part of any comprehensive training program, but the ad hoc nature of these assets don’t address one highly critical aspect of sustainable learning – repetition! In the fast paced world of sales, on-demand resources provide unlimited access and flexibility, but may not be utilized to their fullest potential because sales people can be pre-occupied with daily activity. New forms of “push” technology can provide a steady stream of small learning “moments” that can significantly improve retention of specific material. In addition, this type of on-going reinforcement requires very small amounts of time on a weekly basis, and can be aligned carefully with prior training subject matter.

On-The-Job Learning

A fourth type of training that is emerging in today's workplace is on-the-job or "context-based" learning. Since nearly all sales organizations today utilize CRM technology on a daily basis, it is possible to increasingly integrate learning material directly into the process of working on an active opportunity. Essential how-to's, selling tips, and sales tools can be made directly accessible from a specific stage in the sales process within the CRM system. The key for this type of on-the-job integration is to have learning assets that are granular and specific to steps in the sales process. This type of "instant advice" precludes the need to spend time searching for the right learning content, and helps to reinforce a new selling process and methodology on a continual basis.

While all of the training and learning vehicles described above can have a positive impact on sales performance, they are most effective when they are thoughtfully incorporated into a well designed learning "program" that spans multiple months or potentially several years for highest levels of mastery.

To be continued: In Part III of this series we will explore "The Sales Training Program of The Future" – A systematic, planned approach to optimize the investment in sales training and transform your organization's approach to selling.

About Us: Sales Performance International (SPI) is a global sales performance improvement firm dedicated to helping the world's leading corporations elevate their sales relationships and drive measurable, sustainable revenue growth and operational sales performance improvement.

Founded in 1988, SPI has been the leader in helping global companies successfully transition from selling products to marketing and selling high-value solutions. With extensive sales

performance expertise, deep industry knowledge, global resources and a proven track record, SPI collaborates with clients to deliver strategic, operational and tactical solutions.

SPI has assisted more than 900,000 sales and management professionals in more than 50 countries and 14 languages achieve higher levels of performance.



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